

ETERNAL QUESTIONS

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Birth of God, Part 2

If you ask a Hindu they will likely tell you their creation story is the best creation story, but that's probably because it's the story they *know* best. It's normal for people to be the most comfortable with foods and stories they consumed as children. In a nutshell, here's the Hindu creation story:

The god's name is Brahma and he created the universe out of himself. Before he made the universe, Brahma was all alone and self-content. But then for some reason he got lonely and wanted companionship. First, he began his project by making water. The water became an ocean. Then, he dropped a seed into his ocean, and the seed became a golden egg from which he emerged and the remaining golden eggshell expanded and became the universe. That's it.

I know! It *does* sound like that old conundrum: which came first, the chicken or the egg? Apparently, Brahma makes an ocean, drops a seed into it, the seed becomes an egg, Brahma hops into the egg, and at the appropriate time he is born.

I suppose some Hindus believe this story exactly as it is given to them. You could say the same thing about fundamentalist Christians who believe the Genesis story we briefly summarized in the last essay—that God apparently got tired of the dark abyss and said, "Let there be light."

I don't know what percentage of Hindus believe that Brahma was born in a golden egg that he created. Surely many of them see it as a symbolic story. But for both gods, Yahweh and Brahma, we have the same situation of a god who was all alone, then decided he wanted company and created a universe. There's no

explanation of where they came from or who created them, or who created the creator of that creator, and so on back to an infinity of creators. Yes, we're back to the logical fallacy, Infinite Regress.

I mean no disrespect, and I really do understand that the vast majority of humanity doesn't really care about things like logical fallacies—especially when it comes to their religion. They care about paying their bills, avoiding taxes, raising their children, and just getting to live another day. But I care, and I'm guessing you care, or you wouldn't be reading this essay. We have the same problem with Brahma that we have with Yahweh, and I can't think of any reason to continue beating this drum.

So, let's move along to Gautama the Buddha. Here, at least, is an intellectually honest spiritual leader who wasn't afraid to admit he didn't know everything and didn't make up fantastical stories to entertain or intimidate the ignorant.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time talking about who and what Gautama the Buddha was. If you're reading this, then I'm ready to believe you already know a little or a lot about him. You probably already know he was born in Nepal and founded an order of monks on the Ganges River about 500 years before the common era, that is, before Jesus. You may already know that his name, Buddha, means the "awakened one," as in one who was awakened from ignorance.

I like that part. We could all use a little more awakening from ignorance—some more than others. And, you may already know something about Zen koans and meditation and Buddhist monks. But what you may NOT know is how a small monastic order of spiritual seekers became a religion of more than 500 million worldwide. The world has always had many teachers trying to answer the Eternal Questions, but why do some live and die and are never heard of again, while a few others like the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad go from a handful of followers to a religion of many millions, even billions.

Good question, but were only going to spend a few minutes answering it because the subject of this essay is the birth of God, not the birth of a major religion. But, I can't resist this little diversion, so please bear with me.

Many years ago, I worked with a colleague who was deeply religious, a true fundamentalist Protestant who would come to work and say things like, "The Bible is the indisputable word of God." Of course, I couldn't resist saying, "No it's not. I dispute it. Therefore, it is not indisputable." True story. These are actual quotes.

This is a professional person, a college graduate, a man that looks just as normal as you and me, well, as normal as me, and he goes around saying things like *The Bible* is the indisputable word of God. To his credit, he didn't get red in the face and call for God to strike me dead when I disagreed with him. I can have that effect on people, but that's a story for another day.

One Monday morning, this same colleague came to work all excited about a rousing sermon he heard at church the day before. His preacher told the congregation that soon after Jesus died and went to heaven the world was converted to Christianity *as if consumed by a great wildfire sweeping over the world*. Whoosh! Just like that.

I'm not making this up.

Anyway, that did it. The gloves were off. I told my colleague his preacher was preaching rubbish. The Christians were a poor and cantankerous little sect that annoyed the Romans for 300 years before the emperor Constantine was converted *by his mother* to their point of view. It was Constantine the 1st, who *forced* the citizens of his empire to convert to Christianity, and the conversion was NOT a wildfire of divine inspiration but a sword of menacing intent.

I remember when I was a little boy going to Protestant Sabbath School and one of the teachers told a story about this kind of conversion. He said a Roman Centurion took the 80 soldiers under his command and marched them to the edge of the sea. At the shore he had them halt. Then, he ordered those who wanted to convert to Christianity to stand fast. Those who did NOT want to become Christians were ordered to forward march into the sea. At the time I thought that was really cool, but then I was probably about 10.

Anyway, after I explained the historical facts of the birth of Christianity my religious colleague gave up on me, and left me alone.

And that's ALSO how Buddhism became a great religion. An emperor made it happen. Only in this case it was the emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE) who converted to Buddhism following his war with the kingdom of Kalinga. What happened is that about 200 years AFTER the Buddha lived with his monks on the Ganges River, Ashoka, who was emperor of the entire Indian subcontinent, went to war with the state of Kalinga, a smaller and independent feudal kingdom located on the east coast that he thought should be his.

Does this sound like a warlord of our own time?

But, in Ashoka's case, after 100 thousand people died in the Kalinga war, Ashoka, who apparently had a conscience, was shaken by what he had done, by the murder of a 100 thousand lives he had caused, and in his remorse he converted to Buddhism.

After the Kalinga conquest Ashoka made Buddhism the state religion (c. 260 BCE) and sent his son and daughter to Sri Lanka along with other missionaries sent throughout Asia to spread Buddha's teachings. According to Wikipedia and many other Internet sources, Ashoka's Brahmi edicts say he "favored" Buddhism but was also tolerant of other major faiths, such as Brahmanism and Jainism. If this

is true, then it is unlikely that Ashoka forced Buddhism on the world in the same manner as Emperor Constantine and another religion promoter, the prophet Muhammad, the “praiseworthy,” whom we will briefly discuss now.

Soon after the beginning of his ministry in Mecca he and his little band of followers were thrown out of the city. In those days, Mecca was a rich crossroads of many cultures with many religions, and the city fathers prided themselves on tolerance for all people and their beliefs—as long as they didn’t disrupt the city’s rich trade. Muhammad defied the city fathers when he preached about his *one true religion*, annoying the traders from other lands who had other beliefs.

Muhammad did not appreciate his rejection and ejection from Mecca and decided warfare was warranted. Four years after he founded his religious sect, Muhammad had only about 40 converts, a rather pathetic showing for a lot of hard work, so he took matters into his own hands. With a small band of followers he attacked and robbed a caravan guarded by Meccan tribes in the Sacred month when warfare was forbidden.¹ That was just the beginning. Gradually, the Muhammadans grew in numbers and greatly prospered—sometimes by the sword and sometimes because Muhammad provided an alternative government that was less cruel than what was offered by the many despotic rulers of that time.

Right. Enough of these diversions. Let’s get back to what the Buddha said about the birth of God and the beginning of the world. Are you ready? He said nothing. Even more remarkably, he didn’t fall into the logical fallacy of the Infinite Regress. He didn’t invent a lonely god who decided to create a universe. In fact, his religion didn’t need a god at all.

Buddha borrowed from an Indian mode of thinking called the quadrilemma, four dilemmas, and he called these dilemmas the INEXPRESSIBLES. In other words, some things, four things to be exact, are inexpressible. The four dilemmas that cannot be resolved are central to Buddhist philosophy, and they are:

- *Whether the world is eternal or not, or both, or neither.*
- *Whether the world is finite, or infinite, or both, or neither.*
- *Whether the Buddha exists after death or not, or both, or neither.*

What does the Buddha say about life after death? Inexpressible. Actually, he did express himself on the matter. When a group of his closest followers came to him one day and insisted on knowing about life after death he said that the mere fact they asked this question meant they were still clinging to life. Here’s the fourth:

- *Whether the soul is identical with the body or different from it.*

Buddhism is very popular with atheists, as you can imagine. I like Buddhism, too, even though I’m not an atheist. It’s just that there are interesting points of

¹ Smart, Roderick Ninian, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, 2nd edition, (Scribner and Sons, 1976, pp. 397-8, 411-2)

comparison between Buddhism and Stoicism, but we're not going to go there because that sort of comparative analysis I will leave that to the scholars of the College of Stoic Philosophers. Instead, we will move on to my favorite mystic and philosopher, a man some call the Father of Western Civilization and others call the Obscure One. Heraclitus.

Heraclitus (c 535-c 475 BCE) If you're already familiar with the history of this man, skip to the next page starting with the Heraclitus fragment in blue font.

Heraclitus was born into a family of nobility in Ephesus—near Miletus the birthplace of Western philosophy. Apparently, he was a hereditary nobleman who set aside his crown to become a philosopher. Heraclitus became renowned as a sage, a mystic genius, and the fragments we have remaining from his written work has fascinated thinkers from Socrates to Goethe and from Aristotle to contemporary quantum physicists.

He is the greatest of the Ionian sages, a Founding Father of Western Civilization, a creator of philosophy, and a diviner of the fundamental essence of the cosmos. He is also known as the Obscure One, a reputation acquired in his own time for a vague and riddling style that some believe he deliberately adopted to elude all but the most perceptive scholars.

God, he called the Logos, the Word, Reason, and rational thought. Remember the Apostle John's verse about the Word being with God from the beginning? Well, this is the Word John was talking about, and the author of that the New Testament book had Heraclitus to thank for the concept.

Anyway, what Heraclitus wrote in its original form was lost in antiquity by the systematic attempts of early Christians, such as Theodosius I (4th century CE), the Christian emperor who set out to destroy all remnants of pagan civilizations during the years of his reign (375-395 CE). What the Christians didn't destroy, the Muslims did. In the 7th century, not only was the Word of Heraclitus destroyed, virtually all of the hundreds of books written by the early Greek Stoics were also put to the flame.

Caliph Omar, the Muslim general who conquered Egypt, gave the edict that all books except the Koran were to be burned. ALL of the many thousands of books of the Library of Alexandria, the greatest library in the world, were carted off to be burned as fuel for the public baths in the city. It was said that the books of the ancient world, the earliest genius of humanity kept the famous baths of Alexandria lit for more than six months.

All that remains of the Word of Heraclitus are fragmentary references from many sources, some reliable, some unreliable. And from these fragments we discover the insights of a remarkable cosmologist that describe observations of nature that predate modern physics by 2500 years. His cosmology and that of the Stoics who followed him, describe a universe that is a unified whole, perpetual and cyclical

with unity and paradox in pairs of opposites—a dynamic living organism of movement, flow, and change. In all of these attributes of Nature, Heraclitus would include a rational consciousness and providence.

For now, we will focus on a single fragment, one of over 100 that have been found and preserved. Here's that fragment, fragment #20 according to the Burnet translation, and I quote:

“This cosmos, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living fire, with measures kindling and measures going out.”

As you can see, Heraclitus was called the Obscure One for a reason. Let's take this passage apart. Heraclitus said, **“This cosmos, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made . . .”**

OK, do you have a clear distinction between universe and cosmos? We often use them interchangeably, and for most of us that's no big deal. But, if you're looking for a bit of precision we should clear that up right now. The Cosmos is larger in scope than the universe. The cosmos is a unified, harmonious, and orderly whole, a system governed by natural laws. The universe is everything that exists—all matter and energy, the earth, and all the galaxies, and the physical laws that have been constant forever. The universe is everything within the cosmos.

If you are *still* unsure about the difference, don't worry about it. Just remember that cosmos, universe, and nature are often used synonymously except in the most precise scientific or philosophical language, and we are not going to ask you to be either a scientist or a grammarian to know God. Just remember that the cosmos is a unified, harmonious, and orderly Whole. This is foundational information about God, the One.

“This cosmos, which is the same for all...” Remember, all matter and energy, the earth, and all the galaxies, and the physical laws have been constant forever which is another way of saying it is the same for all. Now we're getting to the good stuff: **“...no one of gods or men has made...”**

Stoic atheists rejoice! According to Heraclitus, the cosmos was NOT created by some lonely Yahweh or Brahma. Be that as it may, Heraclitus describes the cosmos as having NO beginning. It's neither a god nor a man. This rarefied, cosmic fire is here now, has always been here, and will always be here. Eternal. What was Buddha's first inexpressible? “Whether the world is eternal or not, or both, or neither.” For Heraclitus, it's *eternal*.

Now I'm going to shift over to the early Greek Stoics. BTW, much of the information we get about the Early Greeks comes from the Roman Senator

Cicero. Yes, *the* Cicero of ancient Rome. And I need to mention that the earliest Stoics believed in something called, *Ekpyrosis*, the cyclical birth, death, and rebirth of the cosmos.

This is really an elaboration of the Stoic interpretation of the fragments about the cosmos contained in Heraclitus's Word. Here's a quick summary, At the end of the cycle, the Active principal, the Logos fire, burns away the Passive inert matter, and there eventually remains only the fire that is reduced to an infinitesimal point; at which time it bursts into creation of the cosmos again, combining the Active with the Passive material in the universe. Something like the Big Bang theory of modern physics.

And that's really where I want to leave Heraclitus. We will get more of him later But for now, let me repeat what you need to know. The beginning of the Stoic universe, according to Heraclitus, is an infinitesimal point of Logos fire that explodes and the cosmos is born anew. And with Heraclitus we have our introduction to modern physics. If you want to know how physicists describe the beginning of all things today, we will discuss this in the next essay on the Birth of God, Part 3.

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OUTSIDE: FEEDING MY GOPHER

Early Winter when the Summer furnace finally cools, the sourgrass, the deep green grass of clover-like leaves with tart lemony flowers, returns. The yard is covered them (*Oxalis* spp.), and a blanket of green and yellow carpets my semi-arid lawn. Sourgrass usually dies away by early May, and I'm sorry to see it go, but their tender little bulbs remain, hidden underground promising to return. Some people consider them a pest, but I never have.

Recently, I was standing still and enjoying my patch of sourgrass when I noticed a Gopher mound at one edge of it. I watched as the mound got larger and larger, then opened up to reveal the Gopher (*Geomyidae*) hard at work. It was a big one, the biggest I'd ever seen—about the size of three brown rats with the same beady eyes and buck teeth, but with powerful stubby legs and digging nails. I watched it push the dirt up and up until it was apparently satisfied and went back down underground—probably to eat the sourgrass bulbs.

In early Spring we had long, cold days of pouring rain with hardly a glimpse of the sun, and I didn't want to bother the Gopher while it was just trying to stay alive and keep dry. At last, one day in late April the sun returned, and it was time

to go outside and deal with the Gopher. He had dug up large mounds of dirt here and there and tunnels everywhere. Just to walk on the ground made it give way into a tunnel, and I wondered what he and I would do if I accidentally stepped on him hiding there.

There are about 4.5 million Jains in the world today. Jainism originated 700-500 BCE in the Ganges Basin and teaches that the path to spiritual purity is through disciplined nonviolence (*ahimsa*) to all living creatures. Their monks sweep the ground everywhere they walk so as not to tread on any insects, seen or unseen.

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For the Readers

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