

Deity and Humanity in Modern Heathenism

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Introduction

I am a heathen, a member of a modern neo-pagan religion that gets its inspiration from the pre-Christian religions of the Germanic tribes of Northern Europe, England, and Scandinavia. Other names for our religion include Asatru, Forn Sed, Norse Paganism, and Heithni. The various names reflect both organizational boundaries and differences of emphasis; I use “heathenism” in this paper because it’s generally seen as including the broadest range¹.

We are still mostly converts, still small, and still debating most aspects of our beliefs, organization, and spiritual practice. What theology we have is rudimentary, and generally very specific; we are only just beginning to see the need to consciously systematize. We have a collection of near primary sources² (generally recorded by travelers, or after conversion), referred to as “lore”, which serve some of the functions of Scripture, but we’re very aware of the likely biases and omissions in what little has been preserved. We’re also very much prone to direct personal revelatory experiences; it is customary to regard these with considerable skepticism, but they do get used to fill in the blanks.

My presentation in this paper is a development from primary sources (lore), contemporary interpretation, modern heathen experience, and my exploration of Christian theology. For purposes of this course, I have limited myself to discussing the

¹ A discussion of names for the religion can be found in Arlea Anschütz and Stormerne Hunt’s article, “Call us Heathens!” (Anschütz and Hunt 1997)

² Primary sources are generally written in Old Norse or Latin, though there’s some material in Arabic and Anglo-Saxon. (Fortunately for English speaking heathens, most of this material is available in translation; however, heathens frequently choose to study one of these languages, especially Old Norse.) The most commonly cited sources are the Prose Edda (Sturluson), and the Poetic Edda (Poetic Edda), though various sagas are also popular.

nature of deity, the nature of humanity, and the ways in which deities and human beings relate to each other. The third area is needed, because it's proving impossible to discuss any two of those areas without the third; that would be rather like a Christian discussing Christology and anthropology while ignoring soteriology. I will not be giving a general overview of heathen beliefs except as they impact these areas; a general description can be found in the bibliography³.

Nature of Deities

Heathens are polytheists. We believe that there are many deities, and these are not simply ways of looking at a single transcendent deity. They have individual traits and individual relationships. Odin is not Thor, and it's not reasonable to expect them to have exactly the same goals and ideals, the identical style of action or relationship, or the same relationships. At the same time, they are all deities, and have some common traits, just as all human beings share common traits. Moreover, the particular group of deities we honour form a kind of family or community, with shared values and corporate relationships. Within that group, we can expect general agreement on goals and ideals, though with some differences in the details.

Thus, there are things I can expect of Odin because he's a deity; other things I can expect because he's one of the Aesir⁴; and others that I can expect because he is Odin. This is much the same as with human beings; there are things you can expect of me

³ A fairly detailed overview of heathen belief can be found in the *Asatru-U Beginner's Class* (Asatru-U 2001), intended for new and potential converts.

⁴ The Old Norse word Aesir (singular masc. form Áss, fem. form Ásynja) is used in two ways. It can be used as a general term for the deities worshipped by heathens, but it can also be used as the name of a sub-category of those deities. I use it here in the former sense.

because I'm human; things you can expect because I'm a middle aged Canadian living in the early 21st century; and things you can expect because I'm Arlie, and you know me as an individual.

We do not fully understand the nature of deities. This is partly because modern heathenism is a new or newly revived religion, still in the process of discovery. However, it seems likely that there are aspects of their nature which are either completely unknowable by humans or merely unexplainable, possible to be experienced by mystics but never explained to someone without that experience.

Deities are people, or at least individuals, not symbols or personifications of natural forces. They are not Neoplatonic ideals. They are not Jungian archetypes. As people, they are capable of thought, of feeling, of learning and changing with experience. They compromise. They change their minds, and adapt to new situations. They may be perfect⁵, in the sense of being exactly right for their current situation, though I doubt it, but they aren't static, and would probably laugh at the idea that perfection implies that any possible change must be for the worse.

They are not, however, people in quite the same sense as human people. In particular, they don't have many of the ordinary concerns of human beings, nor the limitations that give rise to those concerns. That's not all that's different about them.

⁵ There's very good reason to believe they aren't perfect in any sense. For one thing, they sometimes make mistakes. However, I imagine a case could be made for a weak definition of "perfect" as "best possible", and some heathens would really like to see them as perfect.

They appear to be incorporeal⁶, and capable of interacting with individuals in many locations at the same time.

Deities are relational⁷ and consultative. They form relationships with each other. They form relationships with human beings, both individually and collectively. They interact. They also consult. In crisis, our stories show them calling councils, discussing their options⁸. They sometimes simply make unilateral decisions, but even then these decisions are subject to later revision.

Deities have a natural inclination to make things work better, in both short and long term. They enjoy seeing people learn. They like seeing societies function well, and families prosper. They enjoy every kind of creative endeavour, whether cooking or calligraphy, and whether amateur or advanced. They like art, and athletics, and simply being a good farmer. They like to see things done well, and they like to see things improving. If something is broken, they want it fixed; if something could be better, they want it improved. While individual deities may have particular areas they pay most attention to, it appears they all share this general trait. (Some seem to have it stronger than others; Odin appears to be particularly insistent on continuous improvement, and will accept rather steep risks compared to the apparent potential gains⁹.)

⁶ By incorporeal, I mean that they do not seem to have tangible, physical bodies here in Midgard (the “middle world”, where humans live). Cosmology is far outside the scope of this paper; however, there are heathens who believe that deities live in some other realm or plane of existence, where they are indeed corporeal.

⁷ The idea of deity as inherently relational is also present in Christianity, in the context of the Trinity, where I believe it originates with the Cappadocian Fathers.

⁸ Examples of divine councils include the story of the reaction to a threat of the loss of the goddess Freyja in the story of the birth of Sleipnir (Sturluson, p.35), and their reaction to the threat of Ragnarok, in Voluspo (Poetic Edda, p.21).

⁹ The clearest example of this in the lore is the story of his visit to Vafurthnir in search of wisdom (Vafurthnismol, Poetic Edda p.68-83), where he wagers his life on the outcome of a wisdom competition. However, it’s also somewhat of a truism among modern followers of Odin that he expects similar behaviour

Deities are favourably inclined towards human beings. Deities don't just want humans to function well; they want humans to thrive and be happy. They like to help humans, to form relationships with them, to enhance human potential. They enjoy seeing human prosperity, and comfort, success, and achievement. They are also inclined to help and care for other beings, both individually and as groups. They want humans and animals, plants and spirits¹⁰ all to thrive, and will put effort into facilitating this. This particularly applies to those with whom they have formed relationships, individually or in groups, such as heathens and their families. (With others, the interest is more casual, and perhaps mostly based on their general desire for things to function well.)

Deities are powerful, but not omnipotent. They can do things no human could possibly do. But there's plenty they can't do, and they seem, like humans, to have to choose where to allocate their efforts, rather than doing everything they'd like to do.

Deities and humans are both subject to Wyrd¹¹. Wyrd is a concept both fundamental to heathenry and exceedingly hard to explain or to grasp. Many people don't get it, just as many Christians don't get the Trinity. Basically, Wyrd is the idea that actions have consequences, and that people, including deities, fall into patterns which can be quite difficult for them to get themselves out of. In every situation, your choices are limited, as a result of a combination of past events and simple chance. Thus, if I am looking for work, but have no skills, the offers I get are likely to be low paying,

from us, though not with quite the same stakes.

¹⁰ Spirits, usually called vaettir, are a kind of miscellaneous category of beings who aren't deities, but have some similar characteristics, particularly not having physical bodies in the same way that humans or animals have bodies. They include spirits of the land, spirits associated with particular, unusual objects, and spirits of the dead.

¹¹ Wyrd is discussed to some extent in Blain (2000) and Bauschatz (1982).

unpleasant, and few. If I take whichever of them seems likely to build good skills and good references, and pursue skills development in other ways, I'm likely to have better options next time. But I might get lucky this time, and unlucky next time. Or my personal efforts might be swamped by greater trends; I might get better offers in a time of prosperity than in a recession, regardless of my improving skills. This is Wyrd in action, on a small and comprehensible scale.

Every time a deity or human being acts, they change the world a little bit. These changes feed back on themselves, and can be built into huge changes, for good or ill. Go too far down one path, and you rule out other possibilities. Deities do this on a large scale. Humans operate on a smaller scale. (I don't rule out overlap here; some human actions clearly have huge effects, and some divine actions may well be trivial.)

Wyrd affects both actions and results. The job hunter above will be more or less diligent, and more or less capable of learning, based in part on habits, built from past behaviour. One can change that behaviour, but radical change is difficult, and even more difficult to sustain.

Wyrd is not determinism, but neither is it classic free will. One's options are shaped and limited; some things which seem theoretically possible pretty much can't be done in practice, in spite of willpower; other things which could theoretically be avoided seem inevitable in practice. Sometimes one has what seems like a wide open field, with infinite possibilities, and no one able to predict the result. Sometimes it seems as if one is fated; only one outcome is possible. Most situations, however, fall into the middle area where there are a few plausible options, some that are unlikely, but do happen, and others that are so unlikely that we treat them as impossible.

Deities are extremely long lived, far beyond the lifespan of any human being. Our stories specifically say that they are not immortal; one poem (Baldrs Draumar) is devoted to the death of the god Baldr (Poetic Edda, p.195-200). Another story says that even their immunity to aging is artificially maintained (Sturluson p.60). It's possible that these stories are the result of excessive anthropomorphism, expressing spiritual and emotional truths in mythic form, and deities really are immortal¹². On the other hand, it makes sense to me that beings which can change and grow can also cease to exist. In any case, whether they are immortal or merely extremely long lived, their long life span gives deities a maturity and knowledge base far beyond that of any human.

Deities are not omniscient, at least as this term is normally used. There are stories suggesting that some of them (Odin, Heimdall) possess the ability to observe anything they wish, or even in one case as knowing all things (Frigga)¹³. However, this doesn't seem to mean that they are automatically aware of all things; stories show Odin fooled more than once, and one story shows even Frigga making what appears to be a bad decision that could have been prevented given knowledge of events which had already occurred¹⁴.

Even if they did have the ability to know everything that had already occurred, or was presently occurring, they still would not know the future. The future is never

¹² I certainly see the other details of those stories as metaphorical; the prose version of the death of Baldr features a blind god throwing a scrap of mistletoe, accidentally killing Baldr. This is typical of the stories in our lore, and rarely treated as true in a literal sense.

¹³ Odin is said to have a high seat or watchtower called Hlidskjalf, from which he can see all the worlds, and everything done in them, and furthermore understand all he sees (Sturluson, p. 13, p. 20). Heimdall is said to be able to hear "grass growing on the earth and wool on sheep and everything that sounds louder than that" (Sturluson p.25). Frigga is referred to as knowing "the fate of all" in Lokasenna (Poetic Edda p. 161).

¹⁴ In the prose version of the death of Baldr, Frigga gives information to an enemy disguised as an old woman, that the enemy uses to arrange Baldr's death (Sturluson p. 48-51).

knowable with certainty; that's one important implication of the nature of Wyrð. The future is always changeable, even when things seem completely certain. Moreover, most of the time there are at least a couple of plausible options, and quite likely many more. Someone who observes the patterns of Wyrð can make very good educated guesses about likely outcome(s), often far in advance. Humans do it all the time, sometimes to the great aggravation of friends who'd been insisting that "this time will be different".

Deities, being long lived, have had the opportunity to develop extensive experience of the patterns of Wyrð. They've generally seen everything before, often several times, so have a good idea of what to expect and how to deal with it. They also have information sources which mortals lack. This frequently allows them to accurately predict many things that leave humans baffled, producing effects that are easily taken for omniscience.

Deities did not create the universe. It appears most likely to have arisen on its own. What deities have done is to organize and improve an already existing universe, or parts of that universe¹⁵. The Prose Edda gives a detailed story both of how the universe came into being, and how the earliest deities acted to organize it. The details are generally regarded as metaphorical, involving a cosmic cow named Audhumla, who arose from dripping rime and licked the ice around her, gradually revealing Buri, the ancestor of our deities (Sturluson p. 9-13). The principle, however, is clear; deities arose and became active at the same time as the rest of the universe, not before.

¹⁵ This isn't an unusual attitude to creation, odd though it may seem to someone brought up with creation *ex nihilo*. Even the creation stories in the Hebrew Bible can be interpreted this way, particularly the second one, featuring God making humans out of dust, rather than simply creating them out of nothing.

Deities are not human. It's very easy to conceptualize relationships with individual gods and goddesses as being like relationships with individual human beings. However, they don't react as we do, and this gets more and more obvious the deeper a relationship one develops. There are human viewpoints they just don't share. For example, a human lifespan is an eye blink of time to them. They know we'd prefer to live long lives, but nonetheless tend to see 80 and 20 years as much the same, and judge a human life based on its flavour, not its length.

Deities are awe inspiring¹⁶. They can appear as gentle, comforting beings, as fully personal and personified people with their power and charisma masked. But this is a mask, or a temporary reduction of a large blaze to a tiny coal. Get close to them, and you will generally encounter them as awe inspiring too.

Nature of Humans

Humans evolved¹⁷ as social animals. This evolution may have been nudged along by various deities, seeking either to improve the overall world, to make the human species happier and more successful, or simply seeking to form relationships with humans and proto-humans, and then to assist those beings and groups with whom they

¹⁶ The best description I've seen of deities as awe inspiring is in a Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, particularly his Chapter 4, "Mysterium Tremendum" (Otto 1950). He's a Christian theologian, but he's talking here about the divine in general, rather than in Christian specifics.

¹⁷ The theory of evolution is not a heathen dogma; it is simply my personal understanding of where the human species came from. It is always dangerous to express theology in terms of current knowledge of the natural world, because if that knowledge becomes outdated, it may seem to invalidate the theology. Nonetheless, it is almost impossible to avoid; I understand the biological world in terms of evolution, and that will colour my theological understanding whether or not I make this explicit.

had formed connections. Rig, in particular, is said to have assisted human development, both by manipulating conceptions and teaching one particularly promising human child¹⁸.

Human beings are intelligent, capable of thinking before acting, working out long term consequences, and creating and transmitting culture. Some would call this rationality, though that word is now often used to refer strictly to logical calculation, bereft of emotion or intuition. This is a trait we share with deities.

Humans generally have spiritual¹⁹ cravings of some kind. We are inclined to respond to overtures from deities, to seek them out, to try to connect with them directly, and to include them in our social communities. We seek meaning, and purpose, and to understand what comes before and after mortal life. This is part of our innate wiring, though some have it more strongly than others.

As social beings, humans are always embedded in a social context. We understand ourselves in part through roles and relationships. We are neither happy nor healthy when isolated from other humans, and we try to make up for our isolation by emphasizing what relationships we have, both with distant or remembered humans and with other beings (pets, deities, etc.). To change people's behaviour, the social context must be changed, not just the opinions of individuals. We understand things as "true" or "false" in part based on the reaction of those around us. No matter what interests we may have, we seek to share them with others, get feedback, and even build communities around them.

¹⁸ This story is given in the poem Rigsthula (Poetic Edda p. 201-216); like far too much of our lore, it's incomplete, with the manuscript ending just as new action seems about to begin.

¹⁹ Spiritual may not be the best word to use here, but the alternatives seem even worse.

Because we evolved to live in small bands, we have a kind of built in inconsistency in the way we approach other beings, particularly other humans. On the one hand, it is natural for us to love our fellows, starting with family and spiraling out into our community and beyond. When we see a human in trouble, we want to help them, to share with them, to risk our lives to save theirs. But on the other hand, we also want to compete with them, dominate them, gain a higher status in our band and better access to food and mates. Moreover, both these traits are strongest with those who are closest, socially. Those far away can be seen as little more than part of the environment, to be ignored as if not really human, or feared as dangerous potential rivals.

We are also limited, and to a far greater extent than the gods. We must make generalizations simply to function, rather than look at each situation individually; this leads to prejudice and other problems. We cannot help everyone who needs it. We cannot even pay attention to everyone. We have to ignore some things, and some people. We have to leave some people without assistance, even when we do not see them as dangerous, or rivals.

Corporeal existence has other consequences. Our cognitions are affected by our biochemistry, which is strongly affected by our environment. These reactions are sometimes helpful, when we feel sympathy and kindness, or even justified anger, but sometimes they are very much unhelpful, when we become overwhelmed with unjustified anger, or stress, or depression. We also know ourselves short-lived, and begin losing capacities before we even reach full emotional maturity. We are vulnerable to many things, which we cannot always prevent however hard we try. Thus, we have a tendency to experience our lives as a process of weakening and loss. Yet at the same

time, we tend to accumulate good things with age, like knowledge, friends, property, and status, and so can also look on our lives as a process of development and gain. However we look at it, though, we cannot escape the effect of being embodied, however much some have tried.

Humans are not really all that smart, or foresighted. We're good at handling familiar situations, or situations our species or culture has encountered frequently in the past. We are not so good at dealing with new things, or things where a short term good is likely to be followed by a long term loss. We put a lot of effort into teaching our children things like delayed gratification, and avoiding trading short term pleasure for long term distress, but we don't do all that good a job of it, as can be seen by looking at the messes, large and small, that most people manage to make in their lives.

We are also inherently selfish, in the sense that we're pretty much hard wired to take care of ourselves and our close relations first, except in exceptional circumstances.

At the same time, we are inclined to want to be less selfish, less shortsighted, more loving, and more effective. We try to improve ourselves morally, intellectually and materially, and we respect those who do a good job of living, showing foresight, self restraint, kindness, and wisdom. Moreover, it is natural for us to try to think about consequences, to learn, and to plan.

We are thus midway between devils and angels²⁰, having traits of both, in a paradoxical synthesis which is also a never ending tug of war.

There was no fall, and no golden age. Humans have always been this way, with details changing as our environment and culture changes. We probably had many of these

²⁰ Neither devils nor angels are part of heathenism; I'm using the words with their common cultural connotations.

traits even before we were human, except that there would have been less cultural transmission, without words, and a far more limited capacity for conscious thought.

The principle of Wyrđ, discussed above in the context of deities, applies even more obviously to humans. Acts have consequences. This, combined with human nature, is the source of most of what is wrong with the world, but also of most of what is right. Our actions and choices today follow from what we have done in the past. But the choices we make today will shape the choices we can make in future.

This applies at both an individual and a group level, and even at the level of whole cultures. At a cultural level, for example, it's easier to modify an existing political system than to adopt a completely new one. Adding a few elected councils is likely to work better than going direct from absolute monarchy to representative democracy. It takes time for people to get used to debate and even voting. If you do go direct to an all new system, generally because of a revolution, it generally takes a few tries to finally get it right; meanwhile, there tends to be a succession of revolutions or coups.

Fortunately, when people get something right, it tends to be self perpetuating, at least until conditions change. A solution that works is imitated, and taught to children, and perhaps tinkered with about the edges. It isn't replaced with something new and different, unless it ceases to work. Thus, for example, Europeans and their derivative cultures have mostly figured out how to avoid having wars about religion, after far too many examples of why such wars were good for no one.

Unfortunately, it frequently takes us quite a while to get things right, and we often wind up in pretty bad circumstances while trying to solve a new problem. This results from a combination of shortsightedness and Wyrđ. In unfamiliar circumstances, our

shortsightedness leads to us fumbling around, trying things that aren't likely to work. These mistakes have consequences, which affect our future options. If we waste resources, or alienate friends, they are gone; we don't get to reload our saved game and try again until we figure things out.

We also frequently improve one thing at the expense of another, which then needs its own cycle of improvement. Thus a workaholic might address his job stress by switching to a less demanding job, only to find he doesn't know what to do with free time. He might then take up a hobby, such as learning to play the trombone, only to find that his enthusiastic practice sessions irritate his neighbours. Meanwhile, his reduced income makes his life difficult in other ways, so he decides to solve both problems by moving to a less expensive home with less demanding neighbours. The only problem is that the new house needs some work, which he must learn to do himself, so as to stay within his budget. Because conditions change frequently, we pretty much never reach a stable state of perfect adaptation to our situation, neither individually nor as cultural groups.

Human-Deity Interaction

To show the interaction of concepts of deity and concepts of humanity, it is useful to examine the ways in which deities and humans interact. This may seem too obvious for words, but in fact monotheistic religions, particularly law oriented monotheistic religions, are drawing on a somewhat different paradigm, placing their emphasis in different places, excluding some of what we care about, and including a whole area that we see very differently.

Deities and humans are drawn to form relationships with each other, both individually and in groups. We use several models to try to understand these relationships. These are only models, not to be taken too literally.

The first model is that of friendship. A “god friend” is someone particularly devoted to a specific deity, with whom the deity has a special relationship. This tends to imply a kind of special affinity to deities, a virtue that has at least as much to do with wisdom, honour and achievement as with anything directly spiritual, and the ability to help others with the sort of situation where they might want to involve the deities.

The second model is that of kin. We see our deities as our elder kin. We can thus relate to them as we would to great grandparents, or parents, clan leaders or wise old cousins. One element of this model is, of course, a continuing love almost regardless of behaviour.

The third common model is to relate to deities as leaders, whether immediate chiefs or exalted monarchs. (Not too exalted, however; we’re not too keen, culturally, on monarchs that get too far from their people, not even divine monarchs.) Thus some heathens describe their relationship with Odin as having elements of a relationship with a manager, someone they work for, by mutual choice. Others see themselves as having less choice, with the deity more like monarch than manager.

Deities provide assistance to human beings, both individually and collectively. This assistance includes practical assistance with tangible things, like food and shelter, employment and health, as well as emotional support and the promotion of psychological integration and spiritual growth.

Such assistance takes various forms. Sometimes, they simply arrange something we want or need, like recovering from some illness, or finding a better job. The mechanism often seems perfectly ordinary; e.g. your doctor reads about a new treatment that proves to work for you. Occasionally, things happen that seem to have no plausible mundane explanation. It's more common for them to simply provide opportunities for us to act upon, such as happening to hear about the perfect job, just in time to apply for it.

They also provide less tangible things. They may make suggestions, either by talking to those of us with the talent for "hearing" them, or by subtly reminding us of things we already know, so that the right idea just pops into our minds, perhaps in a new context. They often provide emotional support: comfort, relaxation, a sense of purpose; intangible things that are nonetheless very important. They may encourage us when things feel hopeless.

Sometimes, too, what they provide is a kind of generic luck. Someone favoured by a deity tends to prosper. They tend to be in the right place at the right time. The flu passes them by, and their car breaks down the day that something terrible happens at their workplace.

This appears, of course, to be an unrealistic theology. Science seems to have left no room for deities to change the future, or individuals to have sustained patterns of luck, except to a statistically insignificant degree. Thus a faith that accepts science is often reduced to claiming that all a deity can or will do is provide encouragement, emotional support, and ideas, working entirely through human minds and human agents. Heathens generally insist that our deities in fact do more than this, though normally staying within what's obviously possible. They specialize in adjusting the timing, or the odds, just a

little, so things come together in ways they probably wouldn't have done without that nudge. I can't prove this, and I'm very aware that anecdotal evidence is not proof. Yet I observe it happening, and regularly encounter coreligionists who observe the same thing; in fact, a common reason given for conversion to heathenry is the convert's experience that our deities answered their prayers, whereas those of their previous religion had not.

Deities almost never do things for us without requiring our active co-operation. They may cause our resume to get noticed, but we still have to present ourselves well at the interview. They may comfort us for our failings and help us to improve, but we still have to make amends to those we've wronged, and consciously work at improving²¹. It also seems to be important to them that we ask for their help; while they'll to some extent look out for people who are strongly devoted to them, providing luck and general prosperity²², they mostly don't help unless we ask. They almost never do take over and do everything we want or need; and when they do things for us we could have done for ourselves, it's generally trivial things, done in an attempt to get our attention.

Deities also act as role models and inspiration for us. That's one reason there are so very many anthropomorphic stories about them. The stories may not be literally true, but it can be easier to deal with stories than a list of concepts. Stories allow us to form an intuitive impression of their personalities and attitudes, complete with ways in which they balance competing claims. Lists of attributes tend to leave us trying to decide which

²¹ This idea of co-operating with the deity seems to be present in Christianity in many concepts of soteriology. Many of those who insist that humans can't save themselves also insist that they must nonetheless actively co-operate in the process, doing good works and avoiding evil. The earliest example of this that comes to mind is Augustine of Hippo, in his sermon 156 on Romans 8:13-15 (Augustine p. 124).

²² An example of this is the case of Hrafinkel, a Godi (priest) of Frey, who is described as having "raked in riches" in "The Saga of Hrafinkel Frey's Godi" (Hreinsson 1997, vol 5, p 276). While Frey is particularly known for providing material prosperity, this story is especially notable because Frey kept faith with Hrafinkel, even after the latter had lost his faith, and abandoned his religious observances.

virtue is more important, as if such a decision could ever be made in abstract. Stories allow us to better answer questions like “What would Odin do” when faced with a decision in our daily life.

It’s important to ask not just what deities bring to humans, but what humans bring to deities. Heathens, too, need to ask “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”²³, though our answers are a little different from the normal Christian or Jewish answers. To heathens, relationships should be mutually beneficial, not flowing only one way, and that includes relationships with deities. Our deities are not so much greater than us that mutuality is unimaginable. On the other hand, they don’t need much of what we have, and could easily get it if they wanted to.

The most obvious thing we bring to our deities is relationships. They want to form connections and interact with us. That’s part of their nature, and a fortunate thing for us, since the overall effects of involvement with deities tend to be good for human beings.

We also bring them gifts, including praise, which they seem to appreciate, artwork, and offerings. The idea of offerings needs some discussion, perhaps, in a paper addressed to people used to Christianity, where people seem to give gifts to the Church, and not directly to their God. The most common ritual in heathenry is the blót, which is the more or less formal giving of gift(s) to one or more deities.

Why would a deity care about being given tangible offerings, like food and drink? They don’t turn up physically and eat with us, so what are they getting out of this? What are we doing, when we share our meals with them, particularly on holy days? One theory is that they do somehow consume and use some kind of essence from the food offered,

²³ Psalm 8:4, NRSV

even if it's physically eaten by the local wildlife. Another is that the gift is the effort of preparing the food, or the sacrifice of not consuming it ourselves.

All I'm sure of is that these rituals matter, and the giving of offerings to deities is common in just about every polytheistic or shamanistic religion. It's only members of monotheistic religions that don't generally give gifts directly to their deity, and even then, they often put significant time and money into decorating their churches, synagogues, etc. the better to glorify their deity.

Humans also provide assistance with divine plans. It seems as if deities work through humans, most of the time, to accomplish anything. They seem far better at putting ideas into human minds, or making small adjustments to the odds of possible events, than acting tangibly and visibly in the physical world. (Alternatively, they've some reason for not acting too blatantly.) Either way, we wind up acting on their behalf. This tends, in general, to be good for human communities, but not always good for the individual. It's quite possible to follow one's god or goddess into considerable sacrifice of time, money, comfort, or even life. Some things are, in their eyes, and hopefully also in our eyes, more important than our own personal desires.

Finally, I believe we provide them with change and ideas. My theory is that deities grow and change along with humans, with each group acting as a catalyst to the other. Moreover, there are things we can see better, from a short lived and limited perspective, than they can see from a too broad vantage point. Perhaps life simply tastes sweeter, to a short lived mortal, and they enjoy that taste through their relationship with us.

Implications

Our deities are comparatively limited, and our humans reasonably capable. The relationship isn't one of parity, but it's a lot closer than is normal among monotheists. This means we can reasonably attempt to pull our weight in our relationships with deities. There are real effects of human efforts, even effects on deities. We can be true contributors. Moreover, we can refuse a relationship offered by a deity, or negotiate better terms. But this also forces more responsibility upon us. We don't get to bewail our total helplessness and expect our deities to put everything right.

We have no fall, no total depravity. We also have no perfection, either for humans or deities. Both deities and humans participate in a constant cycle of striving for improvement, and need help and companions in this endeavour. Both humans and deities do better if those companions include both humans and deities, because each has skills and viewpoints the other lacks. Besides, we're both by nature interested in relationships, each with the other.

Our multiplicity of deities gives us relationality for free, without the somewhat confusing mystery of the Trinity. It also gives us alternatives. Some people get along better than others; humans and deities can find relationships particularly to their liking, rather than trying to make one size fit all. At the same time, though, it gives conflict, or potential conflict. Deities don't always agree with each other. They can disagree on means, or even on ends, just as humans can, even while all are well meaning and reasonably well informed.

The principle of Wyrð is a kind of natural law, applying to both humans and deities. It cannot be violated. This provides a partial answer to the problem of evil. Much

evil isn't willed, but a result of mistakes and trade offs. It is not possible for anyone to start over with a completely clean slate; much as we would sometimes like to do so. We (humans and deities both) have to play the hand we have, with the results of past decisions and past happenstance. We are also all interconnected, so each of us is affected by far more than our own choices.

Heathenism is inherently pluralist. We expect there to be more deities than just the ones with whom we have formed relationships, and for those deities to share the same general traits of all deities. In particular, we expect them to be basically well meaning, seeking good things for everyone, but particularly those humans with whom they have formed relationships. We also expect them to disagree to some extent with our deities about how to go about creating and enhancing these good things, and to preferentially form relationships with human beings compatible with their ideas. We do not expect our deities and our religious customs to be the best for everyone, and would much rather see those who do not suit our deities stay with those deities and religions they do suit.

Deities and human beings have a lot of common traits. In some ways, deities are very much like humans with more information, longer lifetimes, and without some of the limitations inherent in corporeal existence. We cannot explain this by resorting to ideas of humans being somehow created in the divine image, unless we want to import ideas direct from Christianity. What we can support from our lore, and other historical and archaeological material, is the idea of human beings as being literally kin to the gods. Kings routinely claimed descent from Woden (Odin) even well into the Christian period (e.g. Bede, p.63). Odin is also said to have been the father of Sigi, the ancestor of the Volsungs (Byock 1990, p. 35). Rig's manipulation of human conception in Rigsthula

(Poetic Edda p. 201-216) can easily be understood as Rig simply impregnating three human women. (In each case, he is said to get into the same bed with the woman and her husband, and lie between them.) Yet modern people find the idea of a deity siring human children rather hard to accept, given that deities do not seem to manifest with physical bodies. (We have modern heathen claims of many things that modern paradigms would consider either miraculous or delusional, even to the point of subjective experiences of deities as present in ordinary reality. I cannot however, recall any claims of them being as physical as this would require.) Some heathens therefore conclude that we really are partly descended from our deities; others disagree, asking questions about such things as the compatibility of divine and human DNA, and generally ridiculing the suggestion of our kinship with our deities being more than metaphor or adoption.

Heathens cannot plausibly base moral/ethical behaviour on divine commandments²⁴. Instead, we behave well because both humans and deities desire general well being, both for individuals and in terms of well functioning societies. An unethical or evil human being is an ill-functioning human, as well as a creator of ill-functioning in his or her community.

This makes our idea of ethics at least somewhat relative, rather than absolute. Some things are simply a matter of what does or does not work to promote wholeness, prosperity, happiness, etc. in a particular situation. One could, I suppose, theorize that there was some particular set of ethical rules which would always work better than any other set, but observation suggests otherwise. And actual effects are what matters here,

²⁴ It is possible to have a relationship with a deity who insists on particular behaviours commonly classed as moral. For example, Tyr demands a high standard of honesty, and the keeping of one's word. One story has him losing his hand as a result of honourable behaviour (Sturluson p.27-29). This does not, however, make his standards absolute; another deity might in some instances prefer tact to honesty.

not theory, because it's the goal that's wanted, not the means of getting there. (This is not to say that any means will do, because everything is interconnected. If I create my prosperity at the expense of all my neighbours, the net result is not a gain.)

Any equivalent to liberation theology falls in the same general category as ethics. We can derive it, but not as a direct commandment or a primary attribute of the nature of deities. It's easy to imagine our deities, seeking general good functioning, being unhappy with societies where a few prosper at the expense of the many, and highly motivated to help the many redress imbalances. They could easily focus most of their efforts wherever they found the greatest need. They could certainly encourage their friends to refrain from treating others unjustly. But I can't see it becoming their one and only focus, unless for some reason an individual deity had a particular relationship to a particular oppressed group. They aren't Jesus, and don't have his specific association with the poor and marginalized. Some individual deities do have associations with particular occupations and social classes, such as Thor's affinity for ordinary folks, and Odin's affinity for poets. I could imagine a liberation Thor, if he had a strong connection with the people of some place where ordinary folks (farmers, labourers, etc) were as badly treated as they seem to be in much of Latin America. But as far as I know the issue has never come up. Things were very different, in the old days, before Christianity. Now the majority of those consciously involved with these deities are in North America, Europe, and perhaps Australia. None of these are known for being particularly oppressive, except to some extent the United States, where the heathen revival has so far been of no interest to most of the usual targets of oppression, except to some extent to relatively privileged women²⁵.

²⁵ The heathen revival has been of great interest to one self-defined marginalized group: white racists. There is a strand in modern heathenry that tries to understand connection with our deities as a matter of biological or genetic inheritance, manifested in a "white" phenotype. Thus, in the eyes of these people, our deities care about all "white" people, and no one else. This viewpoint is a matter of significant controversy within

Conclusion

In this paper, I have described a heathen view of deities, human beings, and their interrelationship, providing a window into an alternative answer to common human experience. While heathenry is still small, it is my hope that our answers may be of use to others, who doubtless won't accept them in their entirety (which would imply conversion), but may adopt some of them, or even strengthen their own self understanding in arguing against our positions.

What I want to do next is tie in more areas, starting with concepts of authority. Heathens have a somewhat confused attitude to lore and experience, accepting our lore as informative but not entirely authoritative, yet often treating it as giving the final word, at least when we agree with it. As for experience, we have the beginnings of a consensus explanation of how to handle it, but don't seem to in fact follow these methods in practice. I'd also like to go a lot deeper into the area of "ecclesiology" (a term heathens would not use), which is presently the subject of much heated argument.

Meanwhile, I have greatly enjoyed writing this paper. Thank you for asking us to write about our own beliefs, rather than the specific theologies studied in this class.

modern heathenry, leading to mutual excommunication. I personally regard the racist position as heretical, if not blasphemous. However, they still develop some good ideas from our shared lore. It is possible that these people, experiencing their (partial) loss of white male privilege as oppression, will be the first modern heathens to develop some idea of our deities as supporters of (some of) the oppressed.

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