“IN THE BEGINNING”

Creation Myths

Hinduism

Buddhism
– In the second millennium BCE (2000 BCE) Indus valley cities disappeared.
– A series of invasions by Aryan people who introduced Sanskrit, (the language of Hindu scriptures).
– The Aryans composed a set of works known as the Vedas, or Books of Knowledge, in which they describe an elaborate pantheon of gods and the devotional rites to honor them.
– While these Vedic divinities and practices only partly coincide with later traditions, they are regarded as the ultimate literary source of Hinduism.

• In the course of the first Millennium BCE the Vedas were succeeded by the philosophically based Upanishads and the more practically concerned Brahmins.
The creation of the world and the origin of mankind are the themes of many myths. They are found among primitive peoples of most land and can be traced back to antiquity.

There are two kinds of Creation myths:
1. Myths about the beginning of things
2. Ritual myths connected to periodic ceremonies designed to ensure the well-being or continuation of the world.
Early civilizations grew up around river valleys.
The notion of the world even having a beginning arose most likely as Paleolithic people witnessed the beginning of human life through birth. In fact, the earliest creation myths use the imagery of biological birth.

Common themes across cultures are:

1. Birth
2. Growth and Decay and often
3. Resurrection of all life, animal, vegetable and human.

So, even as myths are attempts to explain the world, they are also designed to control or influence it.

And many use a form of Anthropomorphism, the tendency to picture the divine in human form, is extremely widespread.
HINDU

• In the Vedas, the sacred hymns (1500-900 BCE), creation is not the concern.
• Rather it is man’s awe before it.
• Gods were the ‘shining ones’.
• People worshiped the light of the world, the blinding splendor of all things.
• The god AGNI was Fire, light, the sun, lightning
HINDU

- Worshipers went to see the image of the deity.

- Eyes are important because the worshiper sees the deity and the deity can see back.

For the Hindus, seeing became a form of touching.

Seated statuette of Urnanshe, from the Ishtar temple at Mari (modern Tell Hariri), Syria, ca. 2600–2500 BCE
Not one god but many

• Why more than one god?
• What is the difference between Greek (or western gods) and Hindu?

• The Rig-Veda offers myths of the beginning. There were several.
• In one, a primeval man, Prajapati, the Lord of Beings, was sacrificed.
• Sacrifice repeats the mystery of creation.
HINDU

• There are many Hindu creation stories but the one given here helps to explain one of the major Hindu beliefs - reincarnation.

• This is not the first world, nor is it the first universe.

• The universes are made by Lord Brahma the Creator, maintained by Lord Vishnu the Preserver and destroyed by Lord Shiva.
The universes are made by Lord Brahma the Creator
--maintained by Lord Vishnu the Preserver
--destroyed by Lord Shiva.
These three gods are all forms of Supreme One and part of the Supreme One.

- The Supreme One is behind and beyond all.
- After each old universe is destroyed nothing is left but a vast ocean.
- Floating on this ocean, resting on the great snake Ananta, is Lord Vishnu.
- Some say that a lotus flower springs from his navel and from this comes Lord Brahma. And it is from Lord Brahma that all creation comes.
A popular creation myth features Vishnu as Narayana who reclines on the serpent Ananta (Infinity) afloat the casual waters. As narayana dreams, a lotus arises from his navel, bearing Brahma the personification of the creative principle inherent in Consciousness.
Brahma has four heads ---the number of the earth--which order the universe into the four cardinal directions, and four arms which refer to the four Vedas and the four aims of the householder’s life: duty, success, refinement and liberation.
In Hindu Mythology Mother Goddess comes before Trinity—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Shiva as Maheshvara, the Great Lord, worshipped as the linga... emblem of the universal forces of generation.
Shiva as male and female deities bringing the world into being
Not Black and White

• The Hindus saw many possibilities…
• Creation was not bringing into being the wonder of the world.
• It was the fragmenting of the unity of nature into countless imperfect forms what was already there.
• Samsara?
• Yoga (or union)?
The Buddha
THE SILENCE OF THE BUDDHA

• The Buddha had no answer to the riddle of creation.

• The Buddhist aim was not to know the world or to improve it (as in the West) but to escape its suffering.

• The whole concern is salvation.

• Inquiry, as in the Western tradition, had no place in Buddhism.
• Buddha actually offered an explanation as to how ideas of a single Creator got started and it had to do with the establishment of power.

• Story of Lord Brahma?

• The story of the Historic Buddha--Gautama Buddha as Prince Siddhartha (c.561 BCE)

• The word ‘buddha’ is not his name but a word that means to awaken or to know.

• Not the first. Not the last. One in a series.
Birth of the Buddha from the right side of his mother, queen Maya.
Life of the Buddha, several episodes of the life of the Buddha are represented in one stele.

Here the birth of Buddha depicts him emerging from his mother’s side, the next is the moment of enlightenment with the forces of his temptation. His right hand reaches down to touch the earth to signify his moment of triumph. Also are included are his first sermon at Sarnath, showing him making the gesture of teaching (which often includes the wheel of the law). The top figure is reclining...this is his final triumph...his death.
The life and death of the Buddha, frieze from Gandhara, Pakistan, second century CE. Schist, 2’ 2 3/8” X 9’ 6 1/8”. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
• Once he gained enlightenment, he began to preach

1. The holy eight fold path: right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.

2. Four Holy Truths: all existence is suffering, all suffering and rebirth are caused by man’s selfish craving, Nirvana, freedom from suffering, comes from cessation of all craving, and fourth, the stopping of all ill and craving comes only from following the Eight Fold Path.

These are the way of the Buddha, the way of Enlightenment.
Even though the Buddha didn’t address the origins of the world, there is a Buddhist Cosmology…

According to this view, the center of the universe is a mountain, Meru, from the top of which rise various levels of heaven.

Meru is surrounded by 7 mountain chains separated by 7 oceans. Beyond this is a great ocean with four islands… humans occupy one.

The universe is surrounded by a huge rock wall. On Mount Meru reside the four guardians of the four quarters (four cardinal points), and 33 principle gods (principle Hindu gods) and celestial Buddha at the peak. Above this is sky.