

The Where or the When of World Creation Stories: Considerations of Idutsu Toshihiko's

『コスモスとアンチコスモス』

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Everyone *knows* that they are here and now. This knowledge is absolute. It cannot be unknown. But everything else we know is based on assumptions that link together to form meaning for us. Most of the time that meaning is unconsciously assumed. When it is consciously expressed it becomes a narrative for us. The greatest narrative we need to weave for ourselves is the story of why we *are* here right now. This story is what I call here “cosmology” and everyone has one. It may not be consciously told to oneself but with a bit of prodding and questioning will be shown to be there.

All the world's great religions, philosophies, and ideologies each hold to a particular cosmology, a story of why you are here now. Although cosmology is a crucial topic, not many philosophers have sought to compare them. That is why Idutsu Toshihiko's (井筒俊彦 1914–1993) essay 『コスモスとアンチコスモス』 [Cosmos and Anticosmos] (1989) is of particular interest as a philosophical attempt to understand what informs our cosmologies. Here, I wish to outline his main ideas, discuss what I see as their strengths and weakness, and suggest how the weaknesses could be overcome through a different understanding of how cosmologies compare to each other. In essence, my argument will be that Idutsu has prioritized geography over history in his analysis leading him to orientalist assumptions about cosmological differences that prevent him from seeing clearer patterns in the evolution of cosmologies.

Idutsu defines cosmos as something that stands in contrast to chaos (which he renames “anticosmos”). When we look at some of the major creation stories in various traditions, such as Shinto, early Judaism, or Greek mythology, we see that the cosmos, our world, is something arising out of a primordial chaos which is just simply there, and has always been

there. Cosmos, then is not materially different from chaos, the difference is in terms of its meaningfulness for us humans. The cosmos is that world, our world, where everything is meaningfully arranged so that nothing is ever fully strange or unknown to us. It is the comforting ordering of the world that makes it our home, that space in which we feel we belong and nothing is a stranger to us for long. Chaos is not nothingness, but unarranged somethingness. Before creation there is not emptiness but an undifferentiated unknowable mass that is of the same substance that makes our world. In these cosmologies the world emerges not ex-nihilo but from something like, perhaps, deep waters (Genesis) or floating grease (Nihonshoki).

In linking cosmos to meaning (rather than material creation), Idutsu also manages to demonstrate just how little difference there is between the cosmos and anticocosmos. It is a matter of rearranging the “meaning units”, the information, by which we organize our world. Anticocosmos returns, not with the annihilation of the universe but the annihilation of our understandings of the universe. The cosmos emerges from the chaos like a reed emerging from a watery bog, and as such can always wither back into that quagmire. The chaos, the anticocosmos, encircles and haunts our cosmos which is only ever a momentary and derivative organization of material meaning. The chaos is always just there, the cosmos just spurts up, and remains a fragile creation.

For Idutsu, this haunting of cosmos by anticocosmos is most manifest in many of the intellectual and spiritual crises that now stalk western philosophy—the nihilistic existentialism, the anti-logos post-modernism—and from which stem the enfeebling insecurities of the cosmos and the anarchic allure of the anticocosmos. But this malaise and anomie arises because the cosmos-anticocosmos distinction has always been seen by the West to be a real material distinction. The anticocosmos is *out there*, and that is why we fear it. Instead, Idutsu will say that the cosmos-anticocosmos distinction is *in here*—in our consciousness. The cosmological tradition that knows this is the Eastern one. In Buddhism and Taoism, for example, there has always been an awareness that reality is constructed through the conscious as much as by materiality. Indeed, perhaps even the materiality is really just the consciousness. If this is the case, then the dark and scary anticocosmos is simply the darkness

in our consciousness from which we can escape through our own self enlightenment (not trying to be *too* corny here but note the “light” in the word “enlightenment”). The East can cure the West of its modern neurosis or neurosi (plural) by demonstrating that its fears are all in its own psychotic head, and hence exorcise our contemporary society of the ghost of angst and the goblins of apathy.

Idutsu’s contrast between the cosmologies of Buddhism and Taoism and the other traditional cosmologies is fascinating as it manages to bring in two concepts, meaning and materiality, which are important in understanding how cosmologies are formed. When we talk of the creation of the world, we do not just mean new lumpy substances coming into existence but new constellations of meaning emerging with that world. A world without meaning is not a world, but a chaos, an anticocosmos. The difference between what Idutsu sees as Eastern cosmology and all the others is the relationship between the meaning and the material. For the others, the material generates the meaning, for the East the meaning generates the material. These are important insights and have certainly helped me understand something of the way the different cosmologies vary and converge.

However, Idutsu, I think, makes a fundamental error in his analysis. He divides the world geographically, between East and West, when really he should have been dividing it historically, between pre-axial and post-axial. Idutsu’s analysis and explanation of earlier creation stories and cosmogonies—the descriptions of a cosmos emerging from an anticocosmos that was always just there, and the fact that this cosmos is materially the same as the anticocosmos, but just structured in a way that is meaningful for us—is an explanation that can be applied with remarkable consistency to perhaps all pre-axial age religions, whether Shinto, Greek, Celtic, pagan, Ainu, or whatever. What seems to define these pre-axial age religions is an infinite materiality that exists eternally and from which cosmoses (plural) of meaning bubble up and of which we are a part and home in. There is no “nothing” or “emptiness” in pre-axial age religion. To get to the idea of “nothingness” or “emptiness” you need to move from the concrete to the abstract. This is not hard to prove. Think about it! It is actually impossible to visualize or

imagine nothingness. The closest we can come to it is visualizing things disappearing until all that remains is some vague monochrome oneness. But this is not nothing. Nothingness can only be rationally thought, it cannot be experientially understood. A religion that espouses ex-nihilo creation (like Christianity), or a principle beyond the material (like Confucianism), or emptiness itself (like Buddhism) is a religion very different from any of the traditional religions which only ever saw an eternal chaotic materiality and a coherent cosmos emerging from it. As such, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism are more similar to each other than they are to the traditional religions that may have geographically preceded them (such as Shintoism in the case of Buddhism, or paganism in the case of Christianity). This is where Idutsu's squelching of all religions of all periods in Asia into one package gets things wrong. The axial age, that tiny fraction of human history that lasted only a few centuries, changed cosmology across the world forever, East and West.

I think where Idutsu's analysis is more useful is in demonstrating how the leap from traditional to axial-age religion was such a major turn in human consciousness, providing notions of cosmogenesis from a pure nothingness, an idea that was simply unthinkable for the vast, vast majority of human history. Societies that go from the concrete to the abstract in their religious consciousness can never go back. Once you have an abstract idea reverting to the concrete version seems always a backward step. But even so, it also suggests that the transition from traditional to axial-age religion was never fully completed because human consciousness is not naturally designed for religions that demand a transcendental non-concrete imagination. Within Christianity lurks paganism, with its saints and miracles and animist relics and icons. And in Japan, Shinto has always proven an irrepressible and resistant religion whatever the whacks of reason and rationality its axial-age competitors may have delivered to it. Perhaps postmodernism is the latest outbreak of humanity's age long resistance to those axial age religions that seek to crush the local with the universal and abstract away the concrete contents of our messy material lives. In which case the crisis of modernity is its cure. (Although there is a case to be made that the modernity that

postmodernity is reacting to was itself a second further axial age).

Idutsu Toshihiko's survey of the world's cosmologies has added the highly useful insight that cosmos is a matter of meaning rather than material creation. But, alas, his own ahistorical orientalist assumptions prevented him from seeing the wider import of his ideas, that those religions that emerged in the axial age, in banishing all materiality from their creation stories, was the real revolution in human thinking that still pervades the world, East and West, and which will continue to experience waves of acceptance and resistance from the older, longer, more familiar, and perhaps more *naturally* comprehensible traditional religions and cosmology.

Reference

井筒俊彦「コスモスとアンチコスモス」『コスモスとアンチコスモス』岩波書店, 1989.