

"A WELL-CHOSEN COLLECTION, FROM GOOD SOURCES, WELL
PRESENTED FOR USE EITHER AS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF MYTHOLOGY OR
AS A CONVENIENT REFERENCE WORK AND REFRESHER OF MEMORY."

— JOSEPH CAMPBELL

PRIMAL



MYTHS

CREATION MYTHS
AROUND THE WORLD

Barbara C. Sprout

PRIMAL MYTHS

Creation Myths around the World

Barbara C. Sproul



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Dedication

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PREFACE

In many cultures, creation myths form only the first part of an extended mythological tradition which recounts social and cultural as well as natural foundations of present reality. Such cultures make no firm distinctions between creation myths and socio-cultural ones insofar as they understand no gross separation between themselves and the rest of nature. Therefore many of the myths included in this anthology are somewhat arbitrarily truncated—cut off from the more historical myths which follow them—so that in subject matter they might match more closely those explicitly cosmological myths which deal directly with the creation of being, the gods, the universe, and people.

In each case, I have sought the most authentic translation—the version which, even though it might not be as smooth or as easily available to Western readers as another, most authentically evokes its cultural and religious source. For the most part, diacritical marks and footnotes have been omitted as unnecessary for the general reader, but each myth has been introduced with basic information concerning its setting, date, authorship, and main symbols.

To maintain consistency, only book titles have been italicized; the titles of individual myths have not. Partly for the same reason, but also to be clear, the terms “God,” “Being—Itself,” “Not-Being—Itself,” and the “Holy” have been capitalized when they refer to absolute reality. Generic terms for divinities and principles which seem to symbolize only a partial aspect of that reality appear in lowercase.

This is only a partial collection of the creation myths of the world: given the limits of one volume I have tried to choose the most powerful myths, offering examples from each religious tradition and yet avoiding duplication of themes or attitudes. I hope that, by its range, this collection still provides an introduction to the cosmological and theological thinking of the world’s religions.

Among those to whom I am particularly grateful are teachers whose passion for their own subject has inspired me in pursuit of my own. Isabel Stevens, David Bailey, Joseph Campbell, Ada Bozeman, Maurice Friedman, Roy Finch, Rudolf Arnheim, Tom Driver, and Theodor Gaster have each taught me a great deal—not so much by virtue of the answers they gave but by the questions they asked—and I am in their debt.

Barbara C. Sproull
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INTRODUCTION

THE MOST PROFOUND human questions are the ones that give rise to creation myths: Who are we? Where are we here? What is the purpose of our lives and our deaths? How should we understand our place in the world, in time and space? These are central questions of value and meaning, and, while they are influenced by issues of fact, they are not in themselves factual questions; rather, they involve attitudes toward facts and reality. As such, the issues that they raise are addressed most directly by myths.

Myths proclaim such attitudes toward reality. They organize the way we perceive facts and understand ourselves and the world. Whether we adhere to them consciously or not, they remain pervasively influential. Think of the power of the first myth of Genesis (1–2:3) in the Old Testament. While the scientific claims it incorporates, so obviously at odds with modern ones, may be rejected, what about the myth itself? Most Westerners, whether or not they are practicing Jews or Christians, still show themselves to be the heirs of this tradition by holding to the view that people are sacred, the creatures of God. Declared unbelievers often dispense with the frankly religious language of the assertion by renouncing God, yet even they still cherish the *consequence* of the myth's claim and affirm that people have inalienable rights (*as if* they were created by God). And, further, consider the beliefs that human beings are superior to all other creatures and are properly set above the rest of the physical world by intelligence and spirit with the obligation to govern it—these beliefs are still current and very powerful. Even the notion that time is properly organized into seven-day weeks, with one day for rest, remains widely accepted. These attitudes toward reality are all part of the first myth of Genesis. And whether people go to temple or church, whether they consider themselves religious, to the extent they reflect these attitudes in their daily behavior, they are still deeply Judeo-Christian.

But the power of a specific myth is not as important to realize as the power of myth itself. Indeed, each of the claims made by the first Genesis myth has been attacked from some quarter. What is essential to understand is that they have been challenged not by new facts but by new attitudes toward facts; they have been challenged by new myths.

There is no escaping our dependence on myth. Without it, we cannot determine what things are and what to do with them, or how to be in relation to them. The fundamental structures of understanding that myths provide, even though in part dictated by matter and instinct, are nevertheless essential and arbitrary because they describe not just the “real” world of “fact” but our perception and experience of that world.

This is true even when we try to understand our “selves.” How do we approach the most basic question of personal identity? Who is the “I” who is perceiving and experiencing the world? Initially, we presume identity is a physiological reality evident in a body's ability to distinguish between “me” (affirmed and protected by my body's defenses) and “not-me” (denied, attacked, and rejected, as happens in transplant operations). But, even though it rests on so firm a physical foundation and is so settled in instinct, the “fact” of identity is still variously determined by people. With growing intelligence and the progressive freedom that results from it, people construct other than pure reactive, physical ways of responding to and interacting with their environments. “I” is no longer synonymous with body. Indeed, the question is instantly complicated as time enters into consciousness with memory and imagination and you ask *which* body you identify with. Today's or Yesterday's? The body you will have a month from now if you go on a diet? The body you had as a child? And, as people add more factors to the structural grid of understanding, identity grows to include other matters. Gender, race, profession, nationality, age, position, and the like all become

relevant as the “I” in all those bodies comes to think of itself as something constant and essential connected to larger social realities. In many cases, such identifications are so powerful that they overcome the initial one of “‘I’ equals ‘body.’” People begin to make distinctions between various aspects of a complex “I”; they value some as “higher selves” and others as “lower,” and they make choices emphasizing one at the expense of another. This is what happens in wartime when people who have come to identify themselves not only physically but also nationally willingly sacrifice their “body selves” to their “citizen selves.”

Where does identity *really* lie? How should we understand the simple world of “fact” in this situation? Is the “real fact” the physical autonomy of the individual? The autonomy of the state in which individuals are only a temporary part? The autonomy of the universe in which both states and their generations of members are only temporary constituents? Or, moving from macrocosm to microcosm, is “reality” the autonomy of the atom or quark, of which the individual, state, and universe are only temporary configurations? Even in this matter, we need myths to determine and to evaluate the various facts presented to us. We need myths to answer the questions, “Who am I? How do I fit into the worlds of society and nature? How should I live?”

While all cultures have specific myths through which they respond to these kinds of questions, it is in their creation myths that the most basic answers are to be found. Not only are creation myths the most comprehensive of mythic statements, addressing themselves to the widest range of questions of meaning, but they are also the most profound. They deal with first causes, the essences of what the cultures perceive reality to be. In them people set forth their primary understanding of man and the world, time and space. And in them cultures express most directly, before they become involved in the fine points of sophisticated dogma, their understanding of and awe before the absolute reality, the most basic fact of *being*.

It is no accident that cultures think their creation myths the most sacred, for these myths are the ground on which all later myths stand. In them members of the group (and now outsiders) can perceive the main elements of entire structures of value and meaning. Usually, we learn only covertly and piecemeal of the attitudes these myths announce openly and wholly. Watch any parent with a small child, and you will see such attitudes being transmitted and received almost unconsciously. Values derived from the myths are virtually integral to speech itself. “What’s that?” asks the child. “And this? How does that smell? How does it feel? How does this taste?” “Be gentle, that’s a daisy,” her mother answers. “And that’s a puddle. Watch out, that’s a piece of glass; and look, there’s a shiny new penny.” And, along with her mother’s words, the little girl hears her tone and acquires from both the basic blocks for a whole structure of value and meaning. Only when she understands how to place and esteem each of the things can she make her own decisions about them. Only then can she know which is good to sniff, which to jump and splash in, and which to put away in a treasure box. And while many of these attitudes toward reality are conveyed by parents, others come from the culture at large, from education, laws, entertainment, and ritual. In a society as diverse and rapidly changing as ours, attitudes from different and occasionally conflicting myths are promulgated simultaneously. Even so, they are often accepted without question, by adults as well as by children, as “the way things are,” as “facts.”

Thus, because of the way in which domestic myths are transmitted, people often never learn that they *are* myths; people become submerged in their viewpoints, prisoners of their own traditions. They readily confuse attitudes toward reality (proclamations of value) with reality itself (statements of fact). Failing to see their own myths as myths, they consider all other myths false. They do not understand that the truth of all myths is existential and not necessarily theoretical. That is, they forget that myths are true to the extent they are effective. (In a sense, myths are self-fulfilling prophecies; they create facts out of the values they propound. Thinking we are superior to other creatures, f

instance, we set ourselves up as such and use them ruthlessly. Peoples that think of themselves as brothers to the beasts live with them in harmony and respect.)

As circumstances change and perceptions alter (often, as is the case with our feelings about the ecosystem, because an old myth has been so successful that it produces a new reality and therefor engenders a new attitude toward it), cultures constantly revise their myths. This practice is evident in several of the myths in this collection as well as in our own modern culture. Such revision is accomplished with remarkable ease if only the meaning of specific myths, not the words themselves, is altered. Our belief that “all men are created equal,” for example, is still firm, even though we have come to include black men and all women in an originally more restrictive claim. Although much has changed, the “fact” of equality is still considered to be unchallenged. When words as well as meanings are altered, people respond with more hesitation. Sometimes they live for a while with two different attitudes toward the same reality. Conflicting views of the proper attitude toward women, for example, can be seen side by side not only in any newspaper but also in the first book of the Old Testament. The myth of Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:4–23, c. 900 B.C.) speaks of the first woman as dependent on (and a derivative of) the first man, while the myth of creation in six days (Genesis 1–2:3, c. 400 B.C.) describes the genders as of equal origin.

Holding literally to the claims of any particular myth then, is a great error in that it mistakes a myth’s values for science’s facts and results in the worst sort of religiosity. Such literalism requires a faith that splits rather than unifies our consciousness. Thinking particular myths to be valuable in themselves undermines the genuine power of all myth to reveal value in the world; it transforms myths into obstacles to meaning rather than conveyers of it. Frozen in time, myth’s doctrines come to describe a world removed from and irrelevant to our timely one; its followers, consequently, become strangers to modernity and its real progress. Those of such blind faith are forced to sacrifice intellect for emotion, and the honesty of both to the safety of their creeds. And this kind of literalism is revealed as fundamentally idolatrous, the opposite of genuine faith.

Looking at many myths inhibits this sort of religious provincialism and its attendant dangers of dogmatism and false faith. Indeed, one of the benefits of considering myths is that we come to understand them (and by analogy our own) *as myths*. We become conscious of the power of myth itself to generate attitudes toward reality and, along with ritual, to win acceptance for these attitudes. The faithful literalists fear that, by admitting their myths *are* myths and by comparing them to others, they will implicitly be describing their myths as untrue, mere projections of the mythmakers’ relative and particular situations into imagined absolute and universal realms. And the literalist unfaithful—those who mistakenly disparage all myths as false—agree (happily) with this presumption. Both groups are convinced that when the claims of various myths are known and compared the disagreements will cause all myths to be thought untrue. After all, how can all myths be true if each claims different things? If one culture envisions a good god forming a world out of a watery chaos, a second depicts a host of deities fighting for divine control of a world they have fashioned piece by piece, and a third describes the universe as the outgrowth of a cosmic duel between principles of good and evil, how are we to distinguish between them and find truth in any of their imaginings? And if we find that each myth reflects the social, historical, and political situation of its adherents, they argue that further demonstrates the nature of myths as false.

But both groups are wrong. Not only do they confuse theoretical and existential truth but also each forgets that, while languages may differ, the meaning expressed in them may be the same. This collection of creation myths does not show any essential disparity in understanding; rather, it reveals a similarity of views from a rich variety of viewpoints. To be sure, comparisons among the myths demonstrate that the way things are seen is dependent on the seers, their cultures and circumstances. In that sense, this collection provides a useful argument against dogmatism and idolatry. But, as the

Buddhist parable counsels, one must not mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself. In discovering that myths are human products, we are freed equally of blind faith and blind disbelief. We can understand that creation myths are not merely projections into a vacuum. Rather, they are responses to a real world that seek, in their various conditioned ways, to reveal to their adherents an unconditioned reality. Recognizing this, we can reach beyond the variety of languages to their common meanings, beyond the disparity of religions to their common revelations. We can shift our sight from the pointing fingers to the moon itself.

ONE OF THE drawbacks of our piecemeal introductions to mythic ideas is that each one—from the most particular attitude toward pennies or puddles to the most general considerations of the proper role of women in society or humanity in nature—is taught and even debated out of context. Although we often treat such issues apart from their mythic sources, it is really only within the myths that we can properly understand them. For myths do not just reflect random attitudes toward reality. Rather, they begin with a perception of reality as a whole and in its light construct an integrated system for understanding all its parts.

Myth is an integral part of religion. As such, it proclaims a central reality and then builds its structure of valuation around and in relation to it. We commonly understand a similar, although secular, manner of organizing attitudes when we say that someone has made a “religion” out of, say, tennis. What we mean is that the person thinks the game is all important and as a result makes all his choices on the basis of playing it: when considering new friends, he inquires about their game; when deciding whether to go to a party, he considers the shape he will be in the next morning when he could be out on the courts. Anything that brings him closer to the game is judged good; anything that takes him away is bad. When asked about himself, our athletic friend tells of his history in terms of tennis: when he learned to play, how he developed his backhand—these become the significant factors. He has created a myth, an attitude toward reality that makes his past sensible, present meaningful, and future possible. Around its central value, he constructs his life.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that the game of tennis is not an *absolute* reality. It is highly dependent on fitness, ability, equipment, and so on, and as a viable center of religion it is severely limited. The meaning it offers for one’s life is equally circumscribed. While it provides a certain amount of satisfaction in terms of bodily health and sporting fellowship, it does not really address itself to more far-reaching concerns. The tennis devotee, then, is reduced in our estimation to a “jock,” and we consider him somewhat limited in his understanding of himself as “tennis player only, and not more broadly and deeply as “human.”

Regardless of what we think of the athlete’s “religion” of tennis, to the extent we understand how he constructs his life and determines his values around what is for him the supreme reality of the game, we can comprehend the basic structure of all religion. All religion posits such a supreme reality and subsequently builds an entire system of valuation around it. The difference between pseudo-religions like the athlete’s and real ones is that *genuine religions proclaim an absolute reality as the centerpoint of their structure*. That is, religion insists that what is essentially real and important to you subjectively must also be that which is essentially real and important in the objective world of fact.

This is what distinguishes the religious point of view from all others. It proclaims an *absolute reality* that is both transcendent (true for all times and places) and immanent (true in the here and now). This reality is not relative; it is not dependent on changing factors of time and space. It is a reality of absolute value in relation to which all other values can be established.

To be absolute, this reality cannot be a thing or a being, because all things and beings are dependent on others for their existence. They all have beginnings and ends, temporal or spatial limits, and they are all subject to change. Limited in these ways, things have a relative, but not absolute

reality. To be absolute, the reality that religion proclaims through its myths must be eternal (not temporal), independent (not dependent), active (not reactive), and unchanging (constant). Specific religions characterize this reality in different ways and call it by different names, but they all agree on its absoluteness.

While all myths assume this absolute reality and proffer a structure of value relative to it, creation myths do so more frankly and obviously than others. Only creation myths have as their primary task the proclamation of this absolute reality and description of its relation to all other, relative realities. Only creation myths establish the basic structure of *all* valuation based on the supreme value of the primary reality. Creation myths are required to do this by both the range and depth of their questioning. Although these myths are of varying degrees of profundity, at their best they consider the essential structure of the *whole* of reality: matter, spirit, nature, society, and culture. They consider the origin and nature of *being*, the very fact of existence. Thus the Rig-Veda (c. 1200 B.C.) begins:

Then neither Being nor Not-Being was
Nor atmosphere, nor firmament, nor what is beyond.
What did it encompass? Where? In whose protection?
What was water, the deep, unfathomable?

Neither death nor immortality was there then,
No sign of night or day.

Not all creation myths are this wide-ranging in their questioning. Some ask only how a specific instance of being came to be—how this universe was formed, how the earth and sky were made, how the land or the people or the society was fashioned. The second myth in Genesis (c. 900 B.C.), for instance, displays little interest in the origin of the universe and begins:

(2:4) In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, (5) when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; (6) but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground—(7) then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

But even in myths such as this, which are limited in the *range* of their considerations, the same profound *depth* of questioning is apparent. They are still concerned with creation, with the relations of death to life, nonexistence to existence, not-being to being. Whether the myth addresses the issue of creation in its broadest sense as the origin of all being, or in its narrowest sense as the origin of a particular being, the same mystery is central: the nature of reality itself.

In this respect, creation myths do not merely deal with the known or even seek to make determinations about the unknown. Rather, their real concern is with the relation of the known to the *unknowable*. They push at the limits of all thinking, reaching to the very edge of the world of matter and ideas. The creation of the universe, for instance, represents the limit of being in time and space. Beyond it, or at its edge, begins the unknowable. This is true regardless of the size of the universe being described: the relation of the finite to the infinite is mysterious whatever the relative size of the finite. Before the creation, there was nothing, and even “nothing” is too definite a term. You can still seem to be saying something by it. (In *Alice in Wonderland*, the Red King asks Alice, “What do you see?” “Nothing,” answers Alice, and the Red King comments with a certain degree of admiration, “My, what good eyes you have.”) But religions go beyond this: they think about a “nothing-that-wa-

not” and focus on this *unknowable* because they believe it the key to determining and valuing everything that flows from it, the known and the unknown.

Creation myths reveal this religious concern most clearly. They ask, essentially, what was before anything was, what is the source, the *ground* of being? The word *ground* is a useful here because it helps to demonstrate the unknowable nature of the source of being; it points to the fact that we have no independent position from which to scrutinize and know that source. Imagine trying to see the underside of the ground you are standing on. If you dig it up and turn it over, you will have exposed the ground you *were* standing on, but not that which supports you while you are digging—that *ground* is unknowable; there is no perspective from which you can study it. This is the kind of problem religion faces when it attempts to describe the ground of being.

This point is well demonstrated in the Book of Job in the Old Testament. Barely surviving a plague of misfortunes, Job calls upon God to justify his suffering. He thus challenges God; he asks God to account for his actions. But when God finally speaks he does not reply to Job’s charges. Rather, he questions Job’s power and right to make them. Appearing in all his majesty as the source of being, God demands to know how Job could have defined himself sufficiently independent of the creator to make such a challenge in the first place. “Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me. When wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast understanding.” And God shows in the following speech how Job is a dependent creature that requires God merely in order to *be*. In himself Job has no solidity, no place to stand which is not God’s, so his challenge is hollow. It is as if your own words were to speak back to your tongue: what voice of their own would they have? Finally understanding this, Job repents in dust and ashes.

In creation myths, the ground of being is not only physical but also metaphysical. The ground they speak of is the source of mind as well as of matter. The Indian Kena Upanishad (800–400 B.C.) tries to make this clear when it asks:

Who sends the mind to wander afar? Who first drives life to start on its journey? Who impels us to utter these words? Who is the Spirit behind the eye and the ear?...

We know not, we cannot understand, how he can be explained: He is above the known, and he is above the unknown.

And then it proceeds to describe this “unknowable” as “what cannot be spoken with words, but [is] that whereby words are spoken...what cannot be thought with the mind, but [is] that whereby the mind can think...what cannot be seen with the eye, but [is] that whereby the eye can see.” This *unknowable* ground of being, this spatial and temporal limit of reality is what religions consider to be the *absolute* reality or, for want of a better term for the moment, what they call “God.” Forget all of your own religious conceptions of the word “God” for a little while, and think about this ground of being. It is purely definitional: you will inevitably come to it if you think enough about the limit of any finite thing. Where did you come from? Your parents gave birth to you. And your parents? From their parents; and so on down through the animals to micro-organisms and chemicals and elements and matter and energy to what? To the moment of creation and the “creator,” if it is possible to name such a force. And that is the same place that religions end up in their speculation. Everything *within* the created universe of matter and mind is derived from something else and therefore has an existence that is dependent or relative. (You are dependent on your parents for your being; your “reality” in physical terms is relative to theirs.) Only what stands as the *source* of all existence, the ground of all being, is self-derived and independent; only *that* reality is absolute.

Now, religions have a great deal of trouble describing this absolute reality because they have no absolute perspective. They cannot stand outside the universe with the Holy and encompass the world of time and space; they are inevitably within that world. Like fish in water, they have no way to stand aside and describe the sea objectively. Since the absolute reality that religions strive to understand is the ground of all thinking, it cannot be known. Since it is beyond any subject–object distinction, being by definition the ground of both, it cannot be objectified.

Part of this problem is that our whole way of understanding operates with the use of polar oppositions. We categorize things by how much they are like any one part of such a pair of opposites and how unlike the other they are. It is as if we imagine a multidimensional grid in which each of the polar oppositions has a line: tall–short, here–there, high–low, old–young, hard–soft, red–green, good–bad, matter–mind, life–death, existence–nonexistence, and a million others. We understand things when we have decided where to place them on each of these lines in the grid; finally we see how they fit into the whole. Now the most basic of such pairings is being and not-being, the positive and negative alternatives expressed in terms of existence. And, as with all polar oppositions, the parts of the primary one require each other. What “is” derives from what “is not”; what “is not” comes from what “is.” Which came first, being or not being? Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

1. In the beginning, my dear, this world was just Being, one only, without a second. To be sure, some people say: “In the beginning this world was just Not-Being, one only, without a second; then from Not-Being Being was produced.”

2. But verily, my dear, whence could this be? said he. How from Not-Being could Being be produced? On the contrary, in the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second.

This is how the Chandogya Upanishad (c. 700 B.C.) tried to resolve the problem. But of course the solution must finally be more profound than this. To pick any part of the opposition is to remain within it. “The egg came first!” announces the child when he first hears the question. “But who laid the egg?” And back he plunges into the ultimate riddle.

The only solution lies in asking about the ground of the polar opposition itself. What should we call that which produces both being and not-being? What is prior to both the positive and the negative? Thus the language of creation myths reaches beyond itself to absoluteness.

Some religions characterize the holy ground of all in seemingly positive terms. They call it *Being-Itself* and rush to qualify the statement by saying that Being-Itself incorporates both being and not-being. “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; praise be the Lord!” Both life and death, existence and nonexistence, are controlled by such a power. And, as the Rig-Veda says, “Neither Being nor Not-Being was there then.... Only the One breathed, windless, by its own energy.”

Other religions, however, favor the negative side of the polarity and proclaim in effect that *Not-Being-Itself* is the source of all being and not-being. The Maori of New Zealand chant:

From nothing the begetting
From nothing the increase
From nothing the abundance
The power of increasing
The living breath....

Because both of these solutions are obviously open to misunderstanding, many religions try to transcend both positive and negative characterizations by describing the original reality as divine.

Chaos. In this primordial stew, all distinctions are blurred but still potentially present; such Chaos is the potentiality and not the actuality of being. It should not be confused with the sort of chaos that is merely negative, the destroyer of order. Rather, this is the happy sort of Chaos out of which both order and dis-order can be made. It is like raw clay before some clay has been made into pots and the rest has been discarded as unnecessary. In one sense, the Chaos is ultimately positive: it is all, everything, the totality of Being, in that there is nothing else besides it. In the other and equally valid sense, it is ultimately negative: it is Nothing (*no-thing*), in that it has no internal distinctions. Solid and liquid, spirit and matter, good and evil, light and dark—all the oppositions through which reality exists are not yet delineated.

The creation occurs when part, if not all, of this Chaos coalesces and forms internal divisions, like the internal mass of a cell dividing itself into nucleus and matter. The part that is formed and thereby distinguished from the rest of the unformed mass then acts upon it to produce further distinctions and thereby create the world. Which is the absolute reality here? The Chaos itself? Or the child of Chaos that acts on it? *Both*. They are one. At some point, the myths step back from the mystery and affirm the essential and unbreakable unity of the creator and creation. Ultimately they insist on the interdependence of being and not-being, and it is the inexplicable transcendent unity of these two that they recognize in wonder and awe as absolute and call *Holy*.

All creation myths that consider the nature of being and not-being at this most profound level reach this conclusion. Others less ambitious in their theorizing, however, avoid the issue by merely beginning with one or the other side of this polar opposition. “Being was first,” they say, and they never ask where it came from; or, with equal force, they say “Not-Being was first,” and they fail to consider whence Not-Being evolved. In some versions of the Myth of Ptah from Memphis (c. 1400 B.C.), for instance, the gods (powers of being) are born from the waters of chaos (fertile not-being). Do they mean that not-being is prior to being? No, for other versions of the same myth describe the gods giving birth to those waters. Sometimes you start with the chicken and sometimes with the egg. In most cases, both are already present and distinguished. Throughout the world, creation myths express and dramatize this primary religious proclamation of the absolute reality in its dual form of being and not-being. Eternal gods of every kind reach out over the equally eternal chaos of not-being and distinguish within it all the forces and realities of the world: light is separated from darkness, heaven from earth, water from land, good from bad, masculine from feminine, matter from spirit, life from death, being from not-being. And thus the world of “reality,” our world of oppositions, change, and development is established.

Not all religions describe this essential nature of reality by setting this issue in time and speaking consequently of a beginning, a moment of creation. Jinasena (c. 900 A.D.), a great Jain teacher, rejected this whole model and asserts there never was a creation:

Some foolish men declare that a Creator made the world.

The doctrine that the world was created is ill-advised and should be rejected.

If God created the world, where was he before creation?...

How could God have made the world without any raw material? If you say he made this first, and then the world, you are faced with an endless regression....

Know that the world is uncreated, as time itself is, without beginning and end.

And it is based on the principles, life and the rest.

Uncreated and indestructible, it endures under the compulsion of its own nature.

And Buddhism, like some current cosmological theories in science, insists that the universe expands

and contracts, dissolves into non-being and re-evolves into being in an eternal rhythm.

Although it might seem that such a rejection of the idea of creation would set the myths of Jainism and Buddhism radically apart from those of other religions, in fact it does not. To be sure, most myths temporalize their claims and speak of the *absolute* reality as the *first* one, but such a connection is not necessary. Creation myths are not just interested in the “unknowable” because it is *first*; they are interested in it because it is *always*.

This sounds particularly complicated but is in fact rather simple and commonplace. Think about how, when you are becoming close friends with someone, you tell each other about your pasts. You tell all about your parents, your childhoods, where you grew up, who your best friends were, how you succeeded and failed, what you liked to do, and what you were afraid of. Why do you say all of this? To provide historical facts? No, it is not the past but the present that is interesting. The point of these stories is to reveal who you really are now, to show how deeply (in the story, how “long ago”) you feel about stewed tomatoes or dogs or Harry or heights. It is the same with myths about the past of the world. Such creation myths are really revelations of essences, of realities that were not just true once and *then* but are equally true now and *always*. The Jains and the Buddhists manage to reveal these essences without speaking of a temporal limit for creation, without locating the primary reality at the beginning of time. What is timeless, what is eternal, is always real.

Whether they locate it at the “beginning” or not, creation myths proclaim an absolute reality that is both transcendent and immanent—true eternally and true in the moment. Certainly when the myths are describing what was before anything was, they are specifically talking about the transcendent side of that absolute, that “Holy.” They go even further than this: they invent gods. That is, they speak about the unknowable in terms of the known.

In order to communicate their apprehension of the Holy, the unlimited reality that is the ground of all being and not-being and that is, by definition, absolute, religions use the only words we have—relative words. Those who emphasize the positive or manifest aspect of the Holy call it *God* and claim it is eternal (absolute), self-created (independent), creative (active and not reactive), omnipresent (without limit in the physical world), omniscient (without limit in the mental world), and omnipotent (without limit in terms of energy and force). What is most important to notice here is that such gods are thought of, as much as is possible, within the limits of such relative terms, as *prior* to most polar oppositions; they *are* without qualification. “I AM WHO I AM,” such a god says to Moses. But as these kinds of descriptions gradually evolve, God takes on other and more limiting attributes. The ground of being eventually is depicted as human—it is anthropomorphized—to dramatize properly its various relations to the created world: it is shown as male (our “father”) or female (our “mother”), which seems appropriate; it is very, very old (an expression of its eternality) or very young (an expression of its vitality and potency); and it is very wise (an echo of omniscience), big (omnipotent), high (superior), and so on.

Such a god can also be one or two or many (and these distinctions can be internal to the god, as in Christianity’s trinity, or they can be external, as in polytheistic religions), depending on which aspect of the absolute reality the myth wants to proclaim. The Dinka in Africa worship innumerable deities and yet still affirm that “divinity is one.” What they mean is simply that there is one divine power, one absolute reality, perceived in many different aspects; like light refracted in many colors, it is all a matter of perception. We express a similar paradox when we speak of the power of the law under which democracy operates: there is one power, yet it is expressed variously and in different amounts by the president, governors, mayors, and citizens. When such an understanding is expressed religiously, the gods are thought to have only *dependent* reality; they “exist” only as people recognize them to be symbols of the absolute reality. That Holy itself, however, exists by definition and not only as an idea or symbol, but as the only absolute reality.

People commonly misunderstand this essential point and take literally all of these relative descriptions of the absolute reality. They think of “God,” for instance, as male, old, and fierce, and thereby limit what is unlimitable and forget its absoluteness. Because of this tendency to idolatry, some religions eschew all relative characterizations of the Holy and emphasize its negative and unmanifest aspect. They refuse anthropomorphism and deny any association of the Holy with a being or thing. “Not this, not that” claim the myths of these religions. As Lao Tzu (c. 600 B.C.?) writes:

There is a thing confusedly formed
Born before heaven and earth
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name
So I style it “the way.”
The way that can be told
Is not the constant way
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name....

And myths around the world echo his perception. The Incas’ hidden face of God; the Hebrew unspeakable name of God; the idea everywhere expressed that God is unseeable, a “spirit”—even religions that *do* characterize the Holy in relative terms keep trying to point out the fundamental inappropriateness, the misleading limitations of their descriptions.

Whether they do it positively or negatively, creation myths proclaim more frankly than any other kind of myth the absolute reality that religions recognize. But speculation about the Holy is not the sole intent. They not only consider the ground of being but go on to describe the relation of the absolute reality to all relative realities, the relation of the infinite and unknowable to the finite and known. They announce that the absolute permeates every instance of being, every thing. “You can kill time without wounding eternity,” as Thoreau declared. Religions realize that the infinite is not only the ground of the *condition* of finitude but through it the ground of everything finite. Thus the Holy is here as well as everywhere; it is now as well as always; it is the basis of this and that, of you and me, as well as of being itself. *The Holy is immanent as well as transcendent.* This is one of the central messages of creation myths.

Religions argue through their myths that all things that are—all things that exist and have being—partake of the Holy, just as all things beautiful partake of beauty. The myths show how such an eternal and absolute reality is connected to us in our very relative, changing world and affirm that there is a way in which each person and thing can be considered absolute, possessing dignity (absolute, nonexchangeable value) and not merely worth (relative, exchangeable value).

We are so used to thinking of ourselves “relatively”—in relation to others and to the societies in which we live—that this idea may seem a bit foreign at first. Commonly we characterize ourselves by function—parent, child, student, teacher, and so on—and each of these functions *is* real in a relative way; that is, each of these descriptions is true insofar as certain criteria are met. In order for you to be a parent, you must have a child; to be a child, you must have a parent. Teachers similarly require students, and vice versa. Other relative characterizations are equally dependent and temporal. The shorter you must be for you to be “tall,” black people for you to be “white,” males for you to be

“female,” rich people for you to be “poor,” foreigners for you to be a “national.” For any of these terms to have meaning, their counterparts must also exist. In themselves, in isolation, these terms are meaningless; they have no *absolute* validity. And people who define themselves only in such relative ways are left with ascribing to themselves only relative and dependent worth. They can even put a price on it and frequently do by taking out insurance policies: if a parent dies, \$100,000 will pay for a substitute.

But through myth and ritual, religion makes the claim that this is not the entire case. It argues that in all these relative ways and aspects of being an *absolute* aspect, a dimension that is uniquely independent, and of eternal validity is revealed. That is what religions mean when they affirm that people are “sacred,” that they have dignity as well as worth. Religions see that people are not only *relatively* valuable as parents and children but that they are *absolutely* valuable as themselves; you could have had another child, but never another you.

This absolute dimension of the self is often named and called *soul* (or *jiva*, or *ka*, or some other term). Problems arise only when we forget its formal nature and come to think of it as material, as a thing, something we have in addition to our other physical organs. Having misunderstood soul in this fashion (just as we often misunderstand God), we become disappointed when we cannot find it and dismiss it as an illusion, another fraud perpetrated by religion. But soul is not a thing; it is a dimension of depth in a thing. Like justness in a judge’s decision or beauty in a painting, soul is a quality of absoluteness revealed in something relative. And myths argue that, understood profoundly, people are connected to the holiness of the world in such a way that they reveal a dimension of holiness in themselves, a dimension of depth that is absolute.

WE HAVE SEEN how myths have to speak of the transcendent and immanent aspects of the unknowable in terms of the known in order to speak of them at all, but we have not really seen how they go in doing this. Myths are not merely static pronouncements; they are not just pictures or images that might be meaningful to the already convinced but that would be meaningless to the unenlightened. Rather, they are whole stories, dramas placed in the familiar world of time and space that attempt to reveal, through their common details and particulars, truths that are uncommon and universal.

What is most evident when you read them is that *myths use symbols to express their truths*. This is not so peculiar in itself: all language uses symbols. When you say the word *friend* and apply it to the person closest to you, you are using a symbol. The sound *friend* and the letters you form when writing it out are all symbols; they are not your friend himself but are representative of him. The successful use of such symbols requires a certain kind of consent by other people. They have to know what you are talking about; they have to understand both the *fact* of the person you are referring to and the *value* you ascribe to him, or else the symbol is meaningless. At the simplest level, *friend* means nothing to people who do not understand English; more profoundly, it means nothing to people incapable of loving, of sharing with you the experience of valuing a person in that way.

But symbols are not always this easy to understand. They may be related to their referents in very complex ways. Based on common experience and shared history, we build up a wide range of conceptual associations and use these to enrich language and suggest more involved relations between things. Eventually we perceive underlying similarities in the structures of such relations and create metaphors to express them. Justice, for instance, is “blind” because, like a person who cannot see, it is unimpressed with superficial factors of wealth and class; it determines its findings on the sole basis of the weight of the arguments brought before it. Metaphors like this also require a certain amount of consent from their hearers. Without it, they are taken literally and misunderstood. Heard wrongly, even such a common metaphor as “justice is blind” leads us to believe the speaker thinks justice is

living creature with eyes that cannot see.

Such misunderstandings seem obvious and silly when you understand the metaphor, yet it precisely because people so often do not understand that there is so much confusion about myths. Because in reading them you deal mostly with material from other cultures and other times, material belonging to people with whom you share no common history or outlook, it is easy to mistake the metaphors of the myths for literal statements. This is particularly true if you adopt a parochial mentality and define the relative sophistication of all cultures by criteria recognized only by your own. People who consider technology the only indicator of a society's wisdom, for instance, often think that those with it are "advanced" (intelligent, rational, and sophisticated) while those without are "primitive" (stupid, irrational, and innocent). It rarely occurs to them that this standard judgment may not be universal and that other, nontechnological cultures may worry more about the ends of life than about the means to them. It is wrong to conclude that some people ("sophisticated like us") can use metaphors creatively while others ("primitives" like them) cannot.

In a discussion between Marcel Griaule, a French ethnologist who recorded the Dogon myth included in this collection, and Ogotemmeli, the Dogon wise man who related it, Griaule became curious about just this point. How sophisticated was Ogotemmeli in his use of language and metaphor? How literally did he intend his myth? Not sure, Griaule inquired about the number of animals crowded onto the steps of a celestial granary that Ogotemmeli claimed descended from heaven. Griaule had calculated that, given the overall dimensions of the granary, each step was less than a cubit deep, hardly big enough to accommodate several large animals. "How could all the animals find room on a step one cubit wide and one cubit deep?" he asked. And Ogotemmeli carefully explained, "All of this has to be said in words, but everything on the step is a symbol, symbolizing antelopes, symbolic vultures, symbolic hyenas.... Any number of symbols could find room on a one-cubit step." And, as Griaule reports, "For the word 'symbol' he used a composite expression, the literal meaning of which is 'word of this lower world.'"

This is not to say that in all cultures all people understand the sophisticated use of symbols that Ogotemmeli did. There are various levels of understanding even in our own culture. Those who place religious statuettes on the dashboards of their cars to protect themselves against accident are missing the point. And those who presume a physical place called "heaven," with pearly gates intact, floating around somewhere in the sky have misunderstood a metaphoric rendering of the absolute as surely as any literalist from another culture. But there is no reason to define ideas by their misunderstandings simply because they can be and often are misunderstood. To really comprehend myths, you have to grant other cultures in other times the same freedom with language we grant ourselves. And to grasp their meaning, you must see what kinds of associations are being made and used by the myth in its metaphors.

In a myth such as the Assyrians' "Another Version of the Creation of Man" (c. 800 B.C.), for instance, the initial scene, in which Anu, Enlil, Shamash, Ea, and Anunnak—all great gods—are sitting in their heaven discussing the progress of creation, makes little sense unless you recognize its symbolic meaning. If you understand what these deities represented to the Assyrians, if you realize that Anu symbolized the power of the sky, Enlil that of the earth, Shamash the sun or fire, Ea the water, and the Anunnaki destiny, you begin to see that the Assyrians understood creation as a process in which air, earth, water, fire, and time all evolved together. Reading further, you will see that people are to be made out of the blood (the essence, the life force) of slain gods (great concentrations of power) to serve their creators with festivals and to maintain and increase the fertility of the earth. This is the Assyrian faith—a celebration of the wondrous natural forces that created the world, a recognition of a particular mission for people, and a perception of their essential relation to the forces that created them. Understanding the symbols—seeing what they meant to their authors—eliminates

confusion from our reading of them and permits what were intended as timeless truths to be freed from their limited and temporal expressions. Or, to be more precise, by such “translation,” we come to understand these truths in expressions more fitting our own equally but differently limited perceptions.

Sometimes this sort of reinterpretation involves the perception of facts. Since cultures use facts, they understand them, to build their metaphors and express their values, occasionally you must allow for real differences in levels of science available to mythmakers. You have to think about what the “facts” meant to the people who used them and find equivalent modern “facts” to substitute for them. The first Genesis myth, for instance, declares that God made the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. It is difficult to know if the Hebrew authors of this text intended this claim literally or actually thought of a six-day creation as “factual” or whether they hoped merely to use it symbolically to represent a completed amount of time, a sacred week that matched and therefore sanctified their own work week. (Myths usually use factual statements in this way; rarely do they attempt to be scientifically comprehensive in their descriptions of what was created.) But if they did mean the claim literally in this case, then to be comprehended today it must be revised, translated into our current (and still changing) scientific understanding of cosmology in the same way we translate the words themselves from one language to another to make them relevant to new listeners. To be sure, when we do this and speak of a creation taking billions of years rather than six days, we have to sacrifice the structural similarity between the time of God’s divine work and that of our ordinary labors. But the main point of the myth is not lost. On the contrary, it becomes more available to us in our situation. To think that myth is tied to such “facts” and to defend their literal interpretation is to confuse myth with science and to miss the point. Myth seeks to proclaim values and to declare meaning. To the extent that it requires facts to do this, it is aided by science. Pitting the two against one another reveals a profound misunderstanding of the intentions of both.

Nowhere is the need for such translation more apparent than in the myths’ descriptions of *how* the absolute reality is related to the relative. The moment of creation itself is almost always highly metaphoric. “God created the world” is the general claim—but what do the myths mean by this? How do they envision such a creation? And what do they understand to be the subsequent relation of creation to creator?

Rarely are myths as straightforward as the Hopi Indian one that begins with Taiowa and endless space (being and not-being) existing together:

The first world was Tokpela [Endless Space].

But first, they say, there was only the Creator, Taiowa. All else was endless space. There was no beginning and no end, no time, no shape, no life. Just an immeasurable void that had its beginning and end, time, shape, and life in the mind of Taiowa the Creator.

Then he, the infinite, conceived the finite. First he created Sotuknang to make it manifest, saying to him, “I have created you, the first power and instrument as a person, to carry out my plan for life in endless space. I am your Uncle. You are my Nephew. Go now and lay out these universes in proper order so they make work harmoniously with one another according to my plan.”

Sotuknang did as he was commanded. From endless space he gathered that which was to be manifest as solid substance, molded it into forms.

The point that the infinite conceived the finite is made in most of the myths, but they depict this wondrous event in different ways. Those metaphors easily understood speak of the unknowable in terms of the most commonly known: they speak of the creation in terms of procreation. In the most common scheme, a sky father god and an earth mother goddess—(active, masculine, “being” and passive, feminine, “not-being”)

feminine, “non-being”)—lie close together and, with rain as the divine fertilizing agent, produce children all the natural forces and creatures.

The usefulness of this metaphor for describing the origin of the many from the two is demonstrated by the fact that it is used even when only one god is envisioned. In these instances, the polar oppositions (reduced here to a male–female duality) are just internalized in the one. Thus, when the power of being is characterized overtly as feminine, an earth mother goddess gives birth spontaneously and independently, without need of a mate. If the sole deity is seen as male, either he externalizes the duality—imagines a mate into being and produces the creatures with her—or he keeps the duality inside and uses aspects of himself as the feminine “other.” These myths maintain exactly the same principle of distinguishing a directing agent (manifest being) and the raw material of creation (unmanifest not-being) as more abstract myths do in speaking of the original Chaos as self-dividing. Only here, personalized as they are, the myths are more dramatic and involving. Some tell how the god sacrifices a part of himself, cutting off a piece of his “body” and fashioning it into the world. Others describe him vomiting or excreting the world or giving birth to it in some other related manner. In the Aranda myth from Australia, for example, the great totemic ancestor gives birth to his people through his armpit.

Some myths hold to the procreative metaphor more closely and describe instances of divine masturbation. The “Egyptian History of the Creation of the World” affirms that the god Neb-er-tcheh contains all duality—manifest and unmanifest, masculine and feminine, physical and mental—within himself. These aspects interact with each other as the god has union with his clenched hand, pours his semen into his mouth and, having fertilized it in that womb of words and ideas, spits it forth as creation. What seems to us initially only a story of masturbation, strange to use as a model of human behavior, becomes sacred and revealing about the nature of reality if only we understand what was meant by it.

All the myths that use procreation as a way of understanding creation stress the extraordinary fertility, the overabundance of the power of being, that qualifies gods as symbols of the absolute ground of being. This is what the myths celebrate when they talk about an endlessly productive earth mother goddess or, more graphically, as in the Aborigine myth of the Djanggawul gods, about deities with enormous genitalia. They are also showing how the relation of the creation to the creator, so ambiguous and difficult to pin down precisely, can be understood if put in terms of the relation of a child to its parent. How much more powerful it is to use this kind of metaphoric illustration than to define abstractly the complex relation of constant structure and changing form.

Myths also use other metaphors to describe the creation. Sometimes they conceive the primordial duality of being and not-being in terms of an order-chaos opposition and envision god as a kind of great administrator. Often identified as good, this sort of god takes on chaos (evil) as a challenge and, like any of us trying to get our houses in shape, begins by establishing basic principles. Light over here, dark there; solids in this place, liquids in that; and thus day and night, earth and water, come into being. Occasionally in such myths a part of chaos—not the fruitful whole that is *pre-order* but the negative part that is *dis-order*, which threatens to overcome the order—is symbolized as a terrible monster, and the dragon or snake, like the bull in the china shop, has to be slain or at least sufficiently controlled. All over the world, in the Babylonians’ Enuma Elish and in the earliest creed of the Celts in the books of Job and Psalms from the Old Testament, in the myths of the Hottentots of Africa and those of the Mandan and of the Huron Indians of North America, valiant defenders of the principles of being and order do fierce battle with the forces of not-being and chaos and finally subdue them so that order and life can be established.

In yet another kind of metaphor, myths represent creation as a mental activity. Just as our environments result from our relative dreams and plans, so the world here is understood as the product

of an absolute imagination and intelligence: it is dreamed, thought, or spoken. The Mayan Popol Vuh (c. 1600 A.D.) describes creation in these terms:

There was only immobility and silence in the darkness, in the night. Only the Creator, the Maker Tepeu, Gucumatz, the Forefathers, were in the water surrounded with light.... By nature they were great sages or thinkers. In this manner the sky existed and also the Heart of Heaven, which is the name of God, and thus He is called.

Then came the word. Tepeu and Gucumatz came together in the darkness, in the night, and Tepeu and Gucumatz talked together. They talked then, discussing and deliberating; they agreed, they united their words and thoughts.

Then, while they meditated, it became clear to them that when dawn would break, man must appear. Then they planned the creation, and the growth of trees and the thickets and the birth of life and the creation of man. Thus it was arranged in the darkness and the night by the Heart of Heaven.

Myths like this argue that gods are endlessly powerful: they only have to command something and it is accomplished: what they think or say becomes a physical reality. In this sense, their potency is both mental and physical. (As the Koran says of Allah: "It is He who giveth life and death; and when he decreeth a thing, He only saith, 'Be,' and it is.")

How words establish realities becomes clear if you remember the child learning the names of things, and it becomes clearer still if you consider how we change people's names when they marry or join religious orders or how we make up new names for countries when we declare their independence. We create new identities, new things, by giving them new names. Gods too create by naming—*man, woman, tree, animal*—these terms announce values, functions, and identities as well as establishing facts of being. And even if they have not used the naming metaphor to describe the creation of the whole world of being, most myths still apply it to the creation of specific parts of being. They still insist that names must be assigned very carefully. Some underscore the creative function of naming by showing the relation of the powers of speech and procreation; both are thought so sacred that only the god can teach people how to use them. In the Hopi myth, for example, a lesser goddess (Spider Woman) makes people with all abilities except these two; only the manifest god (Sotuknang) can complete them:

"As you commanded me, I have created these First People. They are fully and firmly formed; they are properly colored; they have life; they have movement. But they cannot talk. That is the proper thing that they lack. So I want you to give them speech. Also the wisdom and the power to reproduce so that they may enjoy their life and give thanks to the Creator."

So Sotuknang gave them speech, a different language to each color, with respect for each other's difference. He gave them the wisdom and power to reproduce and multiply.

In procreating and speaking, we act like the gods—we create worlds of being and meaning—and therefore have to learn how to do so properly by keeping the absolute principles of creation in mind.

Many myths use a more direct metaphor and describe creation in terms of forming. Here the emphasis is on the physical side of the mind-matter duality, and the god is portrayed as an artist or craftsman: taking some unmanifest raw material, he fashions it into a specific shape, animates it, and instructs it in the appropriate way of being. In many Eskimo and North American Indian myths, the creators bring up a little mud from the bottom of the chaotic waters and stretch it out into the earth, and gods all over the world use clay or dust to make people and animals. Myths that speak of the

creation in this way usually think of the world as an expression of the creator. What is made still shows the traces of its maker; the known reveals the unknowable or, as the Old Testament puts it, “The Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.”

One of the most profound metaphors myths use to describe creation involves divine sacrifice. Here the absolute, symbolized as a great loving God, dies to become the relative world. The Chinese myth of P’an Ku is typical:

The world was never finished until P’an Ku died. Only his death could perfect the universe: From his skull was shaped the dome of the sky, and from his flesh was formed the soil of the fields; from his bones came the rocks, from his blood the rivers and the seas; from his hair came all vegetation. His breath was the wind, his voice made thunder; his right eye became the moon, his left eye the sun. From his saliva or sweat came rain. And from the vermin which covered his body came forth mankind.

In such myths the polar opposites of being and not-being are connected by a single act. When the absolute becomes manifest and dynamic, as the world, P’an Ku dies to his unmanifest and static state of perfection as God.

Sacrifice is a rich and subtle metaphor because it not only expresses this fact but so much of the ambivalence we feel in understanding the creation and facing the life that springs from it. On the one hand, the metaphor celebrates the glory of the gift of being. The world, after all, and all life within it is sanctified by this act, *sacrifice: sacer—holy, facere— to make*. On the other hand, myths that speak of such sacrifice recognize the enormous cost of this gift. “God” has died to the world; the static perfection of the absolute is lost to the dynamic change and flow of temporal reality. The ground of being and not-being, that holy and mysterious unity, has dissolved into flux. Now, in the created world we experience that unity only through its duality in the polar oppositions of being and not-being, life and death, and so on.

All creation myths express this ambiguity in some way. Usually they stress the difference between the creator and the creation, between the absolute that is the ground of being and the relative being (people, things, forces) that are dependent on it. Now, most myths, as we have seen, emphasize the fact that the absolute is still perceivable in the relative. They show how the world can be experienced as holy if it is understood properly. Other myths, however, stress the loss of perfection resulting from creation. They envision that timeless, unchanging, and absolute reality as sullied by time, change, and relativity. They concentrate on the difficulties involved in recognizing the absolute through the relative and encourage their followers to reject everything that is temporal.

It is a bit like the difference between the optimist and the pessimist: the first delights that his glass is half full, while the second complains that his is half empty. Most religious systems contain some of this pessimism, but few are so starkly despairing as Gnosticism, which thinks of creation almost entirely in terms of the loss of (absolute) reality and perfection. Hope, in Gnostic myths, takes the form of a messenger from the absolute who reveals how all being is under the limitation of not-being, how all life leads to death, and who instructs his listeners to renounce the manifest world and escape back into the unmanifest purity. You have to read through a great deal of symbolism to get the point, but few scenes of loss and despair are so powerful as that in the creation myth of Mani (215–275 A.D.) in which Adam (mankind) suddenly realizes how he has become trapped in relativity, how his eternal soul has become ensnared by the temporal matter of his body. Longing to return to the perfection of the ground of being and not-being, to the unmanifest absolute, he “cried and lamented; terribly he smote his breast and spoke: ‘Woe, Woe unto the shaper of my body, unto those who fettered my soul’”

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