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Ásatrú Theological Analysis: Ancestral Poetry and Deities

Religion is a communication of culture at its core. An expression of the concepts that a group of people place significant value in. For cultures in the more individualistic and individual-focused countries, this can be things like self-improvement or the pursuit of knowledge, while in more group-oriented societies this can be things like social harmony and admiration/respect towards one's elders. As such, the religion of a culture has a reciprocal relationship with the culture it was created within, with both simultaneously contributing to each other's development. A prime example of this concept is that of the Ásatrú religion, which also goes by the name "Heathenry" or "Norse Paganism". Ásatrú is a religion that originates from the tribes of Northern Europe (mainly from Scandinavia and pre-unification Germany). It was created as a result of pre-Christian ancestral worship by the tribes occupying those areas, and shaped by the battle-oriented culture of the time. As such, the mythology and structure of the Ásatrú has been steeped historically in battle valor and ancestral reverence, which as society progressed into the modern age, saw shifts in its theology that persist in its contemporary practice.

When examining the theological structure of a religion, an important starting point is looking at the supernatural, or divine elements of the religion. Ásatrú tradition and mythology are often discussed by first introducing the concept of the Æsir, or the war gods that reside in the

realm of Asgard. These gods include Odin, Thor, Tyr, and Baldur, among many other figures, all tasked with the protection of their realm, along with all other realms that make up Yggdrasil, or the world tree which is said to comprise all of reality. These other realms or worlds in the tree include Midgard(the land of humans), Alfheim(the land of elves), Jotunheim(land of frost giants), Niflheim(realm of mist and cold), Musphelheim(the land of fire), Helheim(the underworld, or realm of the dead), Svartalfheim(home of the dark elves), and Vanaheim(realm of the lesser fertility gods, or the Vanir)(Paxson). Generally, Asgard and the Æsir are regarded by those who practice Ásatrú as the most influential pieces in the understanding of its tstructure and intricacies. As for the afterlife, Valhalla, a hall ruled by Odin(the most revered god out of the æsir) in Asgard, is one of many and is reserved for those slain in battle. Compared to Helheim, which was seen as a dishonorable afterlife to inhabit, Valhalla was regarded by the ancient Scandinavians as the more honorable of the two(Paxson). This focus on battle and valor speaks to the values of Scandinavian culture in antiquity. At the time, the Germanic and Nordic people were eager to explore and conquer the lands that surrounded them, motivated to collect resources and explore areas of the world they hadn't seen yet. This generally resulted in plenty of unwilling victims, especially those in the adjacent Anglo-Saxon lands, leading to the pillaging of property and the murder of a substantial amount of innocent lives. The poets/composers of the time, or skalds, would often praise the actions of the Scandinavians as noble, and that it would inspire an honor that would extend to all of the conqueror's descendants(Finlay). This war-centric and anti-outsider ideology, however, is not shared by a majority of contemporary Ásatrú followers. Modern Norse Pagans consider violence to be barbaric, and the need to conquer to be one that should stay in the past. Some of those people, for example, consider Valhalla to be a punishment in itself, in that it includes not only being perpetually maimed and mutilated in battle but also

being separated from one's own loved ones. Others consider Valhalla itself to be a metaphor for the grave as opposed to a physical place and an important lesson on unnecessary acts of violence. The degree to which people believe in either concept or any variation of them, is subject to the individual and their conclusions instead of to a universal or concrete doctrine. This is generally a pattern that applies to most if not all pagan religions, and as such Ásatrú is no exception to this. Generally, so long as these beliefs do not infringe on the beliefs of other practitioners, they are widely appreciated as being a part of the natural scholarship and learning of an Ásatrú believer.

Another important part of the religion of Ásatrú is the interaction followers themselves have with the divine. This is found in the practice of broader practices as well as focused rituals, each of which differs depending on the subject. A representation of one of the more important broad practices of believers is the concept of scholarship. Generally, an individual's conclusions about the religion and what they extract from the mythology are not set in stone. This makes Ásatrú a decentralized and individual-focused religion, with a portion of a practitioner's time being devoted to studying passed-down oral tradition and poetry, which derive from studying a collection of poems known as "The Edda" from an old Viking manuscript(Schnurbein 2). This concept carries on the long-standing tradition in modern paganism of an individual creating their doctrine, as opposed to an outside source or appointed authority figure creating the doctrine for a person to work within the bounds of. This poses a contrast to major world religions, which often have appointed priests or individuals whose lives are devoted to communicating their understandings of the divine, thus enforcing an often unintentional power differential and hierarchy. In contrast, Ásatrú seeks to dismantle the concept of hierarchy, as it believes the only person who can have a connection with the knowledge and rituals of a religion is an individual, and that no practitioner is better or worse than any other for their own beliefs. No single belief is

punished or rewarded, and individuals are free to pursue paths of knowledge at their leisure and pace. In Ásatrú, this is found more so in the examination of oral tradition and poetry from antiquity, rather than through spontaneous personal revelation, which makes it arguably more of a simultaneous scholarly and literary-focused religion compared to most contemporary practices. This, understandably, produces a variety of results in believers observing and studying the mythology of Ásatrú, leading to a wide spectrum of practices. An example of a specific ritual or action carried out by followers was pointed out by a scholar named Michael Strminska, is the act of paying homage to the Ásatrú tale of the marriage between Sigurdrífa and Sigurd (two heroes in Germanic legend) through a symbolically performed ritual. According to Strminska, this is a practice that is seen in Ásatrú practices in modern Iceland and involves the act of drinking sacred mead and reciting lines from the poem outside among nature, which often accompanies a marriage ceremony between two consenting members. These practices are derived from and concern in the Norse poem *Sigurdrífumál*, which according to Strminska, is a poem found in “The Edda” (119). This practice, and more broadly most other Ásatrú practices not only exemplifies the concept of admiring and honoring nature as evidence of the presence of the divine but also honoring a sense of tradition and paying homage to the folklore which the religion is built upon. As opposed to solely focusing on transactionality and direct encounters with the divine, the religion is more geared towards accepting and paying respect to not only the past as a period but also to those who came before and paved the way for the modern era. In Ásatrú, the past is not something to avoid but is something to simultaneously learn from and pay homage to through deliberate actions. The formation of altars, the recitation of poems in The Edda, and the carving and study of runes are all practices that are exemplifications of this

past-oriented reverence at the core of the religion and additionally show the degree of subjective experience found within modern paganism as a broader practice.

In conclusion, Ásatrú is a religion filled with intricacies in its theology. Not only is it an inherently traditional and past-focused religion, but also one of careful and deliberate study and acceptance of the divine. Ásatrú exists as an intersection between the physical and the spiritual, the natural and the divine. As such, its followers consider both in equal amounts in their daily practices. It is not solely about giving oneself over completely to the spiritual, and neither is it about rejecting the supernatural in favor of grounding oneself in reality. It is about finding a healthy balance of both that enriches one's life and leads to their self-improvement, while also paying respect to those who came before them and founded their traditions. Subjective experience is prioritized over objective fact or universal truths, which makes Ásatrú, and Paganism a broader umbrella in which it falls, an intriguing topic of theological analysis.

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