

Creation Stories and Foundation Myths

Nearly every culture in the world has a creation myth. A creation myth is a story that explains the origins of the world, the creation of humans, and the relationship between a god or gods and humans. In these stories, the origins of the world are generally the act either of a single supreme being (in the case of monotheistic religions, which believe in a single god) or of a group of gods (in the case of polytheistic religions, which believe in more than one god). One noteworthy exception among major religions is Buddhism, whose scriptures, or holy writings, often refer to “beginningless time.” This suggests that Buddhists do not believe in a single creation event or a single creator-god.

Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) **5**

Tales from the Kojiki **13**

Qurʾan **23**

Black Elk Speaks **33**

*Collected Essays, vol. 5:
Science and Christian
Tradition* **45**

Foundation myths differ from creation myths in that they do not necessarily focus on the creation of the world, but they have many characteristics in common with creation myths. Foundation myths in some way define the cultures that produced them. As a foundation myth develops over time, it becomes a way for people to understand the nature of the world they live in and their place within that world. It provides support for the culture’s way of viewing the world, in much the same way that the foundation of a house supports the structure.

These creation and foundational stories are often referred to as “myths,” a word that implies something fanciful or untrue. Theologians (those who study religious beliefs and practices) and other scholars, however, use the word *myth* in a way that is not intended to dismiss a narrative as untrue. Rather, the word suggests a culture’s specific way of explaining the world and its origins, expressed in terms that were understandable even to people in a culture with no written language. Used this way, *myth* connects more with “story,” “narrative,” or “explanation” than with “untruth.” A myth expresses a deeper, more fundamental truth that actual facts do not always capture.

In the major monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, creation is seen as what theologians call *ex nihilo*. *Ex* means

An African Creation Story

Virtually every culture in the world has a creation story that explains how the world came about. The cultures of Africa present a rich collection of such stories. Here is one from the Fulani people of Mali.

At the beginning there was a huge drop of milk
Then Doondari (God) came and he created the stone.
Then the stone created iron;
And iron created fire;
And fire created water;
And water created air.
The Doondari descended a second time. And he took the five elements
And he shaped them into man.
But man was proud.
Then Doondari created blindness and blindness defeated man.
But when blindness became too proud, Doondari created sleep, and sleep defeated blindness;
But when sleep became too proud, Doondari created worry, and worry defeated sleep;
But when worry became too proud, Doondari created death, and death defeated worry.
But when death became too proud, Doondari descended for the third time, And he came as Gueno, the eternal one
And Gueno defeated death.

“Unit Three: Exploring Africa through the Humanities. Module Fourteen: Religion in Africa.”
Exploring Africa. <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/curriculum/lm14/creationstories.html>.

“out of” and *nibilo* means “nothing.” In other words, it is believed that nothing existed before God, who not only formed and structured the universe but also created from nothing the materials of which the universe is made. This process is seen as having occurred over a period of time, often expressed as “days.” This reference of *day* is generally interpreted in symbolic terms to refer to some span of time. In the book of Genesis in the Christian and Judaic scriptures, for example, creation occurred in stages over a six-“day” period, with God resting on the seventh day. This is depicted in the Hebrew Bible, the **Tanakh (Hebrew Bible)**. The creation account in the **Qur’an**, the scripture of Islam, is similar: “Allah is He Who created the heavens and the earth and what is between them in six periods.” Allah is Islam’s name for God.

Common themes

Despite the difference in creation myths throughout the world, they tend to have a number of elements or themes in common. The first of these elements is the idea of creation as a kind of birth, often from an egg. For example, in some versions of the Japanese Shinto religion’s creation myth, contained in the sacred text called **Tales from the Kojiki**, the chaotic mass of elements that existed at the time of creation was in the shape of an egg. In Greek mythology, the god of love, Eros, emerged from an egg laid by the bird Nyx. The shell pieces became Gaia, the goddess of Earth, and Uranus, the god of the sky. The egg especially stands out in the creation myths of early Chinese Daoists, who told the story of a great cosmic egg from which the god Pangu emerged when the shell split. The top half of the shell became the sky, and the bottom half became Earth.

A second common theme found in creation myths is the concept that the universe has both a father and a mother. Again, in Greek mythology, Gaia and Uranus produced children, who in turn produced grandchildren, giving rise to plants, the stars, and other elements of creation. In the Shinto creation myth, Izanagi and Izanami gave birth to the islands of Japan and then gave birth to Amaterasu, the sun goddess, and Tsukiyumi, the moon god. Among the Aborigines of Australia, the Father of All Spirits awakened the Sun Mother and gave her instructions for waking the spirits and giving them life and form. She repeatedly tried to follow his instructions, but when she returned to the Father, he told her to do more, until he was finally pleased with her work. Similarly, Wiccans worship a god and a goddess, masculine and feminine principles of creation and renewal.

Common to most creation myths is the notion of a supreme being. The creation accounts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam see a single supreme god as responsible for all creation. Similarly, Zoroastrianism attributes creation to its supreme deity, Ahura Mazda; the ancient Babylonians to Marduk; and Hindus to Krishna, the “cause of all causes.” Interestingly, while the Church of Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as Mormons) is Christian, its followers believe that the physical universe is eternal, so it was not created by a supreme being; God, however, organized and arranged the physical universe in the act of creation.

Yet another theme that runs through the world’s creation myths is the question of whether creation took place from above or below. In Shinto, for example, creation took place from above, in a world beyond the clouds. In the Sioux foundational myth relayed in *Black Elk Speaks*, a record of the tales told by a holy man of the Oglala Lakota Sioux, Black Elk narrates a vision of a cloud world where he encounters the Six Grandfathers who empower him. In contrast, the creation and foundational myths of the Bushmen of Africa and of the Hopi Indians of North America both depict creation as occurring from below. The Bushmen, for example, believe that in times past people and animals lived below Earth but that the god Kaang planned a place of happiness for them on Earth’s surface. He planted a large tree with branches that spread over Earth and then dug a large hole through which people climbed to the surface. The Hopi believe that they climbed a pine tree to reach the world’s surface, to escape an unbearable world below. They also believe that life on Earth may be part of an ongoing process of climbing to achieve yet a better world.

A related theme is that of the “diver” myth, which sees creation as somehow having been pulled out from chaos or muck. In Shinto, for example, the gods Izanagi and Izanami dipped a spear into the muck and pulled it out. The drops that fell from the spear became the Japanese islands. Similarly, the Iroquois believe that a Sky Woman fell to Earth, which was covered by water. After the water animals seized her and took her to the bottom, she brought up mud, which she spread on the back of a turtle and which grew into the North American continent.

Creation without a god

Of course, not all people believe in a god or gods. Some people, called atheists, do not believe in a god at all. Others, called agnostics, say that they are not sure whether a god exists. Agnostics typically argue that no concrete evidence proves that there is a god who created the world. Thomas Henry Huxley, a nineteenth-century British biologist, is an example of a prominent intellectual (a person who engages in study, reflection, or contemplation) who was an agnostic, a term he himself coined. A biologist studies the processes of plant and animal life. In his essay “**Agnosticism and Christianity**,” he argues his position that “it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty.” In Huxley’s view, there simply is no evidence that supports the existence of a creator-god.

During the nineteenth century, many scientists were studying geology and other branches of science that indicated that evolution, not creation, was the driving force behind the creation of the world and of humankind. Evolution is the theory that living beings evolved, or changed, over time to take on the forms we know today. This contrasts with the belief that God created all beings. Perhaps because he was a biologist, Huxley viewed issues involving creation, the soul, the afterlife, and other religious concepts from the standpoint of a scientist rather than a believer.

All these creation and foundational myths represent an effort on the part of the cultures that produce them to find a link between the present and the past, including the past of their ancestors. It is a part of being human for people to question where they came from and where they are going. Creation and foundational myths attempt to answer these questions in ways that reflect the cultural realities of a people at a given time and in a given place. Even science shares this wonder.