



The Mythical Battle Against Chaos

FOR SOME TIME we have been focusing on the most fundamental issue confronting humanity — self-existence versus coexistence. To be self-existent means “having independent existence; existing of or by itself without external cause or agency.”¹ In other words, “self-existence” is defined as an uncreated reality which stands alone, requires nothing else, excludes everything else. Autonomous self-existence is therefore the opposite of relational coexistence. It is fundamentally antithetical to the presence of a coexistent “other.”

From the beginning dominant world cultures have attributed self-existence both to the gods and to mankind.² For example, in Western culture man (male and female) is commonly believed to be in the image of self-existent deity. Through divine emanation man is thus thought to possess the uncreated essence, substance or “ousia” of divinity — the “divine spark” of “soul,” “spirit,” “mind,” “consciousness,” “reason,” “idea,” “wisdom,” “word” or “law.”

Tragically, because it opposes coexistence, self-existence ultimately demands either the exclusion and extermination or the possession and absorption of all others. Delusional self-existence therefore leads inevitably to violence in at least three dimensions:

1. Self-existence distorts the role of law in order to manifest its “power” by holding “others” in conformity, subordination and subjection. This distortion erupts in further violence as the subordinate “victim” reacts with rebellious criminality against the confining rule of law.

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2. Self-existence manifests aggression toward all “others.” Those who are different, who are unlike us, who are aliens, are assaulted by the aggressive violence of possession and destruction.

3. Self-existence involves the sacralized violence of religious sacrifice. By offering human and other sacrifices, mankind attempts to renew its emanational self-existence through a connection with God while, at the same time, reestablishing its autonomous self-existence by maintaining an appropriate distance from God.³

Violent Creation

Here it should be noted that the violence of religious sacrifice is directly related to mankind’s view of Creation. In fact, as Mircea Eliade has shown, sacrifice is the ritual “repetition of the act of Creation . . .”⁴ The violence of self-existence therefore rests on

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Virtually all archaic cultures believed that the watery chaos of the nether world, and the demonic monsters inhabiting this nether region, preexisted all other reality. “In the beginning” primordial chaos alone was self-existent. From this watery chaos the cosmos itself was believed to have eventually arisen in the form of the gods. However, divine emergence involved a continuous struggle to achieve and maintain self-existence. In this struggle the serpent or dragon, representing chaos, was pitted against the gods, who represented the cosmos.

For example, in ancient Mesopotamian mythology the

commemoration of . . . Creation . . . [reactualized] the combat between Marduk and the sea monster Tiamat . . . [This] combat . . . had taken place *in illo tempore* [in the beginning] and had put an end to chaos by the final victory of the god . . .⁵

. . . Marduk promised to fight Tiamat on condition that he became their ruler. Yet he only managed to slay Tiamat with great difficulty and after a long, dangerous battle. In this myth, creativity is a struggle, achieved laboriously against overwhelming odds . . .

Finally . . . Marduk created humanity. He seized Kingu (the oafish consort of Tiamat, created by her after the defeat of Apsu), slew him and shaped the first man by mixing the divine blood with the dust. . . .

[Thus,] . . . ritual sacrifice was seen as the microcosm of the whole universe.⁶

Ancient Egyptian mythology portrayed the origin and nature of reality similarly, with the gods rising from chaos and struggling to maintain self-existence despite constant confrontation with their enemy, “Chaos.” From this thinking emerged the idea of Creation by weaponry. In this Egyptian mythology the self-existent gods emanated downward from the sky, armed with weapons in order to combat chaos. However, this emanation grew steadily weaker as it reached the earth. Finally Horus, the falcon god, appeared as the reigning Pharaoh. Because a weakened emanation could go no further than Pharaoh, it

became necessary to employ violence when Pharaoh grew old and feeble. The Egyptian god, Seth — the death god — was then assigned to murder Horus so that Pharaoh could return to cosmic oneness with Atum-Ra and be replaced on earth by his eldest son! The contention of Egyptian mythology for the self-existence of the gods therefore involved Creation by violence.⁷

Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia were not alone in imagining Creation by violence. In her recent essay, “Creation Myths Breed Violence,” Tikva Frymer-Kensky shows that, since the groundbreaking work of Hermann Gunkel⁸ a century ago,

scholars have identified the Chaoskampf [Battle against Chaos] throughout the ancient world. Discoveries at 14th century B.C.E. Ugarit show that Ba’al was thought to have become king of the gods after defeating Prince Yam (Prince Sea). . . . Scholars have now also identified this widespread mythical motif of a king defeating a watery enemy in Egypt and India.

We are now beginning to recognize

how fundamental the chaos myth is to our culture’s vision of reality. First, it is a highly gendered myth, for whether the force to be conquered is the devouring mother (as in Babylon) or the greedy rapacious brother (as in Canaan), the hero is always a brave warrior. Whether the warrior goes on to create a nation (as in Babylon . . .) or to face another contender to his rule (as in Canaan), he is the heroic male (in Babylonian, *quradu* . . .) who uses his might to bring order to the world. He is the Near Eastern counterpart to the dragon- or witch-slaying heroes in the myths of Western culture, the men who rescue damsels so that they can live happily ever after. . . .

Twentieth-century history is replete with recurrent appearances of this myth in the political arena, in which all power is vested in a political leader-redeemer — a führer, a duce, a dictator — who could vanquish chaos and create stability and order. We still look for a knight in shining armor to come and solve all our problems! . . .

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Whether the . . . knight [is] on a horse, or a politician on a landslide or a mandate, it is all the same myth projected over and over again. The heroic man of steel will bring truth, justice, and . . . all our troubles will be over. With a man of might, the side of right will win.

The combat myth is a myth of power, of God’s might. It manifests faith that power is a constructive force. It is no accident that the hero becomes king or that . . . the Babylonians . . . used the divine combat myth to lend glory and authority to their human kings. The myth shows us the basic attraction of kingship — people will give up autonomy for security, will relinquish their freedom to choose in return for freedom from danger. The full historical sweep of the combat myth, from the battles of Ba’al and Yam, of Marduk and Tiamat, . . . and on to its many modern variations and permutations, demonstrates the power of this paradigm and our culture’s fervent desire to believe, not that might makes right, but that right-minded might can make everything right. When the children of light defeat the children of darkness, when the forces of good conquer the legions of evil, when the Jedi defeat the dark side, then peace will reign: God will be king over all the nations, and we shall experience war no more.

But repeating this myth without understanding its character and implications keeps us repeating the myth’s downside. Rather than creating perfect peace, the

Chaoskampf [Battle against Chaos] sets up a cosmic cycle; violence used to defeat enemies always leads to new violence as it creates resentment and revenge fantasies in those it defeats. Threatened violence leads us to seek a redeemer; the power we invest in our redeemers turns against us once they become kings of the universe. The combat myth is a violent myth, and after all our history, ancient and recent, it is hard to believe that violence can ever bring peace. The combat and struggle that created our world created a violent world, and to create a new peaceful order we must break the pattern of violence. The myth of the warrior king who defeats his enemies can never accomplish that.

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Even the biblical record is replete with the Chaoskampf — the Battle against Chaos. In fact, this battle is “a fundamental biblical myth.” For example,

Gunkel showed that many poetic biblical passages in the Psalms, prophets and wisdom literature refer to this same mythical concept. Moreover, he demonstrated that biblical ideas of the *eschaton* (the end of time) mirrored these conceptions of the beginning, that is, God’s ultimate kingdom will also be established after a defeat of enemies. . . .

Midrashim — rabbinic interpretations and expansions of the Hebrew Bible — reveal that the rabbis understood the biblical allusions in Genesis to refer to the rebellion of the Prince of the Sea against God. . . .

. . . [Likewise, our] religions look forward to the day when God will defeat Leviathan or when the Messiah will defeat the enemies of Israel and/or the forces of evil.⁹

Biblical eschatology and apocalyptic are thus grounded in the myth of Creation by violence. Just as Creation was mythically inaugurated through violence against primordial chaos, so Creation will be mythically consummated by violence against an eschatological chaos.

Nonviolent Creation

Over against the myth of Creation by violence, however, the Scriptures also portray YHWH as nonviolent. God is gently heard as “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). God acts to prevent Abraham from inflicting sacrificial violence upon his son, Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19). God lovingly, caringly, compassionately relates to us. In tracing Israelite history, there is thus a growing departure from violent

Creation myths. For example, during the Maccabean period (168-163 BCE) the myth of primordial chaos was abandoned. As the Syrian king, Antiochus, was

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torturing and murdering a mother and her seven sons, the mother cried out to her youngest,

My son, take pity on me. . . . I beg you, child, look up at the sky and the earth; see all that is in them and realize that *God made them out of nothing, and that man comes into being in the same way*. Do not be afraid of this butcher; accept death and prove yourself worthy of your brothers, so that by God's mercy I may receive you back again along with them (2 Maccabees 7:28, italics supplied).¹⁰

In the face of the sacralized violence of Antiochus, this Maccabean mother declared that YHWH had accomplished Creation, not through violence against the chaotic waters of self-existence, but nonviolently — “out of nothing.” This concept of *creatio ex nihilo* (Creation out of nothing) has since become a positive aspect of both Judaism and Christianity. While the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* emerged in Judaism two centuries before the common era, it did not become an official doctrine of Christianity “until the Council of Nicaea in 341 . . . ”¹¹

As a result, Catholic scholar, Lucien Richard, can now declare:

To believe in God the Creator . . . is to accept good news about the world. Within the Jewish-Christian tradition a concept of creation as pure gift has gradually developed. In this tradition to be created, to be a creature — to be therefore not-God but a finite being — is truly a grace. In this tradition God alone is Creator, and everything else is creature and creation. In the tradition of the priestly writings, the verb *bara*, which may have originally meant “incise” or “engrave,” was adopted to denote the special work of God in creating and redeeming. Only God can be the subject of *bara*. When this verb is used there is never any mention of a material from which something is “created.” Creation is something absolutely new; God's creative activity has no human analogy. Creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition cannot have any preceding condition; it cannot follow on anything else. In its uniqueness it is in every respect “for the first time.” . . .

The notion of creation *ex nihilo* — or the production out of non-being — is common among the early Fathers of the church, and though it has Christological implications, it is primarily employed to avoid a theory of creation as emanation. Such a theory would seem to draw the creatures out of God's own substance. By implication, creatures would then be divine by nature. . . .

From these various sources [Irenaeus, St. Anselm, Thomas of Aquinas, etc.] the world was created neither out of pre-existent matter nor out of the divine being but by the free will of God. God's freedom is not primarily power but love, which means self-communication. God creates out of love. . . .

. . . Creation has its roots and reason in the reality of God characterized by freedom and especially by love. Love must mean the self-communication of the good. Creation manifests God's boundless power as it communicates God's love. Creation out of God's goodness . . . [is] an act of self-communication. . . . The biblical tradition is the proclamation that there

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is only one who is truly God, a God who loves unconditionally. The theological maxim *creatio ex nihilo* arose when the idea of creation by sheer loving will was combined with the biblical insistence on God as the Creator of all.¹²

The Anglican scholar, John Polkinghorne, echoes this same theme when he states:

The dominant image [of the Old Testament] is the value of creation and the power of its Creator. . . . A similar theme recurs in the prophetic writing most concerned with these matters, Second Isaiah. God is the ground of all that is: “For thus says the Lord who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!), ‘I am the lord, and there is no other’” (Isaiah 45:18). He is no deistic God content with what he has done, but he is active, his care continues: “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them” (Isaiah 42:9). God’s world is one of dynamic becoming, not static being. . . . The comparison with the endlessly cyclic nature-religions of Canaan and Babylon, and the perpetual status quo of Egypt, is very striking.¹³

Lucien Richard makes the culminating point:

The idea of creation as a form of divine self-giving, a love that goes out of itself to bring about fully responsive reality, demands that Godself be put at the disposal of creatures and limited in relation to them. Creation as the effect of God’s boundless and ecstatic love implies a self-limitation of God.¹⁴

Conclusion

Contrary to age-old mythologies, Creation does not involve a mythical battle against chaos. It is not the result of violent weaponry. It is not an act of hateful retaliation against some

preexistent reality. Creation is not the adversary, prisoner or slave of a god of self-existence. Rather, Creation is the loving gift of the God of self-limitation.

Having chosen to forever abandon his own self-existence, God could not act through a surrogate, substitute or subordinate deity. He himself acted as Jesus Christ through his own self-emptying, self-limiting Sonship. Likewise, having chosen to terminate the delusional self-existence of humanity, God could not act through a substitute or surrogate human. He himself acted as the Adamic Father to become the true progenitor of the human race.

In view of this mighty act of God in history, we today earnestly await the manifestation of his recreative, regenerative, transformative love as Spiritus (Spirit) Creator on behalf of the human race.

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Endnotes

1. *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 2nd college ed., s.v. “Self-existent.”
2. See “The Most Painful Difficulty,” *Outlook* (September/October 2004) (originally published as an April 1998 prequel to subsequent online *Outlook* articles and therefore not duplicated

- as an online *Outlook* prequel); “From the House of Bondage,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.3); “In the Aftermath . . .,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.4).
3. See “In the Aftermath . . .,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1998.4).
 4. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 11.
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
 6. Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 8, 9, 29.
 7. See Karl W. Luckert, *Egyptian Light and Hebrew Fire: Theological and Philosophical Roots of Christendom in Evolutionary Perspective* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 55, 119, 138, 139, 193, 196, 310.
 8. See *Britannica Online*, s.v. “Hermann Gunkel (German Biblical Scholar),” at www.britannica.com/biography/Hermann-Gunkel.
 9. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Creation Myths Breed Violence,” *Bible Review* 14, no. 3 (June 1998): 17, 47.
 10. New English Bible.
 11. Armstrong, *History of God*, p. 395.
 12. Lucien Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), pp. 128-131.
 13. John Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), p. 71.
 14. Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God*, p. 137.

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