Vedic Brahmanism Notes

Vocabulary Terms

1. **Agni**: the god of fire. This god is valued because it transforms things. It was also viewed as a fire within us, or as the mouth of the Gods, which then speaks and eats for the Gods. Agni takes a sacrifice and brings it to the Gods; he is also considered the priest for such a sacrifice.

2. **Soma**: a psychedelic drug that is also viewed as a God by the Vedic people.

3. **Agnihotra**: this is a sacrifice ritual that is at the center of Vedic religion. It is a bird shaped altar on which goats are sacrificed and then the altar is burned. The ritual is twelve days long and requires 17 priests and months of preparation to be performed. The “sacrificer” is for whom all these rituals are done for. The “sacrificer” asks the Vedic gods for strength, honor, and immortality, and the ritual is said in Sanskrit. One end of the sacred enclosure represents the home of the “sacrificer”. A Brahmin is eligible for this ritual only if he has kept three fires burning his whole life. After the sacrifice is over, they burn the temple for the fire-god Agni, because they can’t leave the temple just laying around because it is a sacred thing.

4. **Brahman**: This is the name given to the power that made sacrifices effective, which is namely the spiritual power that the Brahmin priests uttered during sacrifices.

5. **Rg Veda**: A book of over a thousand hymns that have remained intact orally for over 3000 years. Rsis supposedly composed these hymns. The Rg Veda is not about the meaning of the text of the hymns, but instead the words themselves and their presence.

6. **Purusa**: Purusa is the person or man personified, who apparently had a thousand heads, which is supposed to show that he is big and powerful. He was the first cosmic man, and he is described as “all that which was and which shall be”, which represents the idea that God is in all things. He is also the lord of immortality, the humans that things may die but they continue on. 1/4 of Purusa is all beings; the other 3/4 of him is the immortal. Part of Purusa is the gods, and the gods sacrifice part of Purusa for the world. He is the first thing, the creator, and the sacrifice. Purusa is the world, the Gods, and the Rg Veda. Purusa divides himself, so his mouth is the Brahmins, his two arms are the Kshatriyas, his thighs are the Vaishyas, and his two feet are the Sudras. The Gods take this division and sacrifice it, so Purusa sacrifices himself, and the gods sacrifice this sacrifice, and from this all life is created.

7. **Indra**: the god of storm, wrath, and more importantly war. He took magic from the Dasas (the Dravidians or the Indus Valley People) and gave it to the Vedic people.

8. **Rta**: cosmic law or order of the universe. The God known as Varuna controls Rta. The whole purpose of Rta was keeping everything conservative and in the right order, and this maintenance is extremely important to the Vedic people.

9. **Sruti**: This is another term for the Vedas, which compose the Rg Veda.

10. **Atman**: the soul, or the inner essence of the human being.

11. **Geertz’s definition of Religion**: a system of symbols (1) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in men (2) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence (3) and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that they seem uniquely realistic (4).

12. **Ritual**: a ritual has to be done in order for it to be effective, while a ceremony only affirms something. Yajna is another word for sacrifice. The Vedic people performed sacrifices in order to strengthen the gods, and then these Gods then strengthen the natural order, and then the Vedic people use this surplus of the cosmic order as a sacrifice to the gods again. This is a cycle that is constantly repeated throughout time. The Vedic people used rituals as a way to understand death and changes in nature, for these were considered mysterious and uncanny. If they can understand the ritual, then they can understand this mystery of nature.