

Creation Myth



The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo

A **creation myth** or **creation story** is a symbolic narrative of a culture, tradition or people that describes their earliest beginnings, how the world they know began and how they first came into it.^{[1][2][3]} Creation myths develop in oral traditions,^[2] and are the most common form of myth, found throughout human culture.^{[4][5]} In the society in which it is told, a creation myth is usually regarded as conveying profound truths, although not necessarily in a historical or literal sense.^[4] They are commonly, although not always, considered cosmogonical myths--that is they describe the ordering of the cosmos from a state of chaos or amorphousness.^[6] They are also commonly, although not always, considered sacred accounts, and can be found in nearly all known religious traditions.^{[7][8]}

Several features are found in all creation myths. They are all stories with a plot and characters who are either deities, human like figures or animals who often speak and transform easily.^[9] They are set in a dim and nonspecific past, what historian of religion Mircea Eliade termed in illo tempore.^{[8][10]} And all creation myths speak to deeply meaningful questions held by the society that shares them, revealing of their central worldview and the framework for the self-identity of the culture and individual in a universal context.^[11]

Mythologists have applied various schemes to classify creation myths found throughout human cultures. Eliade and his student, Charles H. Long, developed a classification based on some common motifs that reappear in stories the world over. The classification identifies five basic types:^[12]

- Creation ex nihilo in which the creation is through the thought, word, dream or bodily secretions of a divine being
- Earth diver creation in which a diver, usually a bird or amphibian sent by a creator, plunges to the seabed through a primordial ocean to bring up sand or mud which develops into a terrestrial world
- Emergence myths in which progenitors pass through a series of worlds and metamorphoses until reaching the present world
- Creation by the dismemberment of a primordial being

- Creation by the splitting or ordering of a primordial unity such as the cracking of a cosmic egg or a bringing into form from chaos

Marta Weigle further developed and refined this typology to highlight nine themes, adding elements such as deus faber, a creation crafted by a deity, creation from the work of two creators working together or against each other, creation from sacrifice and creation from division/conjugation, accretion/conjunction, or secretion.^[12]

An alternative system based on six recurring narrative themes was designed by Raymond Van Over.^[12]

- a primeval abyss, an infinite expanse of waters or space
- an originator deity which is awakened or an eternal entity within the abyss
- an originator deity poised above the abyss
- a cosmic egg or embryo
- an originator deity creating life through sound or word
- life generating from the corpse or dismembered parts of an originator deity

Meaning and function

All creation myths are in one sense etiological because they attempt to explain how the world was formed and where humanity came from.^[13] While in popular usage the term "myth" is often thought to refer to false or fanciful stories, creation myths are by definition those stories which a culture accepts as both a true and foundational account of their human identity. Ethnologists and anthropologists who study these myths point out that in the modern context theologians try to discern humanity's meaning from revealed truths and scientists investigate cosmology with the tools of empiricism and rationality, but creation myths define human reality in very different terms. In the past historians of religion and other students of myth thought of them as forms of primitive or early stage science or religion and analyzed them in a literal or logical sense. However they are today seen as symbolic narratives which must be understood in terms of their own cultural context. Charles H. Long writes, "The beings referred to in the myth -- gods, animals, plants -- are forms of power grasped existentially. The myths should not be understood as attempts to work out a rational explanation of deity."^[14]

While creation myths are not literal explications they do serve to define an orientation of humanity in the world in terms of a birth story. They are the basis of a worldview that reaffirms and guides how people relate to both the spiritual and natural world as well as to each other. The creation myth acts as a cornerstone for distinguishing primary reality from relative reality, the origin and nature of being from non-being.^[15] In this sense they serve as a philosophy of life but one expressed and conveyed through symbol rather than systematic reason. And in this sense they go beyond etiological myths which mean to explain specific features in religious rites, natural phenomena or cultural life. Creation myths also serve as a framework for humanity's sense of self in terms of ultimate origins, shaping concepts of place, time and purpose in the world.^[16]

Types

Ex nihilo

Main article: Ex nihilo

The ex nihilo is thought to be the most common type of creation in myth. Also called "creation from nothing" or "creation de novo", it is the type of myth featured in Genesis I in the Bible in Judaism and Christianity, and also in the Koran's Sura VII in Islam. Ex nihilo creation is also found in creation stories from ancient Egypt, the Rig Veda and many animistic cultures in Africa, Asia, Oceania and North America.^[17] In most of these stories the world is brought into being by the speech, dream, breath, or pure thought of a creator but creation ex nihilo may also take place through a creator's bodily secretions. The literal translation of the phrase ex nihilo is "from nothing" but in many creation myths the line is blurred whether the creative act would be better classified as a creation ex nihilo or creation from chaos. With ex nihilo the potential and the substance of creation springs from within the creator, who may or may not be existing in physical surroundings such as darkness or water but does not create the world from them. In creation from chaos the substance used for creation is pre-existing within the unformed void.^[18]

Creation from chaos

In creation from chaos myth, initially there is nothing but a formless, shapeless expanse. The word chaos means disorder, and this expanse, which is also sometimes called a void, or an abyss, contains the material of which the world will be made. Chaos may be described as a having the consistency of vapor or water, dimensionless, and sometimes salty or muddy. In creation myths, chaos is associated with evil and oblivion whereas order (cosmos) is the good. Creation is the bringing of order from disorder, and in many of these cultures, it is believed that at some point the forces preserving order and form will weaken and the world will once again be engulfed into the abyss.^[19]

World parent

There are two types of world parent myths, both describing a separation or splitting of a primeval entity, the world parent or parents. One form describes the primeval state as an eternal union of two parents, and the creation takes place when the two are pulled apart. The two parents are commonly identified as Sky (usually male) and Earth (usually female) who in the primeval state were so tightly bound to each other that no offspring could emerge. These myths often depict creation as the result of a sexual union, and serve as genealogical record of the deities born from it.^[20]

In the second form of world parent myth, creation itself springs from dismembered parts of the body of the primeval being. Often in these stories the limbs, hair, blood, bones or organs of the primeval being are somehow severed or sacrificed to transform into sky, earth, animal or plant life, and other worldly features. These myths tend to emphasize creative forces as animistic in

nature rather than sexual, and depict the sacred as the elemental and integral component of the natural world.^[21]

Emergence

In emergence myths humanity emerges from another world into the one they currently inhabit. The previous world is often considered the womb of the earth mother, and the process of emergence is likened to the act of giving birth. The role of midwife is usually played by a female deity, like the spider woman of Native American mythology. Male characters rarely figure into these stories, and scholars often consider them in counterpoint to male oriented creation myths, like those of the ex nihilo variety.

Earth-diver

The earth diver is a common character in various traditional creation myths. In these stories a supreme being usually sends an animal into the primal waters to find the material with which to build habitable land. Some scholars interpret these myths psychologically while others interpret them cosmogonically. In both cases emphasis is placed on beginnings emanating from the depths. Earth diver myths are common in Native American folklore but can be found elsewhere as well.^[23]

Notes

1. ^ Encyclopaedia Britannica 2009
2. ^ a b Womack 2005, p. 81
3. ^ Leeming 2005
4. ^ a b Kimball 2008
5. ^ Braziller 1963
6. ^ See:
 - o Leeming 2009
 - o Weigle 1987
 - o Leonard & McClure 2004
 - o Honko 1984, p. 50
7. ^ Encyclopædia Britannica 2009
8. ^ a b Johnston 2009
9. ^ See:
 - o Johnston 2009
 - o Encyclopaedia Britannica 2009
 - o Leeming 2005
 - o Braziller 1963
10. ^ Eliade 1963, p. 429
11. ^ See:
 - o Johnston 2009
 - o Braziller 1963

- Encyclopaedia Britannica 2009
- Leeming 2009
- 12. ^ a b c Leonard & McClure 2004, p. 32-33
- 13. ^ Leeming 2005
- 14. ^ Long 1963, p. 12
- 15. ^ Template:Sproul
- 16. ^ Encyclopædia Britannica 2009
- 17. ^ Leeming 2009, pp. 1-3,153
- 18. ^ Leeming & Leeming 1994, p. 60-61
- 19. ^ Leeming 2009
- 20. ^ Leeming 2009, p. 16
- 21. ^ Leeming 2009, p. 18
- 22. ^ Leeming 2005
- 23. ^ "Earth-Diver Creation" A Dictionary of Creation Myths. David Adams Leeming and Margaret Adams Leeming. Oxford University Press 2009 Oxford Reference Online. 30 April 2010
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t279.e87>

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