

**“Genesis Now!”**

## **The Story that Jews, Christians and Muslims Still Share**

by Neil Douglas-Klotz

The stories that a culture tells itself weave its destiny. Most of our stories come from headlines and two-minute television news spots, which seem to change from day to day, but quickly blur into one another, numbing the senses.

Today there is greater yearning than ever to find a common ground of peace and compassion upon which Jews, Christians and Muslims can all stand, without violence and with compassion. And yet, most of the images that fill our television screens do little to cultivate this common ground. One murder or act of violence may be offset by one act of kindness or compassion, and yet there would be no way of knowing it from the mass media.

Yet there are many people working behind the headlines—in schools, churches, synagogues and mosques-- to help maintain the very practical realization that we are all much more alike than different, no matter whether one is a believer or an agnostic. We breathe the same air, need the same water and food and are vulnerable in all the same ways.

It may seem to be the old religious stories and myths that keep us apart. And yet even here, the three religions all share the most important story: the story of the creation of the world and the first human being. For our early ancestors, who did not live with life divided into religion, psychology and politics, these stories provided their worldview, prayer, meditation and ethical code all rolled into one.

It is the stories of our “beginnings” that hold the real power of spiritual devotion in all three Western traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This meditation on cosmic creation lies behind the awe and wonder of Christians at the rebirth of Christ child each midwinter. It fuels the intense, heartfelt hope Jews experience each fall in the New Year celebrations of Rosh Hashana. It roots the devotion of Muslims each year during the fast of Ramadan, preparing for the “night of power,” when blessing flows freely, just as it did when Muhammad first received the Quran. These are all celebrations of hope, not fear, of love, not hate.

By experiencing the creation story as our own personal story, rather than as a description of what “really” happened, we could still have—as Jews, Christians and Muslims-- the same opportunity to recreate and renew ourselves, as our ancestors did. By contrast, the stories that these three traditions tell of “endings,” including the judgment of those who seem to be “other” at the end of time are not

shared. On one level, we seem to share a common origin, but not a common destiny.

And yet, the people who first told these creation stories did not distinguish past from future in the way that we do today. We know this from the way that the ancient forms of Hebrew, Aramaic (the native language of Jesus) and Arabic look at time. For them, the “beginnings” of creation continued into the present moment, and would continue into an unbounded future. Likewise, the “ending” or “day of judgment” was not far off, but present now, whenever they compared themselves to original divine image in the divine created human beings in the beginning. For Jesus then, understanding the old Hebrew creation story in Aramaic, every moment was judgment day.

Figuratively speaking, we could look at this view of time, so different of ours, in the following way. The front of the “caravan of creation” of which we are a part, set out before us and is still moving ahead of us, receding in the distance. We help create the future according to what we leave for those who come along behind us in the same, continually moving, caravan.

When these old Semitic stories were converted into a Western notion of time and space, they lent themselves to being taken as Western objective fact rather than as symbolic wisdom, as *logos* rather than *mythos*. Ends began to dominate beginnings. Apocalypse became more important than Creation. This newer version helped fuel the

separation of humanity from nature and, ultimately, from the divine.

While a rich, symbolic tradition of interpreting the stories of beginnings remained the province of mystics in all traditions, the more rigid and literalistic interpretations fueled the separations between people forged by some religious and secular authorities. Down this road lay the development of fundamentalism in all the traditions, as well as the justification for colonialization and racism.

While this development varied in the three religions, fundamentalism as we know it tended to reserve the mythic energy of the stories for itself. Instead of the sense of a shared story, fundamentalism promoted the idea that each tradition was the “true” holder or inheritor of the Biblical or prophetic traditions of old. Secularism, which rejected both fundamentalism as well as any kind of spirituality, was simply stamped out of the same end-dominated mold as religious fundamentalism. The “ends” were simply displaced from spiritual rewards to material ones. Fast food on earth replaced pie in the sky.

It’s not too late to change our way of looking at life, however. Simply put, we can focus on what we share rather than on what separates us. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all share “In the Beginning, *God...*” They disagree at the level of “*I believe*” (that is, credos and theologies). In our discussions with each other—whether religious, cultural or political--why not return to this shared beginning

rather than emphasize the differences. The latter only reinforce the more egotistical side of human nature, against which the prophets of all the traditions speak

It is the same choice that goes on within a family, a community or a nation. Sixty years ago, on the eve of the Second World War, it would have been difficult to predict that the nations of Europe could put aside their differences and emphasize what united them in a shared European Community. One hundred and sixty years ago, on the eve of the American Civil War, it would have been difficult to predict the same thing for the various states of the United States.

Today it may be difficult to imagine a world in which every human being respects the sacred nature of creation and feels responsible for being part of an interlinked human community that shares its resources. In our earliest human awareness, when far fewer humans populated the planet, we grouped together for safety and simply out of a desire for companionship. We formed communities out of physical and emotional necessity: nature was stronger than any individual human being.

Today, after less than ten centuries of trying to dominate and control nature, we need to form a different sense of community, again out of physical and emotional necessity. Human individualism has become so strong that we have forgotten our link to nature and to other humans who are not of our tribe. The earth and its ability to

support any human community have been seriously damaged. We expend enormous funds to make us more creative, psychologically healthy and happy, but mostly these efforts focus on acquiring something outside ourselves, rather than recovering what was ours in the beginning: a sense of creative purpose in life.

We are still at the beginning phase of our cultural therapy. What “feels right” to us—the centuries of looking at ends over beginnings, of goals over means—particularly in our spiritual and religious lives—may in fact be preventing us from living the compassionate, peaceful and just lives that all the great religious prophets advocated.

We need to look ahead, but not to a fixed future controlled by one monolithic or monocultural “new world order.” We need to look ahead to an open, changing past moving ahead of us—one of diversity, creativity and inclusion. We need to hear—and begin to live—our creation stories again, as though for the first time.

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