



**Figure 1** "Spiritual Pilgrim", wood engraving. Artist unknown. First appeared in "L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire" written by Camille Flammarion, p. 163, published in 1888. Color version – Gunther Scholl.

## On Creation Myths

A summary of Joseph L. Henderson's May 14, 1988 slide and lecture presentation before The San Francisco Friends of ARAS, entitled "Creation Myths."

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**Images selected by Kako Ueda and Stephanie Fariss**

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In his introduction, Dr. Henderson explained that while creation myths ostensibly tell the story of the creation of the world and human life, they are, to a great extent, metaphors of the creation of consciousness. He began his presentation with a discussion of his personal relation to the topic.

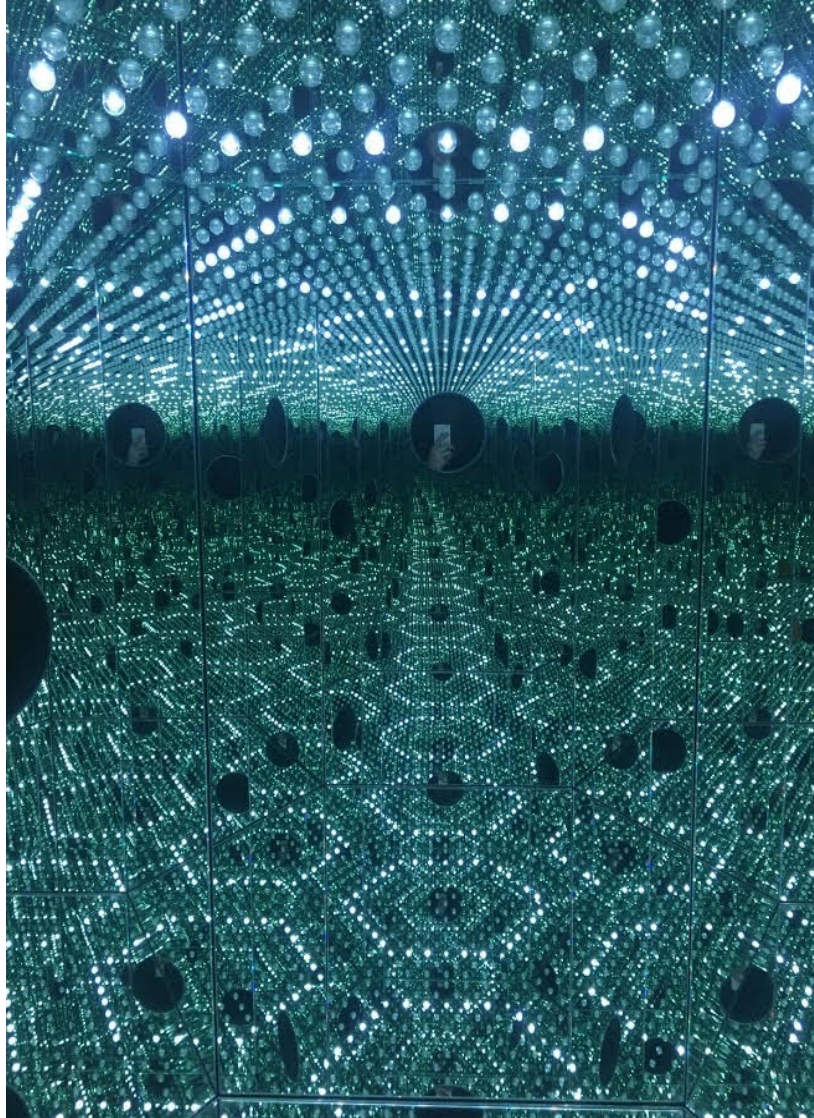
"When I was young, in late childhood and early teens, I had an occasional attack of fear. I was afraid of infinity. Space for me was linear. It extended out in all directions from where I was and I tried to accept that it had no end. This was frightening. Surely there must be an end to it, I thought, some stone wall or mountain perhaps. But then the awful thought would haunt me that there was still space on the other side of this barrier extending off into infinity. So, my existential nightmare seemed to have no end any more than infinity has an end. Like many other young people, I managed to forget or at least repress my fear. But it laid there as an unanswered question, a mystery, for many years to come. Some time in my 20s I learned that modern physics and astronomy had some new ideas about the nature of space. From Arthur Stanley Eddington I learned that astronomical space was perhaps not linear but circular. This meant that if one had a strong enough telescope pointing into the sky one might see the back of one's own head. This was immensely consoling and relieved my fear of linear infinity. I realized then, that I had been a victim of Euclidean geometry and could now be free to explore the wonders of modern science." (JLH)



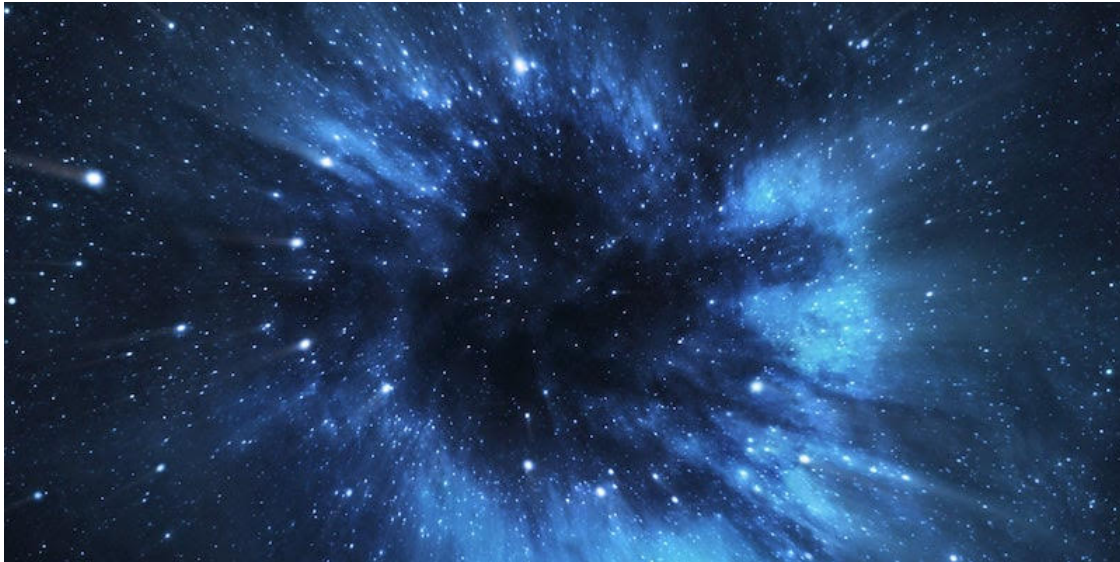
**Figure 2** Photograph from NASA.

"At the same time, I began to learn the language of a different but analogous creation arising from the archetypal images of human inner life. This was also a cosmic symbolism in which many of the same images of creation appear that we find in quantum physics or in the miraculous probabilities of astronomy. Here too I found the common link, a place where both physics and psychology might truly meet. This is the concept, found both in quantum physics and psychology, that creation may be continuous - a creatio contiguo. This term was first used by theologians and therefore must spring from an archetypal source. But in physics it is used to describe an infinite

state - according to the astronomer Fred Boyle - "a kind of constant coming into existence of more and more matter."

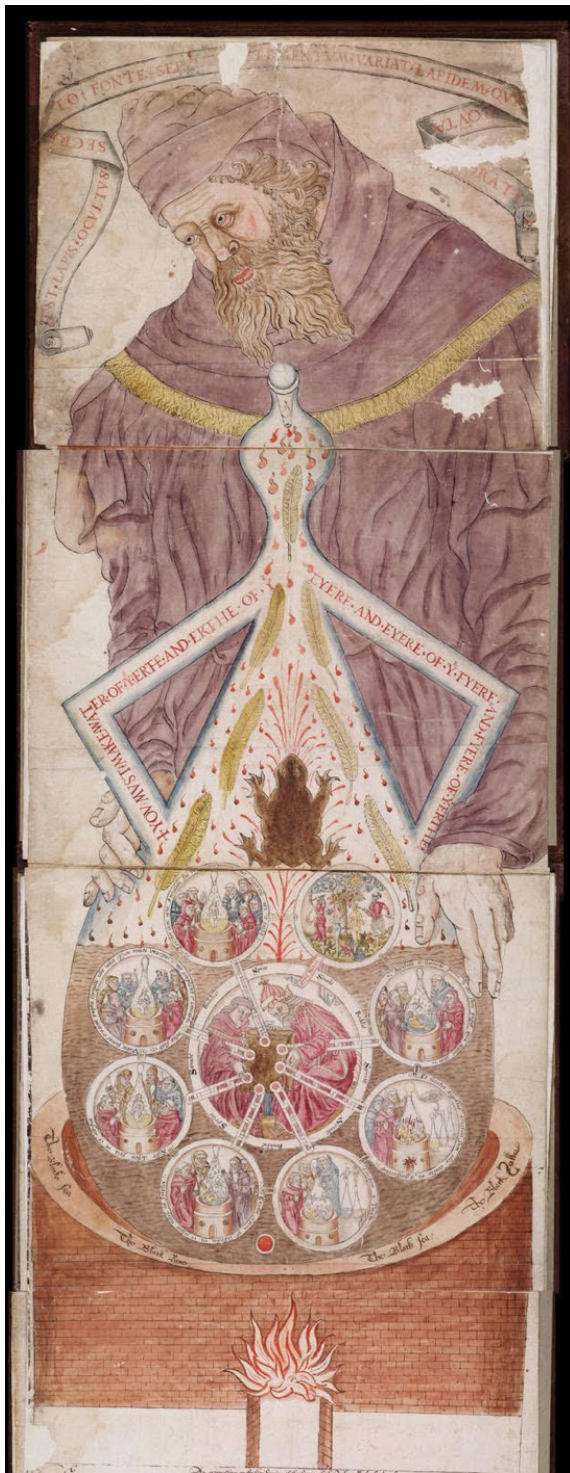


**Figure 3** "Longing for Eternity" (2017), detail, Yayoi Kusama.



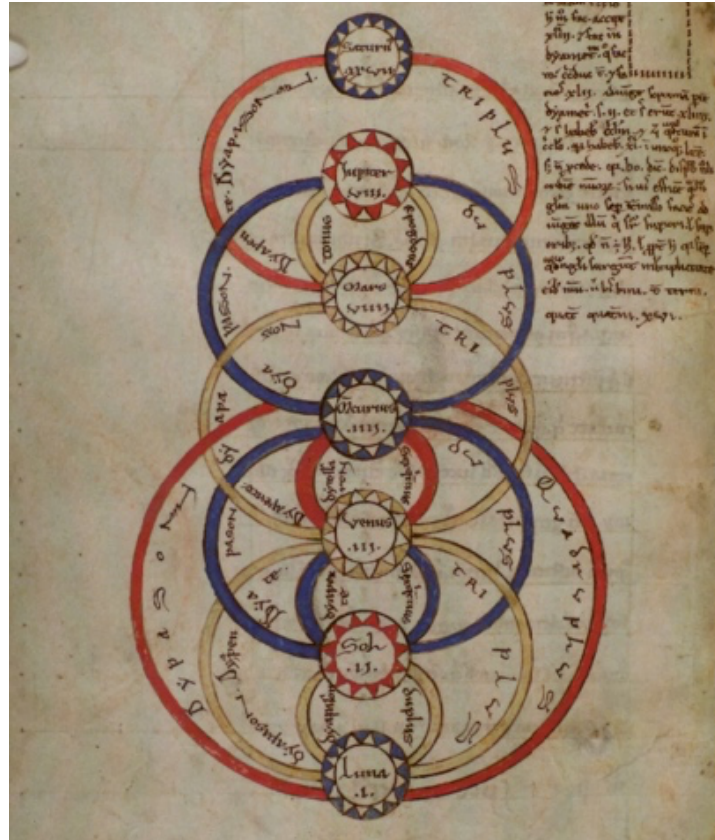
**Figure 4** Image of an expanding universe.

“There is also the idea of the expanding universe, but this is not fully accepted.” (JLH) Dr. Henderson then explained that in some creation myths there is the motif of legions and legions of generations of gods or spirits or beings in which one begets the next until eventually our reality comes into being. Implicit in this is the notion that the creation began from something new and unknown which did not exist before and is not of a natural cause. Thus, there was something before the creation. "This is quite troubling to the rational mind but if we accept that there is something before the beginning, that is, before creation, we don't have to worry about it because we can never find out what it is as long as we are in this life." (JLH) What we are talking about here is the "spontaneous creation of spirit in matter. This is discussed by Aniela Jaffe in her passage on alchemy in *The Myth of Meaning*." (JLH)



**Figure 5** Alchemist with his alembic, from the *Ripley Scroll*, England, ca. 1570, Yale Univ. Library

“In alchemy we find the process of creation as a continuous movement from below -> upward or from above -> downward, taking place in the alembic or retort in which the metals are transformed. When the beginning is the same as the end and up is the same as down, the human mind rebels as it always has, and always will, in the face of such paradox. This rebellion engenders a basic need for some explanation, some credible story of how the world and life came into being. That is why I say, in my book on *Cultural Attitudes*, that the creation myth in primal societies is a precursor of a philosophical attitude.



**Figure 6** Plato’s image of the Universe/ MS Digby 23,  
©Bodleian Libraries, Univ. Oxford

This also occurs in more highly evolved societies and in actual philosophies such as Plato does in his book *The Timaeus*, in accordance with the philosophic spirit of his time. He did not expect literal verification for it but simply called it a “likely story.”

(JLH)



**Figure 7** Creation in Hindu myth. Vishnu, Lakshmi and Brahma on Shesha.  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England

“This may give you some idea of the essential function of a creation myth. It is told to supply meaning where an objective explanation of the human race as we know it fails. We fall back on a special kind of mythic thought that has something creative about it. This is symbolized in an Indian myth as ‘warmth combined with brooding thought’ expressed in the word ‘tapas,’ which comes from two roots meaning ‘to burn’ and ‘to meditate.’ Von Franz tells us that in the Nundanka Upanishad, the Brahman swells by means of brooding, hence producing matter – and from matter, breath, fire, the truth and all the worlds.





**Figure 8** *Vishnu Vishvarupa*, (detail) approx. 1800–1820, India; Rajasthan state, former kingdom of Jaipur, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Then he formed the Purusha, the primordial human being. Taking him forth from the water, he brooded on him and a mouth burst forth like an egg and from the mouth proceeded speech, from speech, Agni or fire.” (JLH)



**Figure 9** Hiranyagarbha (Golden Cosmic Egg), Circa 1730 CE, artist, Manaku (active, 1725-1760), Manuscript illumination: gouache on paper with gold leaf, India.

Dr. Henderson then presented a number of creation myths and illustrated his retelling of those stories with slides, from the ARAS collection, associated with the myths. He began by picking up on the theme of the egg and showed us a magnificent tantric Indian painting of a golden egg surrounded by something like waves or clouds. He gave examples of Asian Indian myths in which the gods and the world are said to have been born from a great cosmic egg.



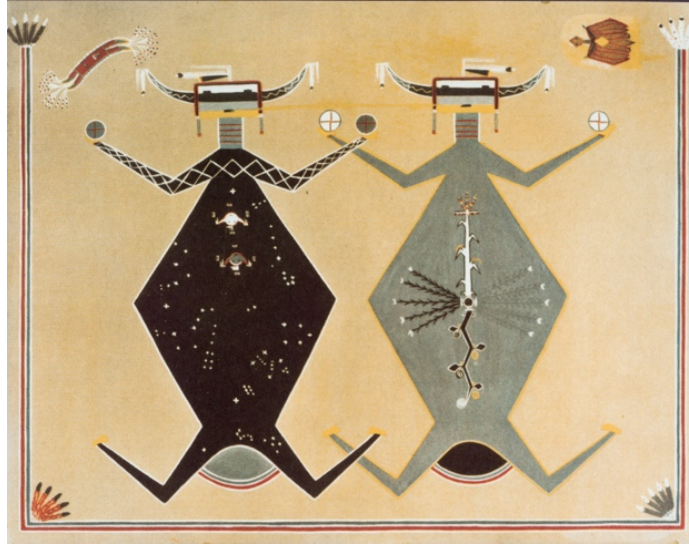
**Figure 10** Egyptian myth of Ptah who creates the world as a cosmic egg. Budge, E.A. Wallis. *The Gods of Egyptians or Studies in Egyptian Mythology*. London: Methuen & Co., 1904, Vol.I, pl. opp. of p. 500.

He recounted the Orphic creation myth where the sun, representing consciousness, emerges from the egg and the Egyptian myth of Ptah who creates the world as a cosmic egg on his pottery wheel. This was followed by the motifs of creation from the primal parents and creation arising from the hero as the separator of the primal opposites.

Dr. Henderson ended with an analysis of two different types of creation - one from the sky and the other from below. "Creation from the sky is usually associated with logos, some kind of thought, some kind of masculine activity and only then descends and animates the world and creates what is needed. But this creation, as far as the world is concerned, is often felt to be somewhat accidental." There is a stumbling and a fumbling quality to this creative play but it is a conscious creation. "Creative play is well known today as an essential part of growing up and you can study this in more detail in the writings of the analyst D.W. Winnicott."



**Figure 11** Children at play. Photo credit: Agoes Antara.



**Figure 12** Navajo creation pair – Father Sky and Mother Earth. Sand painting, c. 1940.

Creation from the sky is also associated with patrilineal societies. In contrast to the myths of creation from the sky, the great emergence myths where the creation comes from the earth have a strong feminine quality. The Navajo Indians and the Pueblo



**Figure 13** Exultation of the Earth, Exultet Roll. 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Indians have matrilineal societies. Their creation myths follow the emergence motif from below -> upward. Their creation comes from the earth. Their worlds emerged. They evolved. They developed order. There is a feminine creation from a Mother Earth.



**Figure 14** From the alchemical manuscript “Atalanta Fugiens”. First edition: 1617.

Creation myths are also found in the alchemical tradition in which the alchemists projected the creation and evolution of consciousness onto their experiments and speculations about the transformation of the prima materia into the philosopher's stone or the lead into gold.



**Figure 15** Victor Brauner, *The Philosopher's Stone*, 1940, oil on canvas, Saint-Etienne, Musee d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Sint-Etienne Metropole, Jacqueline Victor Brauner Bequest, Inv. 90.10.9.

Dr. Henderson ended with saying that in alchemy some of the many schemas of transformation are metaphors of the creation of consciousness similar to those found in creation myths and that others are metaphors of the process of individuation.