

# INTRODUCTION TO RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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# Introduction

## FOR TEACHERS USING THIS BOOK

An introductory course in the study of religion can be daunting for undergraduates. It is often a required course for students before taking courses in areas of study that may hold greater interest. Although some students come to the study of religion eager to learn, many arrive with mixed motivation and languid enthusiasm. Resistance to the study of religion may be a byproduct of student fears—real and imagined—that personal faith might somehow be dismantled by the study of religion. Perhaps students resist because they are convinced that the course will be irrelevant for study and life in general. There exists an array of student perceptions about what religion is and how it might be studied. For a host of educators teaching first-year religion courses, then, the classroom can seem to be more a like salted field impeding growth than a fertile one destined to produce abundance.

As for students, perhaps the majority might compare the introductory study of religion to being swept away by a flood of new ideas and concepts—most of them foreign to the students' own experience of religion and religious life. Hence, course design can greatly influence the students' experience.

North American higher education does not currently subscribe to a universal standard for teaching an introductory course in religion. Even

denominationally related schools—Protestant and Catholic—have no universal curriculum for foundational courses in religion. Furthermore, students and faculty who engage in the introductory course find that it is not a *tabula rasa* on which the course is written. The classroom represents an array of commitments—both scholarly and faith-oriented—that directly or indirectly influence how a course is taught and how students engage the texts, stories, and ideas. Barbara Walvoord recently completed a study of the best practices of effective teachers of introductory courses in religion, theology, and Bible studies. Her findings, published in *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), shed light on recurrent issues for the study of religion. One key finding concerns what Walvoord calls “the great divide,” the line in many college and university religion classrooms where student and faculty goals diverge. Faculty are largely interested in fostering critical reflection in the study of religion, while students are primarily interested in their own spiritual and religious development. This book will try to walk in the liminal space between these two goals. Each chapter author has written with the intent of making his or her topic accessible to the student reader through keeping both faculty and student goals in mind.

Over the past century, some religion professors have maintained that a certain objectivity is preferred in the religious studies classroom.

This may be a lofty ideal, as objectivity is a rare commodity, difficult to attain and commonly illusive. Given that students come with a range of religious commitments and passions, emotions, experience, and opinions, objectivity may be hard to come by in the religious studies classroom. However, recognizing the densely layered subjectivity of students and teachers alike can liberate the student to explore a range of ideas and practices. In fact, subjectivity tempered by disciplined study, openness to new ideas, and attention to research and pedagogical methods can create an environment where the study of religion is exhilarating rather than something one must suffer through. Such an environment could potentially catalyze a new growth of ideas about religion, religious experience, and contours of faith, and prepare minds for subsequent growth in related subjects.

This book endeavors to foster a dialogical environment. It is not meant to serve as the only source of classroom material, but rather as a framework or scaffold for conversation. It is assumed that both teacher and student will draw from personal knowledge and experience as they dialogue about ideas central to the study of religion: truth, faith, religious experience, sacred texts, rituals, and so on. In a global environment where religion has been variously understood, it is my hope that this text will provide room for every voice to be heard and no one voice to be privileged above the rest. It is also assumed that the conversation will not be finished with the completion of the course, but rather that this book might serve as a prelude for a sustained, lifelong conversation.

This book takes into consideration common questions students raise about religion, cultural notions about faith, and what the lived experience of religion might entail. Sets of questions are offered throughout the book to serve as discussion prompts. The book is also designed

to aid students and teachers in exploring perceptions about how religion is understood, to expose matrices of relationships between ideas and practices, and to serve as initial steps toward discovery of how religion and religious life are interwoven with an array of commitments—economic, cultural, political, and so on—in an increasingly globalized (and Westernized) world. The book introduces students to nomenclature unique to the study of religion and to ideas and concepts that religions share; it serves as a means for interpersonal as well as personal reflection; and it invites for interrogation of perceptions and beliefs about what connotes religion, faith, and religious practice. Though each author wrote independently of the others, certain concepts, ideas, and methods thread throughout the book, and it is hoped that students and teachers will weave these together as they engage in the study of religion.

The book is written with the first-year college student in mind; hence it will not introduce all of the nuances that could be covered. Because the study of religion is massive, the book confines itself to basic topics and ideas that could be investigated more thoroughly in subsequent courses. In addition, the text will not cover religious methods, ideas, or practices comprehensively, but rather smorgasbord style. Not all topics will be covered, and some readers may leave longing for more. Description, analysis, and interpretation of ideas and practices are imbedded in most chapters. Sometimes topics will surface for careful examination and at other times remain submerged and awaiting subsequent study. For this reason each chapter includes a list of references for further study. As with a smorgasbord, no one will be able to ingest it all. I hope this book will serve as a means of whetting student appetites for return visits to ideas and topics in the study of theology and religion.

*Paul O. Myhre, editor*

# ORIGIN STORIES AND RELIGION: HOW ARE RELIGIONS FORMED?

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## **Preface**

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How do we explain the human inclination toward religious belief? How are religions formed? There are as many answers to these questions as there are religious systems. And each answer helps to illumine the nature of these universal and inherently mysterious phenomena.

Some believe origin stories may hold crucial clues to the formation of religions. Nearly every religion has an origin story around which revolve its values, rituals, and belief system. This story is central to understanding the religion's practices and structures and the ideas and beliefs that inform them. Origin stories embody the foundational truths on which religions are built.

In this chapter, David Ratke explores different perspectives on the source of religion before examining origin stories from within their cultural and historical frameworks. Ratke explores the example of the Navajo sweat-lodge ceremony, which centers on the emergence story of that people. Entry into the sweat lodge prompts practitioners to move back to a spiritual and cultural center, thus reorienting adherents to ways of living in the world that connect with their cultural and religious origins.

## **Chapter Goals**

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- To introduce different perspectives on the formation of religion, including scientific, Hindu, and Christian
- To consider origin stories and the formation of religions and religious practices
- To introduce myth in relation to the study of religion
- To better understand mythic belief systems by introducing religious ideas such as "sacred" and "profane"

## INTRODUCTION

What is the source of religion? How do we explain the human inclination and desire for religious belief? In this chapter, I propose that religions are formed at least in part to explain and understand our human origin and the origin of the universe and to thereby locate ourselves in the world. Our explanations are often overtly religious in character and give rise to religious practices and beliefs that satisfy our human need for meaning and belonging.

But exploring why religions are formed necessarily involves grappling with what religion is. Indeed, asking why religions are formed suggests that religion might somehow be merely a human fabrication. Some people of faith would counter that religion is a divine gift given to humans more or less complete and fully developed. They might add that human understanding of a religion may develop over time, but that the core of the religion itself would remain unchanged.

Asking why religions are formed also assumes the existence of something called “religion” that occupies a distinct realm in human life. While for those in Western societies this implied distinction between “religious” and “secular” or “sacred” and “profane” is self-evident, this distinction is not always made elsewhere. Yet most would agree that there *is* something that can be called “religion” and there are certain behaviors and practices that people the world over recognize as religious. Most cultures, for example, have one or more distinct communities that identify themselves as religious. In the United States, churches, synagogues, mosques, and other places of worship are locations where certain religious practices commonly happen. Prayer and meditation are widely recognized as religious activities. Certain holidays (literally “holy days”) such as Christmas and Easter or Yom Kippur and Passover or Ramadan are seen as religious. Participation in and observance of certain ceremonies

and rites such as baptism or the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) or the various Hindu life-cycle rites are seen as religious activities.

Nonetheless, it is often difficult to distinguish the sacred (the supernatural, metaphysical realm) from the profane or mundane (the everyday, material realm). In other words, it is often difficult to separate religion from culture. In fact, the practices of a particular religion are often strongly influenced by its cultural location.

As noted, in many ways “religion” is a Western concept. In fact, in other parts of the world, there is no word that readily translates to “religion.” The sacred writings of Islam and Judaism, for example, speak of *din*, meaning “judgment,” rather than religion. And the New Testament of the Christian Bible doesn’t mention religion.

Rudolf Otto, a German scholar of religion (1869–1937), argues in *The Idea of the Holy* that there is something identifiable as beyond the human person (the *numinous*). He names this “something” the *mysterium tremendum* (literally: “awe-full” or “overpowering mystery”) and says it points to the divine that is “wholly other.” Otto’s concept of religion (as well as others like it) probably overemphasizes a divide between the divine and the material, the sacred and the profane. This conception works well enough with the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), but not so well with Buddhism and Hinduism. After all, these latter religions tend to emphasize the oneness or unity of the sacred and the profane. Hindus and Buddhists say there is not only a harmony but also an essential unity between the ultimate and the penultimate, between the sacred and the profane.

Some thinkers conceive of religion as a sense of something beyond the material, the physical, while others conceive of religion in terms of doctrines and beliefs. Some religious scholars think about religion in ways that encompass behaviors and practices, and point to values and ethics. This latter view makes sense when we consider



that the mystical strain of many religions tends to reject creeds and other statements of belief in favor of emotional (ecstatic) experiences of the divine that sometimes result in a lifestyle characterized by specific behaviors and values. Consider the great Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi. In reading the Christian scriptures, he came upon the passage that states, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” Gandhi said that this passage had a profound impact on him. He commented: “If you will understand, appreciate and act up to the spirit of this passage, you would not even need to know what place Jesus or any other teacher occupies in

your heart.” Gandhi clearly does not see religion as having primarily creedal (having to do with statements of belief) boundaries. He understood himself to be a devout Hindu, but that did not dissuade him from reading the scriptures of other religions. Gandhi read the religious writings stripped of any doctrinal or creedal content and focused on their ethical value. His concern had to do with how we act, not with how we believe. Or, at the very least, action is not divorced from belief, and in fact action trumps belief.

All these perspectives on religion notwithstanding, still there is something that we can call *religion*, even if it is difficult to precisely distinguish it from culture (*culture* is also tricky to define).

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Why do you think the formation of religion is a nearly universal human phenomenon?
- Do you prefer the Western notion of separation between the sacred and the profane or the Eastern idea of harmony and essential oneness? Explain.
- How would you define religion?

## A SCIENTIFIC ACCOUNT OF THE FORMATION OF RELIGION

Some studying the origins of religion ask: “Can the formation of religion be scientifically accounted for? Are humans genetically wired to be religious? If so, are some more inclined to be religious?”

Some scientists, such as Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Dawkins, dismiss religion as merely a human fabrication, while others, like anthropologist Barbara J. King, are genuinely

interested in exploring the formation and development of religion.<sup>1</sup> These latter are curious about how science might help us better understand religion—both its faith and practice.

In *Evolving God: A Provocative View of the Origins of Religion*, King notes that religion is common to all human cultures. Acknowledging the difficulty of defining religion, she settles on the idea of “belongingness” as a “necessary element” of religion. “[B]elongingness,” King writes, “was transformed from a basic emotional relating between individuals to a deeper relating,

1. See Barbara J. King, *Evolving God: A Provocative View of the Origins of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 235. It is important to note that King does not argue that science can “explain” religion. She is interested in how religion is formed. For a discussion of the neuroscientific study of the formation of religion, see Michael Brooks, “Born Believers: How Your Brain Creates God,” *New Scientist*, February 4, 2009, 30–33.

one that had the potential to become *transcendent*, between people and supernatural beings or forces.”<sup>2</sup> King studies the evolutionary basis for religion and its formation. This is why “belongingness” is crucial to her. “We humans crave emotional connection with others. This deep desire to connect can be explained by the long evolutionary history we share with other primates, the monkeys and apes. At the same time, it explains why humans evolved to become the spiritual ape—the ape that grew a large brain, the ape that stood up, the ape that first created art, but above all, the ape that evolved God.”<sup>3</sup>

King is interested in the commonality of the religious experience or the religious imagination. When people talk about their religious experiences, there appears to be a fundamental similarity, King says: “People enter into a deeply felt relationship with beings whom they cannot see, but who are present daily in their lives and who transform these lives . . . [A]n intimate social relationship between living people and supernatural beings of some sort is characteristic of human societies everywhere.”<sup>4</sup> We may not be able to satisfactorily define religion, but we can generally agree that *something* called religion can be found in cultures and societies everywhere, although not all people in these cultures and societies are necessarily religious.

Because religion is about belonging, it is also emotional. “Religion *is* emotion,” King asserts, “because it is so grounded in belongingness; it is about feeling deeply for another creature, caring enough for someone to act compassionately, being in awe of the ineffable. To turn away from

the emotional life of hominids while trying to explain the development of their religion renders any explanation sterile right from the start.”<sup>5</sup> Having made these assertions, King then examines apes, early hominid cultures, and human culture to make her case.

Apes are not religious. They do however exhibit behavior that is associated with religion: meaning-making, imagination, empathy, and obedience (following the rules). Apes make meaning when they interact with each other and change their behavior based on the messages they receive from each other. Apes are empathetic. They suffer with and for each other. Apes are imaginative. They will create tools and imaginary playmates. Finally they follow rules as established by the community. None of this by itself really proves anything, but it helps King explore what life might have been like for prehistoric humans.

Having examined the emotional lives of apes, King explores what the emotional (and social) life of early hominids might have been like. Neanderthals, for example, took care to position the bodies of the dead in one room and the bones of a bear in another room. Why? King is not certain, but is convinced that such positioning is a signpost “pointing to symbolic behavior.”<sup>6</sup>

The cave paintings at Lascaux, France, were early hominid attempts to understand the cosmos, King believes. For hunting and gathering societies, the sacred is closely intertwined with daily activity. Animals are as closely connected to the supernatural and the divine as humans. There are no clear-cut divisions between the animal world, the human world, and the supernatural.

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2. *Ibid.*, 8. The scientist in King is apparent in her focus on the phenomenon of communicating with the transcendent rather than the efficacy of it. These attempts, she says, may or may not be successful: “A bedrock is the belief that one may be seen, heard, protected, harmed, loved, frightened, or soothed by interaction with God, gods, or spirits,” 51.

3. *Ibid.*, 1. King emphatically argues that humans did not evolve from apes.

4. *Ibid.*, 13.

5. *Ibid.*, 94.

6. *Ibid.*, 100.

Animals are active beings in this worldview. The cave paintings at Lascaux therefore were likely a sophisticated attempt to show the place of animals and humans in the cosmos.<sup>7</sup> The paintings themselves demonstrate relationality or belongingness at many levels: (1) the images suggest the interconnectedness of animal and human life (the paintings almost exclusively depict animal life, suggesting that animals were a central concern of the artists); (2) the size and quantity of the paintings are such that the production of the images must have been a communal project (there are hundreds of paintings, the largest of which is more than 15 feet long); and (3) because art is symbolic, art is social (the function of a symbol requires another person to recognize and share in its meaning).<sup>8</sup> The Lascaux paintings provide a clear example of how the sacred and the earthly come together.

The bottom line, for King, is that religion evolved to serve our human need for belonging, for relationship. She notes that “the full [sense of inclusion] of a social network . . . is the single strongest factor in why people convert to a new religion or join an established religious group.

People become attached to those who already belong, and are drawn in.”<sup>9</sup> This makes considerable sense. Children tend to have the same values (including religious values) as their parents. Pastors, preachers, and priests will encourage people to talk to their neighbors and coworkers about their place of worship. These religious leaders know that the top reason people join a church is because of an invitation from someone they know. For people who are active in a religious organization it’s likely that they are active in that organization because they know somebody in that organization.

People seek belonging. They join groups because they know other people in that group. They also seek belonging or connections to powers or forces beyond the human. As humans evolved, they began to seek connections with the supernatural world.<sup>10</sup> It did not happen suddenly. It evolved slowly. Humans began by connecting with others immediately around them, then by connecting with others in ever larger circles. They connected with family members, then clans, tribes, nations, and so forth until finally they connected with a divine being who created the cosmos.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Do you think religion is purely a human construction? If so, why? If not, why not?
- How is belongingness or social community related to the formation of religion and religious practices?
- What holy or special days in your experience would you count as religious? Why?
- Do apes or other nonhuman species practice religion? If not, why not?
- What is it about humans that make them inclined toward religious practices?
- How are religious perceptions related to human emotions? Are there specific religious issues that trigger an emotional response in you? If so, what are they?

7. Images may be viewed at <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/>.

8. King, *Evolving God*, 136.

9. *Ibid.*, 174.

10. Not all religions identify the “other” that people connect to with a divine being. Buddhism is a notable example.

## RELIGION AND THE NEED FOR MEANING, BELONGING

In this chapter, I propose that people have sought to explain and understand their origin and the origin of the universe in order to locate themselves in the world. These explanations are often overtly religious in character and give rise to religious practices and beliefs that satisfy the human need for meaning and belonging.

Many religions, especially so-called primitive religions, seek to reenact the first moment of creation with rites and ceremonies. The Navajo sweat-lodge ceremony is one example. Traditionally constructed of soft saplings that are bent into an igloo-shape, the dome-like frame of the lodge is covered with animal skins, making it completely dark inside. A fire is built nearby and used to heat rocks until they are red hot and glowing. The Navajo place these rocks in the sweat lodge, where they pour water over them. The participants, who are now sitting in the darkness listening to prayers and invocations, experience nearly suffocating heat, steam, and darkness.

A participant explained to me that if you understood the earth to be a female that gave birth to creation, then you could easily see how the sweat lodge itself looks something like the distended, swollen belly of a pregnant woman. When you enter this “belly,” you return to the place where creation began. A baby before it is born is cramped in the mother’s belly. The womb is warm, moist, and dark. Sweat lodges are all of these things as well: cramped, moist, warm (hot!—temperatures can reach 150° F), and dark. As my friend said, “You want to get out just as a baby wants to get out of its mother’s belly.” The womb—and the belly—is a place of disorientation and discomfort. Indeed when you do get out of the sweat lodge you feel relieved, exhilarated. You’re glad to be out even while you’re deeply appreciative for the experience. Birth and creation are seen as similar experiences. The sweat lodge is an attempt to re-create

that experience and that time when primordial chaos became ordered.

Christian baptism has similar themes. Saint Paul writes that in baptism you die with Christ and then rise again in the “newness of life” (Rom 6:4). The water used in baptism reminds the believer of the primordial water described in Genesis 1 (or even Genesis 6 in the account of Noah and the Flood), which seeks to overwhelm with its power to destroy and disorient. In baptism, the believer enters into this place of disorder and death in order to rise again—with Christ—into a new life and become a new person (Rom 6:3–5; Col 2:12; Jn 3:5).

That first moment of creation is a captivating and compelling moment to which adherents of nearly all faith traditions turn for inspiration and renewal. It’s a moment when believers attempt to find meaning in the midst of meaninglessness, order in the midst of chaos, and life in the midst of death. “Creation” thus functions as a kind of symbol.

Symbols, Paul Tillich famously said, participate in the reality to which they point (*Systematic Theology* 1:239). More importantly perhaps, these rites and ceremonies have symbolic power. The sweat lodge both stands apart from creation and participates in it. Clearly, the sweat lodge does not “create” the world or even a new person. It does, however, allow people to participate in the reality of creation. Likewise, Christian baptism stands apart from creation. Christians do not literally go back in time to the point when something was made from nothing. Nonetheless, baptism participates in creation in that the believer participates in a symbolic death and re-creation.

Symbols of faith (e.g., sweat lodge, cross, Passover, hajj) are more lasting than doctrinal statements of faith. Doctrinal statements are rational in nature and though reason transcends time and space, it does seem limited. Symbols, on the other hand, appeal to the heart as well as the mind. They stand both within and outside of time. They appeal to the imagination and not just the intellect.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- In what ways and for what purposes is religion formed?
- How has your understanding of religion been broadened so far in this chapter?
- What holy or special days in your experience would you call religious? Why?

## MYTHS

*Myths* are closely related to symbols. For most people, myth has a pejorative meaning. In Christianity, myths are looked upon a bit negatively as well. One thinks of New Testament passages such as “We did not follow cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet 1:16). Myths have been contrasted with truth and reason: “People . . . will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4).

This negative view of myths has persisted. Many religion scholars, however, have a neutral or even positive view of myths. Most scholars would define *myth* somewhat like Tillich does *symbol*, as a narrative or story that points to a larger truth and thereby helps us understand everyday life. Sometimes myths shape our values and our lives. They are narratives that point to truths or realities that transcend time and space.

Typically myths concern founding or originating events. As such, myths are not ordinarily

## MYTH

The definition of *myth* has changed over the last two hundred years. In the nineteenth century, myth was understood to be a religious explanation of an event, such as the falling of rain or thunder. Myths in this worldview serve the same function as science: they seek to explain natural events. Myths, like science, also seek to explain human behavior (see the above discussion of Barbara King’s ideas about how religion is formed). Understood in this way, myths and science inevitably conflict because science and myths share the same function. The difference, of course, is that science does not self-consciously provide *religious* explanations for events.

Scholars seek to get past this impasse. Mircea Eliade, a prominent religion scholar,

suggests that myths explain both physical and social phenomena. Myths, in Eliade’s view, allow people to escape the natural world and enter into sacred, original time and space. For example, in the sweat lodge, participants try to re-create the creation of the world. At these moments, people try to rub shoulders with the gods. Another theory proposes that myths concern humans’ understanding of their place in the world. From this view, the sweat lodge would provide a medium for participants to tell themselves about themselves. The sweat lodge would remind participants of the deep and profound connection between humans and the earth. In the sweat lodge, the participant would have an experience of creation and self-understanding.

conflated with factual history. They tend to be described historically (otherwise they would be entirely removed from the mundane) but take place before written history. Consequently, although myths cannot be known objectively, they are not beyond subjective knowing. They have a sacred dimension. In this way, myths intersect the sacred and the profane.

Mythical time is eternal—myths communicate in every time and place, and the world of a myth can be experienced or imagined anew just as if it were happening here and now. Remember the account of the sweat lodge? The myth of creation for that Navajo community is experienced and imagined just as if it were really happening right then in that sweat lodge. For this reason, myths are not merely intellectual or aesthetic experiences. They are not simply intellectual experiences in which the hearer or reader appreciates them only for the beauty or message of the narrative. They invite the hearer or reader into their world.

The account of creation in Genesis 1, for example, invites the reader into a world in which God is sovereign. The world before God's creative acts is chaotic, and death and destruction threaten at every turn unless and until the sovereign God imposes order and life through simply uttering a word ("Let there be light"). People who take this account of creation literally ought not to be simply dismissed. They are doing what people have done for thousands of years: entering the world—the time and space—of a myth that attempts to explain why things are the way they are. Myths, therefore, are vehicles by which a culture or community establishes its own beliefs, values, rituals, and principles as normative and authoritative.

### The Babylonian Epic of Creation (*Enuma Elish*)

The *Enuma Elish* myth (sometimes called the *Babylonian Epic of Creation*) is not so much

about the origin of humans and of creation as about divine order. It is concerned with gods and the hierarchy of gods. It explains how Marduk came to be the god of Babylon and asserts the primacy of Marduk. Marduk is said to be the most powerful of all gods because he conquered the forces of chaos by slaying Tiamat (who is closely connected to water: *tiamat* means sea). Marduk created the cosmos out of the chaos of Tiamat's body. In images that are evocative of Genesis 1, Marduk creates heaven to serve as a barrier to the waters above, he creates the stars in the heavens to mark the days, and he uses other parts of Tiamat's body to make clouds, rivers, and mountains. Marduk then forms humans from clay (cf. Gen 2:7) mixed with the blood of a competing god (Qingu or Kingu). At the end of the account, all of the gods acknowledge Marduk's power (and implicitly all humans should acknowledge the power of Babylon) by building him a palace. This marks the end of the threat of chaos and the establishment of order.

Like the creation story in Genesis 1, *Enuma Elish* describes a primordial state of chaos in which nothing is yet formed. The narrative centers on a battle between the female Tiamat and the male Marduk, who represent the forces of chaos and order. The narrative and the characters are a little ambiguous. Tiamat, at the outset, is described as patient with and indulgent of the other gods who

would meet together and disturb Tiamat . . .  
They stirred up Tiamat's belly,  
They were annoying her by playing inside  
Andurana.  
Apsu could not quell the noise  
And Tiamat became mute before them;  
However grievous their behaviour to her,  
However bad their ways, she would indulge  
them.<sup>11</sup>

Tiamat herself is the wife of Apsu. Together they are the parents of the gods who created the

11. "The Epic of Creation," tablet 1 in Stephanie Dalley, ed. and trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 233; all citations for *Enuma Elish* are from this translation unless otherwise indicated.

world (e.g., one of their children is Anu, who created the four winds). Apsu was slain by Ea, father of Marduk, who built a residence over Anu's body, which then became an underground body of water. As it happens, even in death, Apsu gives life: "Inside Apsu, Marduk was created; Inside pure Apsu, Marduk was born."<sup>12</sup> Among these gods is Marduk, who comes to represent wisdom, order, and justice. The accounts in Genesis 1–11 also concern divine order. The author of the creation account in Genesis 2–8 assumes an agricultural world (as opposed to the urban world assumed in Genesis 1) that needs to be organized to produce fruitful harvests.<sup>13</sup> The first humans were created from soil, according to Genesis 2:15, to take care of Yahweh's garden.

Cosmology, how the cosmos are ordered and understood, often determines how the world began. Generally, it is assumed that gods existed

long before humans (both Genesis accounts as well as *Enuma Elish* assume this). Various representations are used to account for the origin of the universe. Sexual intercourse between gods is one example: A female deity and a male deity have intercourse and conceive. Their offspring may be plants or animals or humans or the seasons. Another image is that of creating from clay as does a potter or sculptor. An example of this is the Genesis 2 account: "The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground . . . out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air" (Gen 2:7, 19). Yet another image is that of simply speaking the world into existence, as in Genesis 1: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen 1:3). Genesis 1 uses this formula repeatedly to establish the power and sovereignty of God.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- If a myth points to a larger truth, beyond its story, how do we recognize the truth to which a myth points?
- How do myths help us understand everyday life?
- Do *Enuma Elish* and other ancient stories help or hinder your understanding of religion?
- In what ways does a cosmological story provide insight into a religion?

## RIG VEDA

Let's take a look at two creation myths: the Hindu Rig Veda and the Sandy Lake Cree creation account. In the Hindu sacred writing the Rig Veda, there is a short hymn on creation (hymn 129) that, like Genesis 1, suggests there was a time before time, a time of nonexistence, a time when there was nothing:

1. Then was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air,

no sky beyond it. What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?

2. Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider. That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.
3. Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this All was

12. Ibid., 235.

13. Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 50.

indiscriminated chaos. All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit.

4. Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit. Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent.
5. Transversely was their severing line extended: what was above it then, and what below it? There were begetters, there were mighty forces, free action here and energy up yonder.
6. Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The Gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?
7. He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it, Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, this hymn speaks of an “unfathomed depth of water.”<sup>15</sup> “There was neither death nor life. All that there was, was nothing. There was no order, only chaos.”<sup>16</sup> One might say that the cosmos begins with a question mark, with possibility. Hymn 129 states that desire was the first to arise from this “place” of nothingness and chaos. Desire, the hymn suggests, gives rise to a series of questions: Where does this creation come from? Who even knows about this creation? Even the gods were not there; they came after creation. Whoever formed

creation formed it all. Or perhaps this god did not form it all. The questions are endless and cannot be answered; however, this does not mean that the questions should not be asked.

This hymnal account reveals the ambiguity at the heart of Hinduism, which fluctuates between polytheism and monotheism. This hymn suggests the divine character of humans, who can raise these questions and ponder answers without arriving at certain and sure answers. What is certain and sure is that desire is inherent in creation and is a central feature of Hindu anthropology. This hymn says two things about humans: (1) they desire to know the unknowable and comprehend the incomprehensible; and (2) they are like the gods and, in fact, may be divine in some way. And this hymn says two things about gods: (1) gods desire to know the unknowable and comprehend the incomprehensible; and (2) gods are not so very different from humans. In short, there is continuity between the human and the divine.

## SANDY LAKE CREE

I once volunteered for a year with a Christian mission organization, living with the Anishnabi in Sandy Lake, Ontario. Outsiders variously called them Cree, Ojibwa, or sometimes Oji-Cree, names that derive from a Western, non-native way of understanding and classifying that assumes distinctions between the Anishnabi and their neighbors, distinctions that the Anishnabi do not necessarily make. (*Anishnabi* means, simply, “human.”)

The following account of creation that the Sandy Lake Cree share is considerably different from any we have thus far discussed:

14. Rig Veda, trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith, x, 129, <http://sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10129.htm>.

15. Ibid., x, 129, 1.

16. Ibid., x, 129, 3.



The earth mother, O-ma-ma-ma, gave birth to the spirits of the world. O-ma-ma-ma is a woman who remains perpetually or eternally beautiful. Among her children are Binay-sih, the thunderbird who protects the animals of the world from the sea serpent, Genay-big, who seeks to destroy them. Thunder is the result of Binay-sih battling Genay-big. Another child of O-ma-ma-ma is Oma-ka-ki who is a sorcerer frog who often aids other animals when they are in need. Her third child is Wee-sa-kay-jac, a supernatural Anishnabi. He has many powers (for example, he can change shape), but is also a trickster who likes to have fun (sometimes, perhaps even often) at the expense of people. Other children are Ma-heegun, the wolf, and Amik, the beaver.

The fish, rocks, grass, trees and all the animals were created from womb of O-ma-ma-ma. For a long time this was all there was; there were not any humans (Anishnabi).

During this time, Wee-sa-kay-jac battled Mishipizhiw the god of the water who tried to destroy Wee-sa-kay-jac in a whirlpool in a river. Wee-sa-kay-jac was victorious in this battle. Another time, the waters of the lakes and the rivers began to rise and eventually flooded all of the land but for a small island where Wee-sa-kay-jac and the surviving animals retreated. Some of the creatures thought that Mishipizhiw was digging deep into a lake and had opened O-ma-ma-ma to bleed to death. Others thought that they had angered O-ma-ma-ma. In any case, Wee-sa-kay-jac had to build a great canoe so that he and the animals might survive the deluge. For many years they endured the unending rain and stormy seas.

One day, the rain stopped. Wee-sa-kay-jac was dismayed when he realized that he had not brought any clay to re-create the world. He asked Amik, the beaver, to dive below the surface and get some dirt, but the noble creature died in the

attempt. Then he asked the otter to dive, but he too drowned. Finally, Wee-sa-kay-jac sent the muskrat who also drowned but succeeded in getting some clay. It was with much gratitude that Wee-sa-kay-jac pulled the vine to which the limp muskrat's body was tied. Wee-sa-kay-jac's first order of business was to use the clay to bring the three animals back to life.

Then he boiled the clay so that it expanded and overflowed the pot thus forming the world.

Humans were created when Wee-sa-kay-jac had a dream in which he saw many creatures just like him dancing, singing, and making music. The first human Wee-sa-kay-jac was black, but Wee-sa-kay-jac decided that was not a Anishnabi (human) and discarded this one. The second human was pale and white, but this one too was not a Anishnabi. This human was also discarded. The third was olive-brown in color. A success! Thus the first human or Anishnabi came into being.<sup>17</sup>

This account clearly places humans second to animal spirits. It is also tribal in that a certain race of humans are preferred or ranked over others, in this case Anishnabi over other humans. This element of the myth is probably a later addition; nonetheless, it tells us something about how the Sandy Lake Cree see themselves and other humans. Anishnabi are at the center of the world at least in comparison to other humans. However, Anishnabi do not see themselves as the first creatures or, we can safely assume, the center of the world. At the center are the animal spirits that O-ma-ma-ma created. Second in rank is Wee-sa-kay-jac, who serves as a prototype for humans. The story itself has much to say about the activity of O-ma-ma-ma and the spirits. In fact, the story even hints at a rich collection of myths about these characters, which behave

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17. Carl Ray and James R. Stevens, *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 20–25.

disturbingly—or perhaps encouragingly—like humans. They are given to anger, frustration, competitiveness, jealousy, joy, gratitude, compassion, sympathy, and love. By placing humans far from the center of O-ma-ma-ma's activity and concern, the account puts humans in their place. Much more important are O-ma-ma-ma and the animal spirits, whose activity is central to creation and the ongoing sustenance of the earth. Humans can participate in this, but because they are far down the hierarchy, their contribution is of less importance. According to the Anishnabi, there is an entire world beyond the one we can know with our senses, a world that plays a much larger role. In short, what humans do in the here and now is not nearly as important as what is happening in that other world, beyond our ken.

Wee-sa-kay-jac's role as a human prototype is important and should not be overlooked. He is a noble character: well-intentioned, but a bit bumbling. He sounds a bit like us. Many of us are well intentioned, but our efforts are too often misplaced or misdirected. Wee-sa-kay-jac depends on the animal spirits to get things done. He needs the muskrat to dive for clay so that he can make humans. This account suggests that we are far from the crown of creation; we depend on animals and the rest of creation in order to survive, much less thrive. Even our best efforts are dependent on forces and powers far beyond our ken, much less our control.

## GENESIS: TWO ACCOUNTS OF CREATION

Genesis 1 and 2 actually tell two creation myths, with similar but different interests. Genesis 1 is generally ascribed to the “priestly” writer (P), while Genesis 2 is credited to the “Yahwist” (J) writer.

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless

void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:1–3). Thus begins the priestly account of creation. I often ask my students to imagine in their mind's eye what it might have been like to be there at the beginning in this formless void where darkness covered the seas. They often describe a cosmos that is dark, lonely, chaotic, even terrifying. I suspect this was the effect the priestly writer was aiming for: A dangerous and terrifying world without God. The chaotic and perilous seas will swallow you up. These death-threatening seas, of course, don't swallow us up. God says, “Let there be light.” If there is any doubt about God's power in this account, it is now removed. When humans create, they create with preexisting materials. Carpenters use wood and nails. Students and professors use the ideas of those who came before them. Bakers use flour and sugar and water and eggs. Humans need stuff to create. They cannot create simply by speaking something into existence.

God can. The divine voice is enough to bring order to the turbulent and chaotic seas. The divine voice is enough to bring light into being. The divine voice orders the cosmos in a way that nurtures and sustains life. Water is separated from the heavens. Dry land appears. The earth brings forth vegetation that bears fruit. The entire account in Genesis 1 contributes to a sense that divine order is keeping deadly chaos at bay. God is great, and while humans have a special place in this account (they are given “dominion” over the rest of creation), they are clearly second in every way to this Creator.

Genesis 2, the Yahwist account, is a very different creation myth. “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, . . . the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:4b–7). In this account, earth already exists, a

desolate earth without plants or other life, but earth nonetheless. In this account, Yahweh uses soil to form the first man, unlike the priestly account in which God simply speaks the first humans into existence. The aloof nature of God in Genesis 1 is not apparent here. Yahweh is hands-on and involved. Indeed Yahweh gets up close and personal with the first man, breathing life into his nostrils. There is a warmth or relationality to the Creator in Genesis 2 that is not nearly so apparent in Genesis 1.

The first man is different too. For example, unlike Genesis 1 where God created the first male and female humans (Gen 1:27), this first man is alone. This solitude in Genesis 2 is something that Yahweh soon resolves. The Creator creates the animals not as creatures for humans to have dominion over as in Genesis 1 (Gen 1:26) but as companions for the first man. “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner,” says the Lord God (Gen 2:18). Animals are created in a failed attempt to find a suitable companion for the first man, who apparently needs a companion. The first woman is then created and when she breaths life, it is an “aha” moment and it is clear that intimacy is expected of the two humans. “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh . . . a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:23–24). Can you imagine a more powerful way of expressing deep intimacy between two people?

The Genesis 2 account of creation suggests a number of different religious and social values. One overarching value is that of relationship. Yahweh is in close relationship with the man and the woman. This is expressed not only by Yahweh’s breathing into the man’s nostrils but also by the conversations in which Yahweh expresses concern for the man’s solitude. Relationship and intimacy are apparent in that the man is expected to be in a relationship and the relationship will be deep. Even the relationship with animals is not finally

about dominion, but about companionship, something a modern pet owner would understand.

## CONCLUSION

Myths, especially those that describe the origin of the world, can be powerful means for shaping our ideas about the world, ourselves, and the transcendent. The Genesis accounts assume monotheism. Yet there is some diversity even in the first two chapters of Genesis, which point to one tradition that posits a sovereign God who keeps the powers of chaos and death at bay, and another that posits a Creator (Yahweh) who compassionately attends to the first man’s emotional and social needs. Both of these traditions play powerful roles in Western culture. Most Westerners, regardless of whether they see themselves as people of faith, would recognize humans’ “dominion” or rule over nature.

The Cree of Sandy Lake, on the other hand, do not see themselves as having authority over nature in any sense. In fact, they understand themselves to be at the mercy of nature and animals. The reality of global warming, they might say, is nature’s revenge; and in the future, life on earth may or may not include humans. Wee-sakay-jac and O-ma-ma-ma will look after themselves first and only then look out for humans. And in the Rig Veda, the account of creation is deliberately ambiguous. Who can be certain about the origin of the world? About ourselves? About God? Even King’s scientific account of creation is deeply influenced by her notion of belonging as fundamental to the human experience.

All of this tells us that origin accounts are intended to obscure as much as they reveal. How did the world begin? Where is humans’ place in the world? Where are humans located in relation to divine being(s)? Creation stories and myths are intended to ask such questions as much as answer them.

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- How are the *Enuma Elish*, Sandy Lake Cree, and Genesis accounts of creation similar to and different from each other?
- What role, if any, does a creation story play in the formation of a religion?
- Have your perceptions about the formation of religion changed as a result of reading this chapter? If so, how?
- How would you answer the question: “How is religion formed?”

## Additional Resources

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