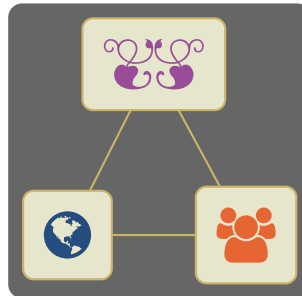


Rethinking Divinity

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“Into this pond were flushed the ashes of some four million people. This was not by gas. It was by *arrogance*; it was by *dogma*; it was by *ignorance*. When people believe that they have absolute knowledge with no test in reality, this is how they behave. This is what we do when we aspire to the knowledge of gods. [...] We need to touch people.” —Jacob Bronowsky, standing in a pond at Auschwitz, 1973.

OUR CONCEPTS OF DIVINITY have always been shaped by our understanding of the world around us, beyond us, and of ourselves in relation to this World. We incline to look up and out and wonder, “What is that Divine out there, hiding at the edge of the World, and which made the World, and me in the World, and the World for me?”

And as we wonder, we begin to name the Divine. We assign attributes to it—attributes not unlike our own. Mind as mind, Image as image. We forge our identities in a *Divine-World-Us* triad. This triad offers existential comfort... sometimes. And at other times it lays a bridge across mortality’s moat.

What is the Divine that it should tug on us, shaping our social, moral and cosmological sensibilities? Is it something real, like the World is real, like Us is real? Or is its realness a mere contingent relation, like the fluttering shadow of a windy tree? I’m not sure.

What is the World? It is surprise. It is a hierarchy of complexity—a surprising testimony to how simplicity begets an imponderable complex. We see how substance finds form in relation. All the time, connectedness between substance forms new substance. And as we overlay symbol upon symbol to capture this unfolding interplay of substance with relation, we discover strangeness. The World is surprisingly strange to Us.

What is Us? For sure, it is you and me and us and them. It is those who relate and connect with the World both in our way and in other ways. It is those who suffer and those who do not. It is those who reach down to raise up, and those who do not. But most of all, Us is those who look within and ask, “What is Us?”

We as Us are not the World. We are *in* but not *of*. And the World is not the Divine because the Divine is anything which the World is not, and not Us. And so the *Divine-World-Us* triad endures, expressed variously over time and place.

Sometimes the Divine is one—the One. And sometimes it is many. For some of Us, the World is a place which is closed and complete, with the triangle of the triad remaining well-defined and immutable. Sadly, most of Us inherit an expression of the *Divine-World-Us* triad from our forebears and friends in the hope that they were all the wiser. For a few, that inheritance is deemed a fatuous default. Others of Us work to deny any existence of the Divine, reducing the triad to a *World-Us* diad. For them, the many choices of Divine render none chooseable.

The Norse pagan World is a place of nine realms of existence (*Nin Heimar*), one of which is the Midgard realm in which we as Us live, breathe, build Viking boats, and clasp combat shields. The Divine are the Norse gods, and they occupy the other realms, mostly Asgard. The one-eyed Odin god seeks and imparts knowledge, and the Freyja goddess imparts love and beauty. In the Christian World there are realms too: a heavenly realm, possibly a realm of Hell, a realm for angels and demons, and a physical realm for humans as Us. The

Divine is Three-in-One plus one plus many. And one of Three-in-One became one of Us, one with Us, endowed with a vitality which is at once of Divine and of Us. So while Norse pagan and Christian sensibilities differ superficially, in both, the integrity of the *Divine-World-Us* triad is well maintained.

So is the Divine real? That is, is the integrity of the *Divine-World-Us* triad solid, whatever form the Divine might take? And if the Norse Divine is to be discarded, then what of the Christian one? Or of others? And inevitably the problem of choice begins to beg the solution: *none*. Yes, that's it: *none*.

But as I incline to look up and out, and ask not how the World is, but how the World is at all, *none* does not answer. *None* offers nothing. And so a facile collapse of the *Divine-World-Us* triad into the *World-Us* diad slips the World from its moorings, causing it to float away into *It-Is-What-It-Is*.

Or is it It-Is-What-It-Is? Could it be that the World, Us, and the Divine in the triad should not be thought of independently? They are to have meaning only in their relation. That is, there is no Us substantively separate from the World and the Divine. Nor the World separate from the Divine and Us. Nor the Divine separate from Us and the World. When our fingers touch and our eyes gaze upon the ensemble of objects around us, we become seduced by the illusion of substance. There is no substance—only difference and change in relation.

As we as Us learn more about the World and our place in it, we begin to understand that *substance is relation*, that our objective detachment is impossible, leaving us wholly immersed, and that the *Divine-World-Us* triad is but a useful heuristic, to be reduced to a monad of unitary relation. **The World, Us, and the Divine are One.** Could this have been the intended message of Jesus—an Us—when he said that he and the Father are one? Could this be what Odin gave his eye for?