

Chapter 1 : The Cosmogonic Cycle: An Overview | The Reverse Gear

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The word cosmogony is derived from the combination of two Greek terms, kosmos and genesis. Genesis means the coming into being or the process or substantial change in the process, a birth. Cosmogony thus has to do with myths, stories, or theories regarding the birth or creation of the universe as an order or the description of the original order of the universe. One type of narrative portraying meanings and description of the creation of the universe is the cosmogonic myth. These myths, which are present in almost all traditional cultures, usually depict an imaginative religious space and time that exist prior to the universe as a normal habitation for human beings. The beings who are the actors in this primordial time are divine, superhuman, and supernatural, for they exist prior to the order of the universe as known by the present generation of human beings. Cosmogonic myths in their narrative form give a rhetorical, stylistic, and imaginative portrayal of the meaning of the creation of the world. These myths set forth a tonality and stylistics for the modes of perception, the organizing principles, and provide the basis for all creative activities in the cultural life. While these myths are always specific to the cultures in which they are found, it is possible to classify them in various ways. One may classify them according to the cultural-historical strata in which they appear; thus, one might place together myths from hunter-gatherer cultures, or from early Neolithic cultures, agricultural societies, and so on. Myths may also be classified in terms of specific religions or cultural-geographical areas. Myths may be classified further according to the symbolic structures and relationships portrayed and narrated in the myths. In the cosmogonic myth the symbols give expression to the religious imagination of the creation of the world. As the prototypical story of founding and creation, the cosmogonic myth provides a model that is recapitulated in the creation and founding of all other human modes of existence. As such some creation myths find extended expression in ritual actions that dramatize certain symbolic meanings expressed in the myth. Myths should not, however, be thought of simply as the theoretical or theological dimension of a ritual. Even when analogous meanings are portrayed in myth and ritual, these meanings may arise from different modes of human consciousness. There are mythic meanings that may arise from ritual activity. Marett, the English anthropologist, surmised that myths might have arisen as attempts to give order to the dynamic rhythms and experiences of life that first found expression as ritual activities. Pierre Bourdieu, the French ethnologist, has refined interpretations of this kind by making a distinction between two types of theories. There is a theory that is the result of speculative human thought and there is another kind of theory that arises out of practical activity. Myth as theory may be of either type, but in each case the myth is a distinctive expression of a narrative that states a paradigmatic truth; this is especially true in the cosmogonic myth. Creation myths are etiological insofar as they tell how the world came into existence, but what is important in the etiology of the creation myth is the basis for the explanation, that is, the basis of the explanation is in the founding or creation of the world itself. In other etiological stories the ultimate cause is not of primary importance. Types of Cosmogonic Myths Cosmogonic myths may be classified into the following types according to their symbolic structures: Cosmogonic myths are seldom limited to any one of these classifications; several symbolic typological forms may be present in one myth. There is in addition the symbolism of the cosmic egg as a meaning of the creation. The classification of myths into these types is thus meant not to be a stricture of limitations but rather to emphasize a dominant motif in the myth. Creation from nothing Though the type of cosmogonic myth recounting creation from nothing is usually identified with the monotheistic religions of the Semitic traditions, it is a more pervasive structure. However, its identification with these religions opens up a fruitful line of study. It is clear that the monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—presuppose a religious history prior to their coming into being: Given this history, it is legitimate to raise the issue of the relationship of prior empirical cultural history as a background to the religious imagination of creation de novo, or creation from nothing, in these traditions. The facticity of the

Near Eastern religions enables us to more easily recognize the issue of the prehistory of those cultures in which this kind of myth appears. As a matter of fact, the very powerful symbolism of a deity who creates from nothing is a symbolic tour de force against the impacted empirical cultural histories as the basis for a new founding and ordering of the world and the human community. The power of the deity in myths of this type establishes the cosmos as unrelated to, and discontinuous from, all other structures prior to the statement of the creation of the cosmos and the human condition as enunciated in the myth. To the extent that older structures are present they are reintegrated within the new mode of creation. In the Polynesian myth, one of the names of the creator god is Io-matua-te-kora, which means "Io, the parentless"; this deity has no parents, brothers, or sisters. The deity exists in the void in himself and by himself; the autonomous and self-created nature of the deity appears out of the void or out of nothingness, which are understood to be potent realities. Thus in a Tuomotuan myth it is stated that "Kiho mused all potential things whatever, and caused his thought to be evoked. The deliberate process of the creation signifies willful volition and the fact that the creation is brought forth as a form of perfection from a supreme being. The creator deity in myths of this kind is often symbolized by the sky or sky deities. In such cases the sky symbolism shows that the deity who creates from nothing is not contingent to the world although the created order is contingent to the deity. Ultimately, the creation from nothing emphasizes that the creation is not a mere ordering or even founding but has come forth as a powerful religio-magical evocation from a powerful supreme being. Creation from chaos Some creation myths describe how the creation arises out of a prior matter or stuff that is either negative or confused. The chaotic condition may be variously depicted as water, a monster, or as the qualities of coldness, sterility, quiescence, repression, and restraint. In any case, the situation of chaos inhibits creation. In a number of Near Eastern and Indian myths, chaos is in the form of a serpentlike monster. Mary Wakeman has classified such myths into two types, a space model and a time model. In the space model the monster is a withholder of water, sun, and fertility. The monster is repressive and acts as a tyrant in relation to its subjects. The monster prevents vital forces and energies from finding expression in a created order. The restraint and repressive nature of the monster does not allow the place and space for a created order to come forth. Chaos is thus defined as a holding back of the orders and energies of creation; this is a situation of primordial confusion and indeterminacy. It is clear, however, that there is power and potency in this confused situation. The repressive and restraining nature of chaos is equally the expression of an inertia in the face of a definitive order; chaos in this sense defines a stasis. In the time model all the potencies are similarly contained within a primordial chaos. There is no change, no movement, and no differentiation. Conversely, some myths portray the chaos as a constant state of flux in which everything changes so fast that no distinguishable ordered form is possible. In the time model of myths of chaos, the drama shows how the forces and potencies of creation are energized to move and also how the constant flux is reduced to a measured movement in which the tendency to dissipation is balanced by a force of cohesion and integration, and this tendency is complemented by the deployment and expansion of the order. Human existence is seen as a mean between these extremes; thus the meaning of ordered human time appears from the regulation of this original chaos. In some myths of this type the chaos is never completely overcome. While order may emerge from the chaos in the forms of space and time, vestiges of the chaos remain and the created order is always in danger of slipping back into chaos or chaos appears as the destiny of the cosmos when it has exhausted the meaning of its time and space. Creation from a cosmic egg In many myths involving creation from chaos there is also the symbolism of a cosmic egg or an ovoid shape out of which creation or the first created being emerges. The egg is obviously a symbol of fertility. In egg myths the potency for creation is contained within the form of the egg. The incubation of the egg implies a time-ordered creation and a specific determination regarding the created order. Hermann Baumann has suggested that one motif of the egg symbolism has to do with the statement and resolution of the problem of sexual antagonism, and has its origin in megalithic cultural circles. For Baumann there is, first of all, an early stage in megalithic cultures in which the meaning of creation is expressed in the form of a sky father and earth mother as sexually differentiated deities; there is another stage in which the parents are separated and may reside within the egg as twins. A third stage portrays the meaning of sexuality as abstract principles such as yin and yang in China. In this stage the gods possess these abstract principles as attributes. In the final stage there is the attempt to

recover the antagonism of sexual differentiation and to resolve it. This is the myth of androgyny. The symbolism of the egg also connotes a state of primordial perfection out of which the created order proceeds. In a Dogon myth from West Africa, the god Amma created a world egg as the first order of creation. Within the egg twins were incubating. In time these twins were supposed to come forth as androgynous beings, indicating perfection on the level of sexuality. Other aspects of the created order were correlated with this mode of perfection. Due to a mishap this perfection was not attained and thus the created order as we know it is a compromise alternating between the dualism of day and night, wet and dry, land beings and water beings, male and female sexes. World-parent myths In some myths creation is the result of the reproductive powers of primordial world parents. The birth of offspring from the world parents is often portrayed as an indifferent or unconscious activity. Even the sexual embrace of the world parents is without passion or intent. The sexual embrace does not appear as the result of a desire or an intention; it is simply the way things are. In this way the sexual embrace of the world parents is like the twins contained within the world egg, and the embrace itself recapitulates an original androgyny. As a matter of fact, the Dogon myth states that the male and female in sexual embrace is an imitation of the original androgynous archetype. In myths of this kind there is a reluctance on the part of the primordial couple to separate from this embrace. The embrace has no beginning or climax; it is perpetual and the world parents are indifferent or unaware of the offspring produced from this embrace. In world-parent myths the world parents are, in most cases, the second phase of the primordial ordering. Prior to the appearance of the world parents there is a chaotic or indeterminate phase. For example, in Enuma elish, the Babylonian creation myth, it is stated that waters commingled as a single body in a state of indeterminacy; the Polynesian myth of Rangi and Papa speaks of a darkness resting over everything. In a similar fashion, in the Egyptian myth of Seb and Nut primeval chaotic waters precede the coming into being of the world parents. From this point of view, the world parents are part of the ordering of the cosmos, a specific stage of its coming into being as a habitat for the human community. The offspring of the world parents tend to be aliens to their parents. The close embrace of the parents allows no space and thus no reality for their mode of being. The world parents are for the most part indifferent to the needs and desires of their offspring. A tension comes about because of this alienation and the offspring become the agents of the separation of the world parents. In some cases the agent of separation is another deity or one of the offspring, but in most cases the separation marks the beginning of a community and a discourse among the offspring. In Enuma elish this community and discourse have to do with a battle between the offspring and the world parents. The same sequence takes place in the Polynesian myth of "the children of heaven and earth. The separation of the world parents is a rupture in the order of creation.

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