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Eng451A

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24th October, 2019

An Examination of the Discrepancies between the Creation Myths of Indigenous Peoples and Puritan Colonists

If one is inclined to gauge the collective ethos of a culture or society, one of the best places to start is in their myths, and there is no better place to start in their myths than in the creation. How a certain dogma, adopted by a significant population, asserts the creation of the world and humanity can reveal much about how that population regards both. Not only this, but it can reveal how a society feels it fits in with adjacent societies, and how it regards them. Nowhere is this seen more starkly than in the respective myths of native American peoples, specifically the Iroquois, and the Puritan colonists. In the former, the first human is a man, a man who is immediately given, supposedly by divine will, the right of sovereignty over all the earth and the animals that tread, fly or swim upon it. In the latter, a woman, having already existed among her people in a sky-realm, is forced to the earth and made to be a part of it, making the beasts of the fields her kith and kin, and learning to live harmoniously with an environment she is a mere part of. There are some similarities, which will be explicated, but the greatest truth of the people that wrote these myths can best be gleaned from their differences, particularly in the way they regard nature and women, and so these will be explored in this essay.

Now let's begin with the Iroquois Creation Story. The meat of the story really beings when a woman from the sky-realm (an ideal human paradise) is forced down to the dark waters

below. Upon learning of the woman's imminent arrival, the beasts of the water congregate to decide how to help her, in the end settling on a turtle bearing her, as well as the very firmament of North America upon its back, indeed to "endure her lasting weight." (pp.33). Now the use of the word endure here suggests that this is indeed a great burden upon the turtle, but that it is willing to do so for the sake of her safety and protection, as well as the protection of her unborn children. This focus on maternal and infantile relationships, and the importance of protecting them, can be seen reflected throughout Iroquois culture, as explored by Dr. John C. Mohawk, in his 1994 novel, *A View from Turtle Island: Chapters in Iroquois Mythology, History and Culture*. Dr. Mohawk explains how their very lodging reflected this protective nature towards women and children. "The ancient communal bark longhouses evoked a way of life which modern society might learn from. Society was structured in a way which protected women and children from physical abuse and especially from sexual abuse." (Mohawk, pp01). And indeed this sentiment is reflected in the creation story, in which the animals of the land and sea work together and toil to create a safe and prosperous environment for the sky woman upon the turtle's already labored back, and endeavor to protect her from the monster that lurk in the darkness.

Now this also speaks to the great importance placed on women in Iroquois culture, that they are sacred and to be respected as well as protected. This concept is explored at length in Judith K. Brown's contribution to Duke University's *Sociological Journal* entitled "Economic Organization and the Position of Women among the Iroquois." In the article, Brown talks about the more practical reasons women were relatively more respected among the Iroquois, asserting that "If women among the Iroquois enjoyed more privileges and possessed greater freedom than the women of other tribes, this was due...to the important place that agriculture held in their economic life, and the distribution of labor...(which left) the entire cultivation of the fields and

the acquisition of the greater part of the food supply to women.” (Brown, pp.12). Now the fact that women were placed in the most important resource position in the tribe, and the fact that this position metaphorically reflects the sky-woman’s first cultivation of the firmament, really exemplifies the practical as well as the spiritual significance with which women were regarded in Iroquois society, as well as a maternal regard for nature and one’s environment.

But even after the sky woman gives birth to her twins and promptly dies, a harmonious relationship between humanity and their environment is exemplified by her sons, both the good and the bad. The former seeds the new firmament with animal life, the myth declaring that he “...created numerous species of animals of the smallest and the greatest, to inhabit the forests, and fishes of all kinds to inhabit the waters.” (pp.33) Now, what is interesting to note about this biogenesis myth is not what it says, but what it does not say. It does not say that man has any dominion over these creatures. It does not say that they were created to sustain or be subjugated by man. It merely states that the creatures were created to “inhabit” the earth; to exist, to be a natural part of the system of nature, a system in which humanity is portrayed as just another part, and this really emphasizes the natural balance between humanity and nature reflected in Iroquois society; a relationship of mutual respect.

Now these two themes (the spiritual significance of women and humanity’s harmony with nature) could not be more polarized from the Iroquois story than they are in the Biblical creation story and therefore in Puritan culture. In the story, after the holy God declares the first human to be created (a man) to be the ruler of all he surveys, he pronounces that “the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered.” (Genesis 9:2). The idea here is that not only is humanity the master of nature and the

animals it contains, but that all living creatures on earth live or die by our hand, and that the tremendous fear this creates in them is not only natural, but it is righteous and good. This starkly contrasts the themes of mutual sharing and collaboration presented in the Iroquois story.

But the difference that stands out even more sharply between these stories is the way they respectively regard women. In the Iroquois myth, the central woman figure of the story is presented as a placid and peaceful matriarch, forming humanity's first harmonious relationship with nature with the settlement of Turtle Island, and eventually giving birth to what would create all the good as well as all the bad in the world. She is the first and the source and is respected as such. Quite the opposite is true in the biblical creation story. In it, the first woman is a product of the first man, and created seemingly from his whim and for his amusement. The problematic nature of this alone is explored by Dr. Ruth Roded in her book, *Human Creation in the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an – Feminist Exegesis*, (the Hebrew bible being the foundation of the Judeo-Christian bible). In it, Dr. Roded explains that "In both religious traditions (Judeo-Christian and Islamic), the creation of the first woman after the man, from the man, and for the man served as a foundation stone of patriarchy." (Brown, pp.18). The foundation is laid in woman's very creation, but it is cemented in her later actions in causing the fall of all mankind, a section of the story that is very obviously meant to portray women as a corrupting force, which would lead to the greater fear of women and especially their sexuality that would lead to the repressing of women and their sexuality in Puritan society, as reflected in their inability own land, hold office, be a member of the church, or even choose their own outfit.

Truly, a creation myth can serve as both the foundation and reflection for many of the core values of any society, from how they regard their own people to how they regard the very earth itself, and nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in each of these creation myths.

Works Cited

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