

The gift giving circle

The key to the relationship between men and gods¹

Farkas Vendel

Introduction

Reading texts and articles on a neopagan religion – or fundamentally any kind of religion – is a peculiar experience: sometimes one can find personal experiences and thoughts with full of creativity and new ideas, even from places where it would not have been suspected – and in other times, one finds hilarious and painful articles born from stupidity. An incredibly common phenomenon connected to the latter claims that everything we, as neopagans practice, believe or say are all survived ancient traditions. It is partially true: there are ancient traditions which survived through the ages in different sources; but sometimes religious people just (have to) speculate and interpret in the way of the gods or the sources about the ancient men. The *Gift giving circle* is one of these interpretations: it is such a new term, that it has not even been integrated in all the modern Ásatrú circles. However the belief, that one should always answer with a gift to a gift is a widespread idea between nowadays Ásatrúars.

The aim of this essay is to investigate the sources of this practice: the Eddas, sagas and the historical reconstruction of the medieval Scandinavian culture. Only through this process can the gift giving circle be placed into its right place in the practices of modern Ásatrú.

1. The definition of gift giving circle

The essential part of a gift giving circle is the belief, that when one receives a gift, the other must or should answer with a gift. Similar to the case of revenge, it becomes a circle: when one answers with a gift, the other person will feel the need to answer too with a gift again, and so on. Because of that, the most simple – lacking any kind of interpretation – and purest definition might be, that a gift giving circle is a *continuous exchange 'circle' of gifts between two or more people*.

Another important term, which seems to be strongly connected to gift giving – in the practice and the thoughts of other believers – is *hospitality*. The reader might already have a bunch of ideas, how this is connected to gift giving, but let's not be in such a rush and spoiler

¹ This essay is the written version of my lecture at the Alþing of Ásatrú Polska on 18.08.2017.

everything yet: firstly, let us acknowledge this connection, and accept the claim that this circle may also be the circle of being hospitable with each other.

2. The difference between the *Ásatrúar* and the Christian concept

Before looking at the sources to start our investigation about what can be known for certain, we should first focus on the difference between the pure ideas of what was represented as gift giving circle and hospitality in the previous chapter and the strongly similar idea found sometimes among christians named as *selfless giving* and 'love your neighbor'.

Maybe the most remarkable place of all, concerning to these concept is the following, found in the gospel of Luke:²

18. And a certain ruler questioned Him [Jesus], saying, Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

19. But Jesus said to him, Why do you call Me good? No one is good except One – God.

20. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother.'

21. And he said, All these things I have kept from *my* youth.

22. And hearing *this*, Jesus said to him, Still you lack one thing: all that you have, sell and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in the heavens; and come, followe Me.

23. But when he heard these things, he became very sorrowful, for he was exceedingly rich.

24. And Jesus, seeing that he became very sorrowful, said, How difficult it is for those who have riches to go into the kingdom of God.

(Luke 18:18–24)

According to some interpretations, this act is the most rewardable of all: to give others without asking for anything in exchange and of course to love every of your fellow neighbor the way you love yourself. As I see, two important ideas are included in this concept: firstly, a sort of global worldview, which emphasizes that the individual should take care of the future of the entire world and every person living in it, and of course to try to help them, as a good man; the second is a type of idealistic, *messianistic* 'hope', that we can and should save the world from its current state or even from its own essential characteristics.

Ásatrú does not share these opinions. Although this kind of generosity is not 'forbidden', it is not required in any way. We should consider the words of Aristotle – who in his ethics prefers the mean instead of the extremes – to understand which is more likely to be closer to the way of generosity in *Ásatrú*: 'With regard to giving and taking of money the mean is liberality, the excess and the defect prodigality and meanness. In these actions people

² The same story also appears in the gospel of Matthew and Mark.

exceed and fall short in contrary ways; the prodigal exceeds in spending and falls short in taking, while the mean man exceeds in taking and falls short in spending. [...]’ (Aristotle 1908, 1107b). So we don’t share the messianistic character; an Ásatrúar does not need to save the world. An Ásatrúar would prefer to live in harmony with the world, and by world, we should also make it clear, that Ásatrú is not global (in this understanding); through the Eddas and the sagas, one can see, that there is a difference in treating those people who are closer to us and those who are not. In the saga of Egil Skalla-grímson, we can read of the death of hundreds of unknown men, but still, there are more pages directly dedicated to the death of Egil’s son and his sorrow only, including a masterpiece of skaldic poetry as well.

As Nietzsche concludes in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (*On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*): ‘[...] And this is the universal law: every living being can only be healthy, strong and fertile inside a horizon; if it is unable to draw a horizon around itself or on the other hand too selfish to be able to see with the eyes of a stranger, then it is wasting away languidly or hastily to its own early destruction.’³ So we have to draw a *horizon* around us in being sympathetic with others: not being sympathetic at all, nor having a horizon of it and being lost in it will also restraint of being a good man. It describes the mentality of Ásatrú too: we can only become strong, if we know the boundaries we have in our life. The Ásatrúar concept of gift giving and hospitality falls in the fences of these ideas: thinking locally and being realistic.

3. The gift giving circle among mankind

After we defined the meaning of our terms and the way of imagining them, we should finally start our journey in the sources. First, I will stay on the level of mankind, and look at what we know about the historical ideas; what we know about the concept of the heroic lays and the sagas; and finally about the advises of Óðin for mankind according to the *Hávamál*. The last one will also serve as a transition from the ways of mankind to the ways of the gods above us.

3.1. The historical situation

In medieval Scandinavia, hospitality or with other name ‘entertainment was a serious matter’, as Eric Christiansen notes in his book, *The Norsemen in the Viking Age* (Christiansen 2006,

³ Own translation from the German original: ‘Und dies ist ein allgemeines Gesetz; jedes Lebendige kann nur innerhalb eines Horizontes gesund, stark und fruchtbar werden; ist es unvernünftig, einen Horizont um sich zu ziehen, und zu selbstisch wiederum, innerhalb eines fremden den eigenen Blick einzuschließen, so siecht es matt oder überhastig zu zeitigem Untergange dahin.’ (Nietzsche 1980, 11)

146). It was an important part of politics, as one of the most serious task of the king's household was to entertain – supplying food and drink, especially in the form of feasts – those people, who were loyal to them. The best description of it was said by Þormódr, the skald of Ólaf Haraldsson– according to the *Saga of Olaf Haraldsson* –, when he got fatally wounded at his chest: 'The king has fed us well. I am fat, even at the heart-roots [...]' (Snorri 1844, chapter 247).

It was also an important measure of value among landowners too, according to the runestones: the more generous a landowner was, the better he was appraised among his folk. On the second Sövestad Runestone (DR 291) we can read the following: 'Tonna placed this stone in memory of Bramr, her husbandman, and (so did) Ásgautr, his son. He was the best of estate-holders and the most generous with food.' The reason of such an importance of hospitality in medieval Scandinavia was simple: '[...] Up here, relative scarcity made food an even more valuable currency of power than in fruitful south Britain or Francia; more than just a symbol.' (Christiansen 2006, 143). So being a guest was not only a privilege: it basically meant life.

According to Roesdahl, gift giving also filled in a similar role, as rewarding loyal and supreme folks usually took place in the form of gift giving (Roesdahl 2007, 147). So in this case, we can imagine the gift giving circle as an exchange of act – loyalty, achievement, etc. – or a material gift. If we look at it this way, it means that offering sacrifice to the gods also had a similar mechanics: mostly when a medieval person made a sacrifice for the gods or a particular god, he/she asked for a favor in advance. In the case of the description of the temple at Uppsala, Adam of Bremen even uses the word 'gift' for these sacrifices: '[...] From attendance at this festival no one is exempted. Kings and people all and singly send their gifts to Uppsala [...]' (Adam of Bremen, book 4).

3.2. The world of heroic lays and sagas

It might be unnecessary to bring examples from the heroic lays and sagas to the gift giving circle or to hospitality, because they are related to each other in every field. Also, one must admit, that these sources are *not historical*. However, their significance is unquestionable because they are likely to be the tools or the carriers of a kind of *theological* message from the writers of these sagas and sources. It is not an uncommon phenomenon: poetry and theology/philosophy is connected at nearly every part of the world. In this case, we can also think of the 'brothers' of the medieval pagan Scandinavians: the Greeks, from whom not only

the rough philosophers dealt with the problem of the nature of Gods, but also had the poets and drama-writers their opinions about the topic, mostly arguing with the philosophers.

Furthermore, I conclude, that gift giving and hospitality must have been important according to those skalds and thinkers too, who wrote these pieces and found them as principal parts of their culture. Even more: examining the role and teachings of the different cases of gift giving and hospitality can even widen our knowledge about these phenomena.

3.3. The sayings of Óðin: the Hávamál

In the intricate and obscure system of Hávamál, we can find many focal topics highlighted, such as gaining knowledge, love, living a good life, and of course gift giving and hospitality.

Here, as it has been mentioned before, they are again strongly connected. Several stanzas are dealing with these two aspects, now we should focus on the stanzas about gift giving only: 39, 40, 41, 42, 44 and 52.

Stanza 39 says more about the essence of understanding the gift giving than anything else, so I should not waste too many words on it. The message is simple: Óðin and his 'ethics' understands, that the desire of getting gifts is a steady part of our nature; not just the part of the human nature, but also the nature of maybe every living being in the world of Ásatrú. However, this is *not* a bad thing; not something we have to fight against, but much more to understand it and realise, that it is not just in *me*, but it is also in *others*. As the stanza says:

I've never met a man so generous or so food-free
that he didn't count giving a gift;
nor one so liberal with his goods
that he'd not take an offered reward.

Stanza 41, 42, 44 and 52 are all connected to friendship, which is a message with great significance for us, because it means, that from the six stanzas regarding the gift giving circle, four are related to friendship. As a conclusion, a possible interpretation is that building a gift giving relationship with other people is an extraordinary activity, which has an important role in keeping up our most personal relations, like friendships⁴ for example (or as we have seen

⁴ According to Hávamál, gift giving (related to friendship) doesn't have to be 'material' or something very expensive: the focus is more likely to be on intention and mutuality. But of course we should also note here, that in the worldview of medieval Scandinavians (as Roesdahl notes) and the sagas (for example when Egil is in the court of Eirik Bloodaxe and saves his head for a beautiful poem in exchange for sparing his life), an important gift doesn't necessarily have to be material, but can be intellectual, like good advice, important informations or poetry; so maybe the focus isn't on intention, but on the revaluation of non-material riches.

before, even political relations). Of course the reason of that is obvious, which can be found in stanza 39 as it has been written before: it is a natural acceptance of the way how people work. It is legitim to ask after that, whether gift giving then has an important role in family relations and/or love relationships too. The answer for that is not clear: in *Hávamál* there are only a few words about parent-child relationship; and in the case of love, we can read in stanza 130, that giving gifts has a huge role in waking up the interest of a woman – due to the reasons in stanza 39 –, but it says nothing about being in a relationship. Still, I would suggest, that the importance of gift giving circle *can* be extended to family and love relations, as the advantages of gift giving circle in friendship also seems logical in these cases. Nevertheless we have no stanzas, which would disqualify these options.

Stanza 40 is connected to stanza 42, and also to stanza 43 – not mentioned before –, which of these two deal with the problem of ‘enemies’. The main ideas are the following: you should not turn your other cheek to those, who do not answer to your kindness with kindness, but falseness; don’t trust and give gifts to those, who are not worthy of it. Stanza 40 highlights the same, just with focusing directly on gift giving:

The goods that a man has acquired,
he ought not stint to spend;
he often spares for the loathed
what he’d hoped for the loved:
much turns out much worse than we want.

Here we shall remember the words of Aristotle again: try to find the mean and don’t hesitate to give gifts to your friends, but be cautious with who is considered your friend.

4. Among the gods themselves

The case of the gods is momentous, firstly of course, because only through them can one understand, whether this conception of gift giving is bad, incomplete or good. As we could see in *Hávamál*, it is definitely not a bad desire, but something, which is only the part of our nature. The question is the following: is it a part of the nature of the gods?

The answer is presumably yes: the gods desire gifts as much as we, humans do and because of that we have several accounts of gods receiving gifts, and even one (in the story of Hrungrnir and Þór) about Óðin becoming disappointed for *not* having been presented with a gift: ‘Thor arose and welcomed his son, saying that he should surely become great; »And I

will give thee,« he said, »the horse Gold-Mane, which Hrungrnir possessed.« Then Odin spake and said that Thor did wrong to give the good horse to the son of a giantess, and not to his father.’ (Skáldskaparmál, chapter 24).

In conclusion, desiring gifts is not only not a mistake, but also a characteristic of our nature we share with the gods. On the other hand, this is something in which the giants seem to be not very good at: we can only see bad or at least ’not the best examples’ of being hosts from them:

- Even though Vafþrúðnir invites Óðin to sit down inside his hall, he is very rude and threatens the guest with death;
- while Ægir tries to give an excellent feast for the gods, his intentions are forced by the gods (as we can read in the beginning of *Hymiskviða*);
- Útgarð-Loki’s only purpose with giving a huge feast to Þór and his companions as guests is to humiliate the thunder god;
- as Geirröð also tries to kill Þór, while he is his guest;
- and Hrungrnir, even so he is well treated in Ásgarð, behaves like an awful guest.

Two other incidents also have to be mentioned: the case of Geirröð, the human king as maybe the worst host in the world, written in the tale of *Grímnismál* and also Loki, who in the case of being a guest seems to belong more like to the giants and not the Æsir – as we can read in the *Lokasenna*.⁵

4.1. Turning a revenge circle into a gift giving circle

Although there are not too much accounts of the gods giving gifts, there are two situations in which they showed such deeds, and we could call another ’variation’ of gift giving: *turning the circle of revenge into a gift giving circle*. We all know the stories of revenge circles, which can become endless just exactly the same way as in the case of gift giving. In contrast, sometimes they can be stopped, if one of the parties offers the opportunity of giving a gift or ransom for his deed.⁶

⁵ For the sake of truth we also have to mention, that there are only a few examples of the gods being hosts or giving gifts, only excluding humans. The reason of that is uncertain: might be for example, that there are no races with close relation (except the humans and álf, of whom we don’t know too much, and probably the dwarves) to the gods or equal races, except the giants, with whom their relation I guess don’t have to explain.

⁶ This is still not the case of turning your other cheek or selfless giving: it is about understanding or accepting our responsibility or at least having an intention of peace in a situation and hoping that the other side will accept our offer. However, continuing the revenge circle is always as much rightful, as trying to break it. It can be also found in the world of sagas, like for example in the case of Hrafnkel, who killed a man – called Einarr – rightfully, but still had the intention to give a ransom to Einarr’s father for the sake of peace.

The gods did this kind of act twice according to the *Skáldskaparmál* and the *Ynglinga Saga*. In the first three chapters of *Skáldskaparmál*, we can read of the case of Þjassi, who was rightfully killed by the Æsir (because of stealing the golden apples of youth), still his daughter, Skaði headed to Ásgarð to revenge her father. The gods decided to offer her a husband and a good laughter, which she accepted, so they also gave her a feast, and Óðin turned the eyes of her father into stars.

In the fourth chapter of *Ynglinga Saga*, we find the description of a much more memorable event, the Æsir-Vanir war. We all know the story of it: a war breaks out between the two family of gods, the Æsir and Vanir, because of an incident of uncertain circumstances. In the end, after the war – also because of unknown circumstances⁷ – the two family gathered with the purpose of finding peace. They made the treaty with an act of mutual gifting or ransoming by sending gods to each other: Mímir and Hænir was sent to Vanaheim, Njörð and his children Frey and Freyja were sent to Ásgarð. But the Vanir felt betrayed in the exchange, as they did not get those wisdom from Hænir, as they expected to be fair in the exchange. To show out their disappointment externally, they beheaded Mímir and sent his head to the Æsir. At this point, Óðin had to choose between claiming claim his *rightful* revenge (or at least ransom for Mímir) or not doing it: but in the end, for the sake of unbreakable peace between the gods, he gave up his right to do so. I guess we can feel the significance of that decision.

5. Between men and gods

So far we gathered around a bunch of ideas and conceptions from different sources to understand the gift giving circle. After all, we can see, how notable it is in the Eddas, sagas and was among medieval Scandinavians. It is important not just for us, but also for the gods, who have exactly the same natural desire of receiving gifts. One might realise, that gift giving is about intention and mutuality, but one should be realistic with measurement of who to involve. It is something not strictly material: it can also be an exchange of act or intellectual goods, and because of that it is closely related to friendship, family and love relations. And last but not least, we can see that it can be a saviour for us from revenge circles. Now comes the most remarkable part of the essay, because after the definition and analysis of gift giving, now I can present my theory based on it: that it is the most essential part of the relation between men and gods. We could see some hints for that before, but now it is time to completely explain it.

⁷ In both cases the uncertainty comes from the differences regarding the telling of the *Heimskringla* and the *Eddas*.

5.1. About the relations

In Ásatrú, we are related to the gods through two options: mimesis and live relation. Under mimesis I understand something similar to living our life with an interpretation of the way of the gods in our mind: it is not copying the acts of the gods, but more likely *refounding* the acts of theirs. We do it, when we are in love with someone, with whom we can never unite our life: we refound the story of Njörð and Skaði; we do it, when we are carving god statues out of wood: we are refounding the act of the creation of Askr and Embla; and so on. Looking at the language of the sacred texts this is the main way of interpreting the teaching of the gods, showing us that Ásatrú is never just theoretical, but also practical.

The other option we have is more important in this context, because here we can find the importance of understanding gift giving. Without a fulfilled gift giving circle between the human person and the gods, there can be no live relationship, appearing in the main moments of *choosing* and *practicing* our religion. But before I explain why I state that, I will have to do a digression to put down the basis of what a religion looks like in my conception.

5.2. The two aspects of religions

As I see, religion has two aspects: a *philosophical* and a *spiritual* aspect.⁸ The first aspect means, that every religion has a systematic worldview, in which it has its own statements on metaphysics, ethics, religious practice, and so on: basically every religion states something(s). The other aspect is the spiritual or mystical relation, which is being experienced in the religious practice with the particular entities of the specific religion. The two aspects are equally important: without the philosophical aspect our faith would be empty and lack of value; without the spiritual aspect it would be just an ideology, according to which the gods, spirits or any kind of entities of that religion would lose their personality, their existence and become the victims of an objectivation.

Realising it from another point of view, the two aspects together can make each other more fruitful: the philosophical system, existing in the dimension of the language can explain us the possibilities of interpretations concerning the spiritual experiences; and the spiritual

⁸ The main source of my ideas about religion and it having two aspects comes from Henry Bergson, a French philosopher from the turn of the 20. century, and especially from his book *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (*The two sources of Morality and Religion*), but I differ from his theory at many points.

aspect can serve as a prop of the philosophical system and the living entities of the religion for the human subject.

We should also get inspiration from Bergson in the importance of *love*. My opinion is, that our role in practicing a religion 'well' is not just in harmonising the two aspects, but of course also in focusing on the aspects themselves with our best intentions. We can illustrate the properly working philosophical aspect through the phenomenon of loving our parents: it means, that we look forward their teaching not just with respect, but with an intention of understanding them, with incorporating them into our own lifestyle, just as we do it with the teaching and protecting help of our parents. Of course this does not mean a lifestyle free from critics: this means that kind of love and respect we usually turn to our parents and their teaching. The spiritual aspect is more similar to the love we feel for our partner (boy/girlfriend, wife, etc.), requiring that kind of very close, pure and passionate intention, we usually have towards our partner; we can also find similarities in experiencing the state of spirituality/mysticism and the state of passion and sexuality.

5.3. Finally: explaining the most important gift giving circle

Here we finally reached the gift giving circle we want to talk about. As I said it is not just in the practice, but also in the act of choosing religion. This is extremely important and the cause of it can be found in the previous chapter: if we cannot love our religion, we will never be able to do both aspects with our best intentions – which is simply meaningless. It is a rough statement to make, but someone, who is not choosing *Ásatrú*, should not be *Ásatrúar*; without these momentum being an *Ásatrúar* is just a *beautiful lie*.⁹ But how should we make this choice? Here we should take in account both aspects: we should investigate in ourselves, which religion has that philosophical aspect I can accept as a guide of my life or is the closest to my worldview, and which religion I can build a spiritual relation with.¹⁰

When I do this – if I choose *Ásatrú* –, I get into a gift giving circle initiated by the gods: now this is a very important part to note. We are not the ones, who start the gift giving circle with our choice – the gods have already made their step towards us with first of all

⁹ Of course it can also mean re-choosing *Ásatrú*, if we are already born in an *Ásatrúar* family.

¹⁰ For the first aspect I would like to highly recommend (with or without the explanation of Hume's *Dialogues concerning natural religion*) the words of Chrysippus, 'that students of Philosophy ought first to learn Logics, then Ethics, next Physics, last of all, of the Nature of the Gods.' (Hume 1991, 97). This sentence illustrates very well the need of knowledge for understanding the teachings of particular religions, and due to the importance of that understanding, makes a good point against 'borning' into a religion. For the second aspect I would like to recall that kind of approach to the question of the existence of the gods, which comes from a way of interpretation of the relativist teachings of the sophist philosopher, Protagoras: the gods are only existing for those, who believe in them, and are not existing for those, who do not (Kerferd 2003, 202– 213).

creating Miðgarð, then creating the first humans and later restrengthening the relationship with making us the blood-children of the gods and giving us the oral tradition of the divine knowledge, both with the help of Heimdall as Ríg. What one can do is appreciating the gift of creation and accepting the gift of divine knowledge with stepping into the gift giving circle by choosing Ásatrú as our religion. Of course this is not the only thing we have to do, if we want to get the maximum out of this circle: if we practice the sacrifices, symbels and blóts,¹¹ dedicated to the ancestors, spirits, and most of all the gods, they will regard our gifts with their gifts, from which comes an endless circle until the time of death and even after. But once again, I have to highlighten the importance of our own will in getting into the the circle. If we are unable to fulfill our place in the gift giving circle with the purest intentions while doing the rituals and live our life, it is more noxious, than helpful. A gift giving circle shouldn't be just a duty: it should be a community holding power between us and the divine.

Conclusion

Of course my theory is still an 'open' project, as there are still numerous related questions to the topic not answered yet. How can we understand better hospitality through the philosophical ideas of hospitality? Does the importance of gift giving circle has an effect on religious economical ideas? What new informations can the investigation of sagas give us?

These are question bringing this discussion far wider, which is good – but at this moment the first, most important step is to realise the gift giving circle in which we, as Ásatrúars, stand in. The gods have already reached out their hands to us: do we accept it? and do we treat them as it is honorable for a true gift giving circle? This is not just a question of 'honor' or 'virtue': it is a question of us doing what is good for us *and* the gods. So: do we do this gift giving with all our hearts as it allows us to do?

¹¹ Sacrifices, symbels and blóts are beautiful because of another important reason too: only in the sacred place and time, created by these religious practices can we become for a short time the hosts of the divine powers. I think, this makes these rituals so beautiful, because every other time, every other minute and everywhere, *we are the guests* of the gods, spirits and ancestors.

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