

Vanessa Marcano
HUM 171
April 17th, 2003

Term Paper

When I first started this class I had many preconceived notions about religion. I always thought religion to be somewhat ridiculous - a rather false "superstition" in order to give a meaning to life, a way for humans to create an illusion of control over their destiny by devising a system to lead their lives by. I decided to take this class in order to understand such absurdity and get a different perspective about religions worldwide, as well as to find a spiritual path, that, in my opinion, is clear and logical. As the course comes to an end, I realize how much I have learned about the diverse spiritual mindsets that individuals around the world perceive the world through, and how some values and ideas in certain major world religions are in agreement with my own way of thinking. Like the character Ariana in Into the Fire, I have gotten to know myself much better by learning about global faith. By comprehending the vital role it plays in the world and seeing how the core ideas of the very same religions I once scorned relate in a very realistic way to my life, I was able to finally determine the spiritual values that I hold as an individual.

There are two main values by which I lead my life. The first is tolerance - to always try to understand another person's point of view in any aspect, no matter how incoherent it seems at first - I have seen that there are many valuable lessons to be learned by simply listening and empathizing with a fellow human being - there is no "right" or "wrong", especially in spiritual matters; there is only "applicable to my experience" and

‘not applicable’.

The second value is freedom - “ethical freedom”- being able to do what you want, as long as it does not affect the world negatively. Moreover, I am acutely aware that with freedom also comes responsibility for one’s actions - if one chooses to live in a certain way, one will encounter many obstacles or rewards in life, depending on which way one chooses to live in. I found this value of “ethical freedom” to be woven into the fabric of two major eastern religions - Hinduism and Buddhism.

In both Hinduism and Buddhism, one finds the concept of *karma*, which can be roughly described as the consequences that a person’s actions may carry. I saw that in these two religions, a person’s happiness and enlightenment ultimately depends on his or her *karma*. Spiritual liberation or enlightenment is obtained by taking responsibility for one’s actions - if one chooses to lead an ethical life, then these actions will bring certain rewards, and if one chooses to lead an unethical life, these actions, too, will carry consequences that will echo in worldly life and spiritual afterlife. Due to the fact that I believe that you are liable for your own choices, and judged on the impact of your actions, it is very hard for me to accept that by simply acknowledging that a messianic figure, such as Jesus is your “savior”, and not necessarily by your actions, you can achieve the ultimate spiritual goal - to be “cleansed” and go to “heaven”. It is illogical and unfair to say that even if a person leads an ethical life and does a great deal of good for humanity, that person will face eternal despair simply because they did not have a religious affiliation or because they chose to follow a different spiritual path - the notion that one is

only 'saved' by faith alone, and not by actions, in my opinion, seems like an absurd and cowardly way to live life.

On the other hand, I was very intrigued by the idea of submission to God. As I mentioned in my analysis/response on Islam, it can be very liberating to completely give up control and partially give up freedom, and live life as a servant to God - still living ethically, but passing on the burden of responsibility through freedom. However, as appealing as it seems, I believe that submission and extreme commitment are a detriment to the growth of the spirit and the individual, because it would mean that one would have to accept unquestioningly and unconditionally, with no chance for real development and learning through exertion of free will.

In conclusion, even though I believe that there is a God who is responsible for creating the universe and giving the world the ability to evolve it has so far, I also believe that every human is his or her own god, because humans are responsible for their own actions and consequences, not a superior entity; but maybe it is easier to let someone else run your life, to give you easy steps all 'written out' for you to follow in order to find a deeper meaning in life and reach a certain spiritual goal according to the rules of some 'club' you can join by unquestioningly accepting theories and teachings you may know nothing about. It is very difficult for most people, including myself, to accept an idea such as 'every man is his own god', especially because of the great amount of responsibility it conveys - it means that you, and you alone are liable for everything good and evil that affects you directly and that you are in charge of your destiny. There is

nobody else to thank for your happiness in life and nobody else to blame for your despair than yourself.