

The assignment to which this paper is responding: "Imagine that you live in a newly established Burbclave within the fictional universe of Snow Crash. The Board of Governors of your Burbclave, to which you belong, is trying to decide what rules, if any, ought to be established regarding freedom of religion. The Board has called for opinions on the issue from the Burbclave's citizens to be posted on the Burbclave Blog. So far, there have been two main positions on the issue: some claim that religion is a virus and ought not to be allowed into the Burbclave at all; others claim that religion (or some forms of religion) is not viral and that it fulfills a necessary purpose. Write a blog posting on the issue which you think is compatible with Stephenson's own views on religion as best you can determine it. (This does not necessarily mean that you have to take one side or the other; various middle grounds or third alternatives are possible.) You should begin the letter with an introductory paragraph which summarizes the debate so far and ends with your thesis. The book has been published (that is, uploaded to the CIC database) as a non-fiction account of Hiro Protagonist's life before HP Security Associates became a major corporation, so you may use any part of the novel as evidence."

Benign and Malignant Viruses

The issue of whether or not we should allow freedom of religion in our new Burbclave has generated a great deal of controversy. There have been excellent arguments on both sides of the issue, with some people arguing that religion is viral in nature, while others feel it is not and that we should have religious freedom. Those who believe religion is a virus use the Cult of Asherah to support their argument. They feel that religion at its fundamental level is just a virus trying to infect ones mind and turn one into a mindless slave. The people on the other side argue that there are many examples of more mainstream religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, positively benefitting people's lives. They feel that religion is not a virus. Both of these sides of the argument are partially wrong and partially correct. All forms of religion are viruses, but these viruses are not necessarily harmful. While some religions are destructive, like the Cult of

Comment: The paper summarizes the previous arguments clearly. Note that the summary goes well beyond what is stated in the assignment; Ryan has filled in details of the two sides in such a way as to set up his own argument.

Asherah, some are benign and beneficial to society, such as Judaism. Other religions, like Christianity, are somewhere in between these two and have characteristics of both.

Comment: The thesis is clear, reasonably specific, and complex.

The Cult of Asherah definitely spreads like a virus. Before Enki freed all of humanity with his nam-shub, “the metavirus” had “infected the human race” (396). This nam-shub blocked the metavirus from controlling people. The metavirus survived, however, through “Asherah worship”, which was “an incredibly tenacious cult” (398-399). The Cult of Asherah was simply a manifestation of the metavirus that allowed it to circumvent the nam-shub of Enki. Not only could this religious virus infect people through their minds, but it could also infect them “through the exchange of bodily fluids” (399). This duality is largely why the Cult of Asherah is still around when “all the... religious practices that predominated in Sumer”, which were also created by the metavirus, died out (399). If a virus is only an idea, like most religions, it “can be stamped out” (399). Even after the nam-shub of Enki, the Cult of Asherah continued to spread while laying dormant, “lurking in the population” (402).

Comment: The topic sentences of every paragraph are specific and clearly signal to the reader every step of the argument.

The Cult of Asherah is a malicious religion that is very harmful to the people that it infects. It reverts people back to the ancient Sumerian state of mind, where they were “passive receivers of information” (397). When infected, people become mindless zombies who can only carry out *en*, simple programs which tell people how to function in society. After Enki, the Cult of Asherah stayed in the background for most of history, and only resurfaced a few times before L. Bob Rife started harnessing it. One of these times was when the Pharisees “imposed a rigid legalistic theocracy” that “resembled the old Sumerian system” (401). Another time was when the “Christians spoke in tongues” at Pentecost (402). When the Asherah virus became active again, it resisted progress by

Comment: Every claim is supported by evidence from the book, and enough of the evidence is in the form of quotes to demonstrate clearly that the book actually says what Ryan claims it says. Where quotes are used, they fit grammatically into the sentences in which they appear.

making people unable to think for themselves. Once the virus infected people on a large scale due to L. Bob Rife, the negative effects of the virus immediately became apparent. All the people on the Raft were infected with the disease, and Y.T. described them as “glassy-eyed” and “brainwashed” (325). The Cult of Asherah is an example of how a viral religion can be harmful.

Judaism, though much less volatile, is still viral in nature. Unlike the dangerous Asherah virus, Judaism does not spread rapidly from host to host. This containment is partially due to the fact that Judaism can only infect your mind. It is a “viral idea” and “can be stamped out” because it doesn’t have a “biological aspect” (399). Even though it is not biological, it still spreads like any other virus. The deuteronomists, like Enki, likely created Judaism using an *en*. Hiro once hypothesized that “the deuteronomists may have had an *en* of their very own” (400). They then spread their religion across the Middle East, like a virus. Still, Judaism was mostly limited to the Hebrews, likely because of their language’s “flexibility and power” which allowed the “propagation” of the religion in the region (400). Since the religion was limited to one culture, the spread was contained at a certain point, unlike with the Cult of Asherah and, later on, Christianity.

Even though Judaism spread virally among the Hebrews like any other virus, it was not harmful to them. In fact, the religion actually benefitted the people that it infected. In a way, Judaism is comparable to the type of virus that is used in vaccines. It was created as a “rational religion” to help “prevent the spread of Asherah” (401). This new type of religion, unlike the Cult of Asherah, allowed people to “think about abstract issues” rather than “not thinking for themselves” (398). The rules and customs of

Judaism also established “informational hygiene measures” which “kept [Asherah] suppressed” (402). Once vaccinated with Judaism, people could no longer be infected by the Cult of Asherah. By keeping its followers protected from Asherah, Judaism helped society move forward.

In terms of its viral nature, Christianity is in between the Cult of Asherah and Judaism. Eventually, Judaism started to lose its viral nature to some extent. It did not transmit from person to person as easily anymore, and Asherah had begun to creep into some aspects of Judaism, such as the Pharisees. To help correct this, Jesus tried to reinvigorate the religion. “Christ’s gospel is a new nam-shub”, one that was designed to “bring the Kingdom of God to everyone” (401). Naturally, as soon as the religion was placed in the hands of the people it began to spread like wildfire. It infected people all over the place, gradually becoming the most popular religion in the entire world. Christianity could not diffuse as widely as the Cult of Asherah because it was only a viral idea, whereas Asherah was both a mental and physical virus. At the same time, Christianity still proved to be much more viral than Judaism, allowing it to spread on a global scale.

In terms of whether Christianity is benign or harmful, it is once again in between the Cult of Asherah and Judaism. Originally, as Christ conceived it, Christianity was an improvement over Judaism in terms of the protection it offered against Asherah. “The ministry of Jesus Christ was an effort to break Judaism out of [the] condition” where the old Sumerian system began to creep into Judaism (401). Following his death, though, the Pharisees took hold once again of this religion and created “another rigid, brutal, and irrational theocracy” in the form of the Roman Catholic Church (402). It was not until

Martin Luther's Reformation, which "opened the door a little wider", that the religion truly became one of the people (402). Still, "at the same time" that Christianity was struggling to find its way, "the Pentecostal church was being founded" (402). This sect of Christianity was the Asherah virus taking over part of the religion. The followers of this religion started speaking in "glossolalia", where they "spoke in tongues" (402). This is one of the key traits of ancient Sumer and the metavirus. Eventually this small part of Christianity took on a bigger role when Reverend Wayne was "backed up by the vast media power of L. Bob Rife" (403). Reverend Wayne became "more powerful than the Pope" (404). So although mainstream Christianity is benign and serves as a buffer against the Asherah virus, "The Reverend Wayne's Pearly Gates", a large portion of Christianity, "is the cult of Asherah" (403). Christianity was once a benign virus, but over time it became infected with the Asherah virus and is now harmful.

In light of the viral nature of religion, we must be cautious when deciding how to proceed with our Burbclave's national stance on religion. All forms of religion are viral, but some are benign rather than harmful. In order to protect ourselves from the dangers of the Asherah virus, we need one of the benign religions to act as a buffer between us and Asherah. Due to how Asherah has corrupted part of Christianity through the Pentecostals and Reverend Wayne, it would be too dangerous to adopt Christianity as our religion. Thus, we should enforce Judaism as the national religion in order use it as a vaccine to protect ourselves from the dangers of the Asherah virus.

Comment: Throughout, Ryan stays in character as a person writing to a community blog about a specific issue important to the community. At the same time, however, he suggests what the book is saying about a broader issue--in this case, the viral (yet sometimes beneficial) nature of religion.