

Alaric Hall

How did the world come into being?

Most scholars you meet ask how your research is going; but Terry always asks after my teaching as well. Among the most recent in a string of kindnesses he's extended to me since I started working at Leeds, in 2014 he helped arrange for me to come to Iceland and learn to be a folklorist. I confess that I didn't spend as much time learning this noble art as I should have, but returning to Leeds I duly ransacked a module once taught by one of this volume's editors, relabelled it 'Folklore and Mythology', and determined that I would send students out to find some real folklore (and mythology). Wary of receiving forty reports on ghost-stories, and weary of hearing how the *Kalevala* has the world spill from a broken duck-egg because nineteenth-century Karelians just didn't know any better, I tasked the undergrads with asking their own fellow students how the world came into being.

This was perhaps a bit of a cruel task: we found that few people have an account of the origins of their universe on the tip of their tongue. Respondents often had the sense that they did not have the authority to represent scriptural and scientific accounts: 'oh God, I really should be able to remember this. On the first day God created ... heavens and the skies?' (Geography and Economics). 'A big cosmic explosion of stuff and somehow it led to the world existing. I really don't know much about it. I study English'. One wonders whether the contemporaries of Snorri Sturluson were equally abashed, or whether people were once more secure in their ownership of their aetiologies.

That said, no-one offered *no* answer, and many offered two: an Abrahamic account and the Big Bang theory. Genesis's creation myth was recounted fragmentarily, but respondents' versions were usually fuller than their versions of the Big Bang, which suggests that narrative form is very useful to the successful transmission of creation stories. There was even a smattering of verbal echoes of Genesis and the Koran themselves. But many respondents gave the Big Bang narrative shape by making it a collision—whether of 'atoms' (History, English, Media and Communication), 'particles' (Biology, Law, Fashion Marketing), 'particles and elements and something' (English) or 'a big mass of stuff flying together' (English). Given its inconsistency with scientific thought, their phrasing was remarkably stable: not a Big Bang theory, but an immanent Big Bang myth.

But perhaps the key framework for memorisation witnessed here was a perceived conflict between Christian and scientific accounts: the main paradigms are perhaps memorable precisely because they are dialectical. Leeds undergraduates repeatedly attempted to synthesise some version of the Abrahamic myth with some version of the Big Bang theory. One ostensibly disenchanted account still managed to affirm God's existence while personifying gravity: 'I think, basically, the world has been created by a load of rocks being thrown together and when I was younger I used to believe the guy who threw those rocks together was God, but now I don't think that guy did that any more. I think that gravity did it, and that was a big disappointment for me really' (Civil Engineering). Conversely, a student of Spanish and Portuguese said 'I mean, you can't argue with science. I think there must have been a big explosion of particles, like you can still see it falling from the sky, like I don't think God is just throwing rocks from the sky, so there is science. But I think that God, like, helps science to create real things'. This ostensibly religious, and charmingly geocentric, response seems to confer a divine status on science itself.

These notes, of course, just scratch the surface of a fascinating array of responses, richly laden with evidence for epistemologies, gender norms, chauvinisms, and, at times, subversive, postmodern irony. Would that I had led this survey while the honorand was himself a student at Leeds. 'I think the world and its inhabitants are too perfect not to have been created', opined one optimistic respondent. Perfection seems a tall order for a storyteller—but on this topic Terry would have given it a good shot.