

Sample essay on religious studies

[Environment](#), [Animals](#)



What is a Human Being? What Am I?

There are facts of humanity that can be seen with our eyes, by using body scanners, and by using microscopes. We are complex. We are orderly, and if you break us down to our separate molecular weights, one can even break us down into how many different atoms we are a collection of. The molecular geneticist's point of view is even more fascinating, and explains just how complex and ordered human life is. Through coding of DNA, it becomes clear that each individual human being is, in fact, very extraordinarily unique. The question "What is a human being," suggests that other forms of living, breathing nature are different. Some would say that by not including ourselves when describing nature, or using terminology such as "human nature," we are actually excluding or separating ourselves from the rest of nature. So this becomes a very loaded question indeed. My position is that human beings are highly ordered, a part of the rest of nature, and nature is probably too complex for us to understand, though I will still try to make my case.

So that I can make this paper as interesting and textured as possible, I will try to be a little unconventional by answering the two questions posed by James Sire chapter 1 of "Naming the Elephant," then I'll compare/contrast it to/with the theology of Mahayana Buddhism, of which my primary source will be chapter 7 (Buddhism: Ecological Themes) of James Kinsley's book.

Starting with the third question asked by Sire (20), which, I'll admit, is the same question I've chosen to answer for this essay. Going back to the science of it all, humans are probably the result of interbreeding by other closely related homo sapiens, between 5 and 7 million years ago. What

records paleontologists have found from this time gives us evidence that the first human beings knew how to hunt, gather food, and they knew how to fear. They feared the sun, the cold, the heat; they feared floods, rain, other animals. They seemed to have been most afraid of lightning, based on the images found left in caves. Basic religious values began almost immediately from the inception of modern humanity, and took place in the form of burials. Even before it is thought that humans began to create tribes, back when they were still primarily family archetypes, evidence of elaborate burial sites exist, with remains found among circles of stone not relatable to other types of surrounding earth.

There is virtually no evidence that the two lines of predecessors that interbred to create us were capable of communicating religious thought to one another. As far as we know they had weapons slightly more advanced than other bicuspid mammals who could walk on two legs. There is a lot of evidence that the interbreeding first began in Africa, but this also probably occurred almost concurrently throughout the world. The best evidence for this is found in Papua New Guinea and Australia, as well as the extremities of Northern parts of the world. It's fascinating that this interbreeding took place at relatively similar times in such different areas, especially considering this is far after the time of Pangea, when all continents were thought to be connected.

Whether this happened coincidentally, or as part of a grander scheme, is really up to our own beliefs. As established before, we seem to have had them since our humanity began.

So, to summarize the answer to this question posed by sire, we, humans, are

a species that began to walk this earth around 6 million years ago. This is an extremely small fraction of time that the earth is thought to have existed, about .0009% to be exact. There is proof of weaponry, pottery, tools, burial sites, other rituals, and artwork from the beginning of this time.

That's the scientific part of the answer, but from this, you can extrapolate meaning that goes deeper. Burials and rituals imply beliefs and oral communication. Somewhere along the way, humans found coal or other ways of getting ink to draw pictures. These pictures often depicted the sun, animals, and lightning. These are all things that differentiate humans from other animals, at least from a Judeo-Christian point of view.

According to Kinsley (88-90), and Thich Nhat Hanh (85-87), and the Buddhist faith in general, we reincarnate, and grow upwards or downwards along the way, in a process of learning. We frequently come back as animals, and some Buddhists will even argue that we start out as bacteria, insects, and such. Due to reincarnation, there is an inherent interconnectedness between humans and animals. To most Buddhists, for this very reason, the evolution from two lines of ancestors to humanity is completely explainable, and negligible at the same time, meaning that it just isn't that important.

We share this life with the rest of nature, and to separate ourselves from it, just because we have different skill sets than other animals, insects, and even bacteria. Bacteria can replicate more efficiently than any other living being, and there is significant evidence showing when colonies have adequate levels they can communicate with each other to move from what part of a host to another, what nutrients to look for during movement, and they also seem to be able to share immunity across a colony if even just a

couple hundred bacteria in a colony of billions have adapted to an antibiotic. The ant can carry eight times its weight, and there are snakes that can release venom that can kill within minutes. Our skill as human beings is critical thought. It's only distinguishment is that humanity is the only entity that can achieve enlightenment. The only way to go downward is because of one's karma, and for the sum of one's good and bad actions to end up being negative is generally viewed in Buddhist tradition to be rare (though I wonder what former genocidal leaders come back as).

Thich Nhat Hanh seems especially passionate in "The Sun in My Heart." (entire chapter) He writes about considering the spirit of all life, and how human beings are a part of this circle. He goes further, in Kinsley's book (88), saying essentially that by choosing to single ourselves out as simply "just human" is to reject the fact that we are ultimate a part of nature in general. Kinsley also clarifies how Buddhist's see human beings in general — essentially as bundles of needs. Food, shelter and clothing are the most basic needs, according to Kinsley (87), of the traditional Buddhist perspective, which is line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Today, most Buddhist people recognize other needs, the need for community love, understanding, and most recently, technology (even the Dalai Lama owns a Macbook).

So to sum up this answer, Buddhist tradition sees human life as part of a larger community, nature. More than that though, being human is one existence of many throughout our spiritual lives until we reach Nirvana, which leads into the next question.

I will look back at the first question asked by Sire now that I've established a

scientific and spiritual context for humanity, I want to qualify humanity more by answering the first question asked of us by Sire (20) “ What is Prime Reality?,” a box flooded with different answers. For atheists, whether belonging to a religion or not, this answer is fairly simple. From a naturalist’s perspective, this earth, right here and now, and its surrounding ecology (and how we humans tend to it), is the ultimate reality. For the somewhat more transcendental atheist, this reality may extend to include the entire not-yet-explored universe, and all the potential life that may exist in the great beyond. For most deists, this reality extends to an afterlife that may or may not exist in this universe. In Christianity and Islam, this is a big gray area it’s not really said whether “ God” or “ heaven,” or even “ hell” exist inside or outside this universe, though it can certainly be said that the description of all of these entities in their religious texts is consistent with an “ intra-universe” and even earthly leaning.

In terms of Mahayana Buddhism, and really most of its variants, there are two completely separate ultimate realities. It’s really concise and fairly black and white. We lead lives here, manifested over many lifetimes, until our greater inner being is able to break free from this universe, and thus suffering. For the purpose of this paper, this is according to Kinsley (ch. 7 pg. 89). Please note that this is mentioned throughout the holy texts of the Dhammapada, and throughout Buddhist literature (as part of the fourth noble truth). Mahayana Buddhism in particular, has an “ in-between” level called Bodhisattva, a person who has achieved enlightenment, but has put off paradise for the sake of helping others find the path. The Dalai Lama is a prime example of this. Paradise is explicitly explained as the removal of

anything earthly, which would probably include atomic matter. This means that Buddhists believe in a paradise (Nirvana) that is only describable by what it is not. Not earthly and with no suffering. Not an existence that is palpable to us in any way shape or form. The only way that this could still be explained as being within the bounds of this universe, is if there is an alternate parallel universe that somehow shadows this one, which leads to various theories of Physics, and is far beyond the scope of this paper.

What is in the scope of this paper are my own personal thoughts and reflections over what I've written about and what we have studied. I have given this a tremendous amount of thought. As a college student, I'm in my formative years, no longer sheltered by my family necessarily, and not coddled by the group of friends I had in high school. As an adult now, I have to start thinking critically about things like this, which has made this class, and this project, invaluable to me.

I ultimately decided to add the scientific perspective to this because of the two authors I chose, and their discussion about larger questions in life, and particularly, in Kinsley's work, the ecological values that need to be considered when we think about ourselves as human beings and our role in nature. So I just took facts that I remember from classes I've taken in the past, and tied them into the readings and the assignment at large. I feel like it's vital to understand the full picture when approaching such big questions, ones that have been tackled by philosophers for years. In the modern age, we understand how human life came to be more than ever. This needed to be imparted because there are religious people who disagree with this perspective, and also religious people that fully embrace it. Because this

paper is largely based on the writings of Kinsley, and more broadly, Buddhism, it's important to consider the scientific evidence, because this religion tends to embrace Science in a much more progressive way than other religions.

It also applies to Sire's work however, as he remains as neutral as possible while asking these questions, and tries to run the gamut from a completely scientific perspective, to being fully accepting of the most religious people on earth. Because these are the two writers I chose, to ignore the science of being human would've been inadequate.

That being said, I took time to meditate and keep a journal of my thoughts, and was really struck by the Buddhist perspective. It's a religion that is largely willing to change with the times, though it could stand to be more socially progressive in the countries where it is not suppressed, like China or Vietnam. It's worth noting that the two countries in Asia where gay marriage is legal, for instance, are two of about ten where Buddhism is very actively practiced (Nepal and Taiwan). Recently, women are starting to be allowed to join monasteries in several types of Buddhism, so it's getting there.

The fact that a religion can embrace science, make sense out of it, accept the theories of it while maintaining it's own religious facets and rules. As far as I'm aware, other traditional religions that do this as well are Reformed Judaism and Unitarianism (where you can actually openly and actively practice Buddhism, along with any other nonviolent religion). I hope to visit a Buddhist temple or Unitarian church soon, so I can further explore these faith systems.

More importantly, when studying Buddhism, a lot of things clicked in my

head. Reading about the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold path to reach a state of enlightenment makes sense, in that to be human, or to be any living, breathing being, means pain suffering, needs and desires. No other religion I know of just calls it out like that. They have instead a construct to which one is supposed to pray for forgiveness, or achieve forgiveness by causing historical wars, like the crusades. We are just “ bundles of needs.” It also makes more sense to me over other religions that our afterlife is something that cannot be described using language, but only by what it is not. I’ve already lived life here on earth. Why do I want to stand in front of a God, and be judged for the sins that he has presumably already seen and made up his mind over, just to live in a more peaceful version of what seems to be an earth in the clouds. Furthermore, It doesn’t make much sense to me to practice a religion that worships a God that might send them to the fiery gates of hell (notice the earthly qualifiers there). It has given me a lot to ponder on, and in doing research for this, I’ve become motivated to give it a lot more thought.

Upon considering what it meant to be a human being, I felt I needed to add the spiritual aspect to this. Other animals may be skilled at other things, but from our very beginnings, we had ceremonies. We were given critical thought, so we probably went out and got some food, sat down, ate, and started using their critical thought. And that first thought was fear, mainly from lightning, which led to finding shelters, and more compellingly, led them to what was probably their first religious ceremonies. These occurrences probably happened very quickly, maybe even within a few generations of existence. The idea that two different species mated to create

us is also a really fascinating idea, that such order could come from so much randomness. Why did these species view each other as mateable? And what are the chances that those two species were close enough genetically to actually cause reproduction to occur.

Overall, this paper was exciting and thought-provoking, and it gives me a good basis for what I will consider in the future. I had no idea that being a human was such a complex thing. I had no idea how much thought had been put into it before. It's not even what it means to be a human, that's a different question, that I might have touched upon, but just being a human, sitting here at a computer, typing, something no other animal can do with any logical basis for doing so.

Works Cited

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