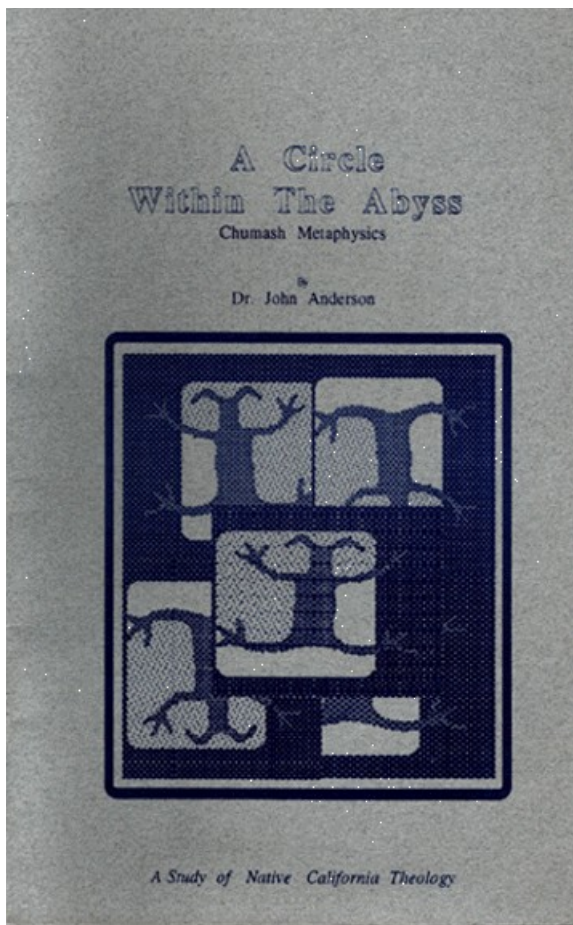


A CIRCLE WITHIN THE ABYSS

**A Book About the Metaphysical Teachings
Of the Chumash Indians,**

John M. Anderson



INTRODUCTION

"The Chumash Indians were once the largest cultural group in California.

I wrote [a book called] *Within the Abyss* a number of years ago, to provide an overview of their rich and enigmatic religious teachings.

This booklet is taken from one chapter of this larger publication. It begins with a discussion of the 'encircled circle' and 'encircled cross' images, which play significant roles in Chumash rock art.

Through an assessment of these ritual icons, the reader is introduced to the complex subject of Being, i. e. how the world came into existence and how it was subsequently ordered.

An understanding of Chumash teachings on these subjects provides

the reader with a benchmark for studying native theologies throughout the Western states."

[J. Anderson, 1993]

Book Review by Father McCarthy

"A Circle Within the Abyss is a very fine introduction to one California Tribe's way of knowing their place on earth and within the larger universe. John Anderson gives us special insights into the meanings of ancient Chumash sacred stories and integrates them in such a way that they are most understandable for contemporary women and men. He has taken the words of both native informants and cultural specialists and made their wisdom and knowledge 'user-friendly' for all of us."

[Rev. Scott McCarthy, Pastor of Our Lady of Mount Carmel]¹

CHUMASH METAPHYSICS

[Chapter 1]

The spirit of philosophy caused them to ask
who created all of this, when did it come
into existence, and how is it governed?

The answer given by Chumash philosophers to these questions represented the thoughts of the largest native group in California. For this reason alone, there is much public interest in Chumash metaphysics.

In *The Lizard's Tale* I document remarkable similarities to cosmologies of other peoples of the region, such as the Pomo of the northern coast, as well as Penutian-speaking groups of the central valley and the Sierra Nevadas. Not surprisingly, links can also be shown to inland Southwest groups such as the Hopi and Zuni, as well as to ancient European and Asian metaphysics.

Only a tiny fragment of Chumash theological teachings has been passed down to us from

1. McCarthy's is affiliated with a Catholic Mission in Carmel, California.

antiquity. Centuries of religious persecution destroyed most of their spiritual art and silenced their public ceremonies.

Ethnographers such as John Harrington preserved fragments which had been handed down as prayers, songs, folktales, and commentaries of tantalizing richness. The task lies in rebuilding a metaphysical model, which unifies these segments. This construction process is worth the effort if the resulting synthesis throws new light upon Christian cosmology.

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Let us begin our discussion with an examination of two religious symbols which survived into modern times because they were painted on remote rock outcroppings hidden in the interior Chumash mountains. Similar patterns are found all over the world, and are familiar to academics who call them the 'encircled circle' and 'encircled cross.'

Ethnographic sources do not provide explicit Chumash explanations or datings for these symbols, so we do not know with certainty when or why they were painted. After an extensive study of Chumash teachings, however, I am convinced that both symbols are cosmological in intent and of profound importance. The keys to understanding their symbolism lie in the Chumash beliefs about the World Axis.

The World Axis first appeared at the beginning of the earth's creation, to maintain the cosmic balance. Anyone can confirm the existence of the Axis for themselves by simply stepping outside at night and looking at the stars.

They revolve around a central pivot. The top lies at the apex of the sky, at the North Star. This is the most pure place in the physical universe. Below Polaris are realms of descending purity, leading downward to the level of the earth. The Chumash believed that the Axis cuts through *Iwihinmu* mountain, at the earth's sacred center northwest of Los Angeles...

Chumash astronomers, like those of ancient Europe, looked around them and wondered why the earth did not revolve like the sky. It seemed fixed in place, non-moving.

To express this ordering of life on earth, the Chumash used the Encircled Cross to symbolize the cosmic forces which seized the earth in mythic times and stopped it from revolving with the upper worlds. Supernatural powers dwelling in Polaris (in the north sky) and Sirius (in the south sky) were the dominant forces of order, maintaining the north-south line of the cross. The changing path of the sun, moving from east to west, regulated the weaker east-west line. Combined, they divided the earth into four quarters."

[page 9]

Who Created the World Axis?

Surviving Chumash records do not specify whether it was one god or a number of gods who ordained the 'birthing' and subsequent 'ordering' of the physical world. They probably followed the tradition of nearby California cultures in attributing the primordial creation to a celestial deity.

In most California theologies, this creator remains beyond the understanding of the human mind. Mystical encounters with this divinity cannot be expressed in words, and thus descriptions of his presence in the world of human affairs are rare and opaque.

References to the Chumash creator fit this pattern. *Alaleqwel* is the Chumash term for a person who creates something, and although it may have been used to designate the Creator, surviving documentation does not comment on such usage. Whistler's dictionary of Chumash words, for example, has no citation for a creator deity. In *The Lizard's Tale* I propose that this absence is compensated for by the preservation of a popular name for the Creator - Enememe, a moniker meaning "He who sleeps." Chumash narrators affectionately describe him as a flute playing lizard whose paradoxical music is a metaphor for the inexpressible essence of his being.

In previous writing, I have quoted numerous Chumash texts which suggest that the personality of Enememe is the central source of information about the Creator. Using other Native American cosmologies as models, many of Enememe's behavior patterns can be shown to have great significance, especially those found in sleeping and withdrawal passages.

From such metaphysical teachings, it seems evident that Enememe was the original divine presence who existed prior to the creation of the physical world. He appears to be a variant of the ancient Eurasian deity who lived in a state of complete peace, which the Chumash called *Tipashumashwish*.

For reasons beyond the comprehension of humans, the inscrutable first deity decided to manifest the physical world and initially populate it with the First People. Through *Kipshuwashich*, will power, he started the creation process, thus setting material body in motion and placing his first animated beings into mythic time. At this transition, he entered the state of *Asshunach*, which means 'to be the ruler', for he was no longer alone.

A short parable about Enememe's role in the creation of humanity demonstrates his rule over the five less powerful (transformer) gods who governed earthly affairs. This narrative is the most important surviving commentary on the flute player's supreme status. Enememe conflicts with Coyote, the leader of the gods of disorder. He imposes his will over Coyote, insisting that newly created humans be given hands like his, useful lizard hands instead of coyote paws.

The conflict of will takes place at the time of the epic transformation of the world by the Great Flood. The five Chumash transformer deities are overseeing dramatic changes of time, space, and species. These are the gods who still regulate the material world today, and therefore act as controllers of history. Enememe intervened only because this was a crisis point, when he was forced to reassert his powers as the dominant deity. His victory over Coyote, and his subsequent withdrawal, permitted the other deities to turn their attention once again to ruling the physical universe during mundane time.

Other references to the Creator deity are extremely rare in Chumash ethnography. Any citation that even mentions an attribute of the supreme deity or Creator is therefore worthy of careful analysis. A spiritual called "Coyote's Song" demonstrates the difficulties faced by anyone trying to understand the few citations available for study. This song is open to many explanations.

Kitsepawit, a Chumash historian, tells how Coyote, when he sings this spiritual, was "pretending to be the one who does everything." This is a puzzling comment, since neither Coyote nor any of the four other Chumash regulator gods were capable of omnipotence, i. e. of doing everything.

Kitsepawit does not reveal the name of "the one who does everything," but clearly it is not Coyote since he is only "pretending" to this status. The lyrics apparently were written as a parody of Coyote's vanity, to entertain the audience that had prior knowledge of the identity of the "does everything" deity.

Surely, they laughed heartily when Foolish Coyote sang: "I go around the world. I, it is I. I cause the mist... When I climb the mountain tops, I cause clouds; I cause the rain. Long live Coyote; he will always be." It is typical of Coyote to glory in his powers, when in fact he is constantly being kept under control by his supernatural rivals. The final line of his song emphasizes Coyote's egotistic weakness, as he proclaims his eternal life.

Coyote is best understood as a character plagued by his many frailties that keep him from using his divine power wisely. In his heart, he is not the only being in the world blessed with eternal life. The other transformer deities, also lived forever, and none of them were as old as the original creator deity who began the creation process." [page 11, chapter 1] [I](#)

ENEMEME A flute-playing Lizard, whose music bestowed divine wisdom upon those who are blessed to hear it.

HOUSE OF FATE The Chumash believed that the gods competed with each other nightly, in a heavenly house of fate. The outcome of the two rival teams of the gods, led by Eagle and Coyote, determined the fate of humanity for the coming year.

COYOTE In *The House of Fate* (Anderson) Coyote is described as the god who brings rain, while Eagle is the god who reigns during drought. Some readers have contacted me, asking about this passage. My point was not to deny that Coyote brought rain and the resulting prosperity that resulted from good crops, but rather that he was NOT capable of perfection in this endeavor. He certainly was not all powerful!

Eagle was the leader of the gods who opposed Coyote, and deities allied with Eagle competed successfully to counteract (balance) Coyote's rain-making abilities.

[J. Anderson, November 24, '2000].

ABYSS "The Chumash term *Alampauwauhani* refers to the limitless abyss, out of which the Creator established order. The term *Abyss* has a Greek root, meaning 'bottomless'. Many cultures use equivalent terms to refer to infinite space, which was the realm of the Creator prior to the manifestation of the physical world. When only the Originator existed, all of space was without limit and thus beyond human understanding. The manifestation of the heavenly axis gave definition to 'place' (ordered spatial relationship) and therefore 'space' was defined only after this seminal act of establishing cosmic dimensionality.

WINNOWING OF SOULS When [Kitsepawit](#) teaches that "all life on this earth is a circle, an eddy within the Abyss," he reminds us of a Hindu spiritual leader discussing the theory of Karma and rebirth. Human souls, Kitsepawit cautioned, are like the stars in the night sky. Each is differentiated in a "winnowing" process in which some souls move up and some move down in the cosmic levels" [from chapter one]

To Send Forth The Breath of Life

Chapter 3

"The pole star was a *Kasunalmu*, a sending place from which the first winds (breath of life) appeared in the lower realms. As this divine wind flowed down, it spread life throughout the universe and blew sacred *Atishwin* into innumerable air souls.

The Chumash word for wind is *Saxkkit*. This term is analogous to the Sanskrit word *Prakrti*, which is the principle of energetic manifestation. The Hindu believed that the

physical universe began when it was first manifested from pure unconditional consciousness. This credo is similar to the Chumash concept of the Breath of the World (the *Cenhus Heisup*). Only after this divine breath was manifested from the celestial axis, was the creation of the material cosmos completed." [page 22]

....."After establishing the stars of the heavens, the Creator began manifestation of *Itiasup*, the earth. This world was affectionately called *Shup* by the Chumash, referring to the female deity which Europeans call Mother Earth. She became the special protector of *Ahash*, or body souls.²

Although the highest concentration of physical matter in the cosmos was located in her massive body, she also had a soul just like the stars. She was thus a very influential goddess with the Chumash, as can be seen in the fact that they used her name as a rallying cry in their repeated revolts against the Spanish. Chumash freedom fighters prayed to the earth goddess to assist them, in recognition that the main cause of their downfall was not military power but rather a weakening of the rule of *Shup*, manifested by the spread of European diseases.

Since the corruption of our physical bodies results from the imbalance in the cosmos, Chumash theologians believed that the plagues could only be brought under control by strengthening *Shup*, who governed physical matter. They feared that the Spanish priests had weakened *Shup's* influence, releasing demons from the lower world. The *Nunashish* brought new diseases to plague the Chumash....

To appreciate the desperate debates raging within the Chumash community during these plagues, it is necessary to understand how the cosmic order was originally established in *Itiasup*, the earth. From the perspective of the Chumash, normal human life could go on only if balance was maintained between many competing forces in the universe. When the Creator withdrew after originating the physical world, numerous lesser deities were left with responsibilities for regulating events in the cosmos. They vied with one another, since they did not have the Creator to force cooperation. When humans were finally introduced into this world, they found that they could maintain their societies only by integrating the conflicting powers of the deities, balancing the influences from both the upper and lower worlds. " [page 23]

In Retrospect

These words were first published in a 1993 edition of this text. In the seven years since, I have have become less certain as to the existence of a body soul in Chumash theology.

2 In later writings such as *Kuta Teachings* and *Chumash Psychology*, Anderson used the term *Ahash* to designate embodied souls. The term *Antik* was used to designate disembodied souls, such as those traveling on the path of the dead.

The term *Ahash* clearly refers to a soul, as does the term *Antik*. And the bones of the dead are clearly of great importance to the Chumash, and are linked to their efforts to protect the grave sites of their ancestors from desecration. But whether the *Ahash* soul is associated with the bones remains undetermined.

I address some of these issues in the text called *Kuta Teachings* which talks about the release of the air soul from the physical body and its ascent into the heavens. My book called *When Demons Rule California* addresses many issues relating to the *Nunashish* demons of traditional Chumash theology.

[John Anderson, February '2000]

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A Newspaper Review

"This slim little booklet, while resembling an hors d'oeuvre, is a full-course dinner, providing such food for thought as to send the reader on to further courses."

[Valle Novak, review from the Daily Bee newspaper, North Idaho]³

This web page represents the views of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Chumash Indians, either individually or in a group.

This book is no longer in print. It will be entered in full text for a free download through the John M. Anderson Library Project

³ Novak's newspaper book review was published November 1993.