

Thinking Towards Peace: On Triades and New Cosmology of the Mesocosm¹

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This paper has three parts. In the first part, we bring to the fore an ancient Vedic concept of mesocosm and discuss its religious and cosmic significance within Indian religion. This part also brings an initial approach towards philosophy of spirituality by focusing on the role of breath within the very concept of mesocosm. In the second part, based on our preliminary analysis, we present an original account on triades and Trinitarian thinking in some of the religious traditions by discussing the following questions: (1) What does the triade as a concept bring to theology and religious studies? (2) How could it be understood as a form, representing the most perfect model for the sacred correlation between divine and for the human Being? (3) How is it related to the idea of the “Third Presence,” the relational link between One and Two as primeval ontological realms? In the third and concluding part, we return to the ancient Indoeuropean religion by discussing the mediatory role of the Indo-Iranian Mit(h)ra.

Keywords: mesocosm, trinitarian thinking, triades, third presence, Vedas, Mit(h)ra, mediation, community, peace.

Introduction

This article aims to elaborate an ancient term: *the mesocosm*. In his work on *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*, Michael Witzel (2004) argued for the reconstruction of this term. He posited it within the ancient Indian Vedic magical interpretation of the world, where we face different “identifications” between the macrocosmic and microcosmic realities or gods. Also according to ancient Sumerian theology, between heaven and earth there was a substance, called *lil* “wind, air, breath, spirit”

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(Kramer 1956, 47). Many other religious traditions also testify for the existence of an ontologico-cosmical reality, related to the middle space between Heaven and Earth, having spiritual character and being related to the wind, air, ether, or breath.¹ This ancient cosmic constellation can be represented in the form of a triadic model, which will also be interpreted in the Trinitarian sense. The mesocosm reveals to us, as a middle term, an inter-space or a copula. Mesocosm is the sacred guardian of cosmic air permeating the All, but also, ethically, of cosmic Breath as a vital/life principle, enlivening the cosmos and our bodies: as such, it reveals to us, as a basic principle, all ethics, all life, and peace. Mesocosm, thus, is the *atmosphere* of ethics and inaugurates the triadic principle in the philosophy of peace in contemporary studies of religion and theology.

Part I: On Mesocosm in Ancient Indian Vedic Thought

In his introduction to a translation of early *Upanishads*, Partick Olivelle describes the triadic relation between the human body/person, the ritual, and the cosmic realities. The ritual sphere includes different ritual actions (such as formulas, prayers, and songs), while the other two realms represent what we understand as microcosm and macrocosm. For the Vedic thinkers, the central concern was to discover various connections between these three realms of the cosmos. Vedic seers (*r̥ṣis*) were in a possession of some secret knowledge of these secret cosmic relations or *upaniṣads*.² But it was Michel Witzel who, for the first time, suprisingly late, introduced the name for the middle term of this ancient cosmological triad—namely, *mesocosm*, a name given to the ritual sphere in order to understand the relation between macrocosm and microcosm. Mesocosm is thus a *copula*, a third part of the triangle structure *the ritual – the cosmic realities – the human body/person* in the ancient Vedic-Upanishadic context.³ This now is the ancient Vedic

1. Here we can only mention various contexts where we could elaborate on concepts such as *ruah*, *aér*, *pneûma*, *spiritus*, *prāṇa*, *qi*, *kî*, *mana*, *orenda*, etc.

2. See *Upaniṣads* ' introduction (Olivelle 1996, lii): "The central concern of of all vedic thinkers, including the authors of the Upaniṣads, is to discover the connections that bind elements of these three spheres to each other. The assumption then is that the universe constitutes a web of relations, that things that appear to stand alone and apart are, in fact, connected to other things."

3. *Kaṭha Āraṇyaka*, critical edition with a translation into German and an introduction by M. Witzel (2004), see n. 129 on p. xl of the Introduction for the history of the usage of "mesocosm." Witzel wrote how curious it was that "the term has not been

triade as represented in a model:

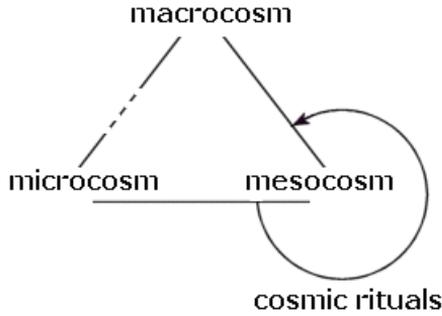


Figure 1: A model for the ancient Vedic triade

We have to outline another important characteristics of the Vedic thought: the role of breath and breathing. For the Vedic philosophers, or the tradition of Vedism/Brahmanism, there existed five originary elements of the world: earth, water, fire, air, and ether (*Aitareya Upaniṣad III*). We find references to wind and breath in the *Samhitās* (the oldest parts of Vedic collections), but the most ancient testimony and elaboration for the so-called “Wind-Breath doctrine” (Wind-Atem-Lehre) can be found in the philosophy of nature of *Jaiminīya upaniṣad brāhmaṇa 3.2.2. and 4*. This teaching is an example of a typical Vedic macro-microcosmic analogy between the macrocosmic Wind (*vāyu*) and microcosmic Breath (*prāṇa*).

From the cosmological point of view, the wind is the only “complete” deity, since all other deities/gods/elements/phenomena (sun, moon, stars, fire, day, night, waters, etc.) return to him during the enigmatic stillness of the night, while he never stops blowing. But at

used in this context before.” He refers to its first usage in a book on Newar religion authored by Robert I. Levy and Kedar Rāj Rājopādhyāya (1990). Witzel argues for the reconstruction of the term “mesocosm” within the Vedic magical interpretation of the world, where we face different analogies or magical “identifications” between the macrocosmic and microcosmic realities or gods (for example, Sun-eye, Wind-breath, Earth-body, Waters-semen, Fire-speech, etc.). This ancient way of thinking uses different “mystic” correlations and equivalents, some obvious (such as between Sun and the eye, or Wind and breath) and some more hidden and esoteric (between Moon and mind). But always there exists a nexus or a connection between two beings (in Sanskrit it is called *bandhu* and *upaniṣad*). See also M. Witzel (1997).

the most abstract level, it is the difference between the perishable (day, night, etc.) and imperishable or “eternal” (Wind) that led to the so-called Wind-Breath doctrine.

Analogously, then, breath in humans is the most important of the five vital powers (breathing, thinking, speech, sight, hearing), since it is only breath that is present during deep sleep. Of course, in the moment of death, breath returns to its macrocosmic eternal origin, the Wind. Breathing as the most important vital power is thus equated with life itself, with the cosmic Wind, and later with person’s self (*ātman*).¹ Mesocosm as a sphere of breath or cosmic wind (or, in Christianity, Holy Spirit) refers to the inauguration of the triadic principle or the so-called third presence into religion—as a newly conceptualized cosmico-ritual space between God/gods and humans. The problem of spirituality, and our relation to the spiritual sphere, and, ultimately, God, in my opinion, can be understood from this initial mesocosmic constellation.

Part II: On Triadic Principle: The Logic of Third Presence

But what does the triade as a concept bring to theology and religious studies? How could it be understood as a form, representing the most perfect model for the sacred correlation between divine and for the human being? How is it related to the idea of the “Third Presence,” the relational link between One and Two as primeval ontological realms? I wish to elaborate on the triadic thinking and triades as models of the divine, before returning in the third part to the ancient Indo-Iranian religious contexts.

In her insightful book on religion and monotheism (*Beyond Monotheism*), Laurel C. Schneider rightly asserts that in order to understand the trinity in our time, we have to turn our minds toward “divinity in multiplicity” (Schneider 2008, 4), which is to be understood as a renewed ontological gesture, disabling the old abstract or numerical (or mathematical-monarchical) modalities and positions of One, and thus opening for us new possibilities for divine incarnations. She thus pleads for a new theology of multiplicity, a theology of Many, which, again, works beyond some naïve and simple “God or the gods” thinking or dilemmas (Schneider 2008, 4). This indeed is a very important observation and a methodological credo, since throughout the history

1. For the Wind-Breath doctrine, See M. Boland’s *Die Wind-Atem-Lehre in den älteren Upanisaden* (1997).

of religion and theology, triades have been probably the most powerful model for representing spiritual exchanges within the Divine-Circle,¹ or within the *divine-human* cosmic and ritual circles and spiritual exchanges. Triades, as we will see, represent an effort towards unity in diversity and thus towards peace and reconciliation, while the idea of One and Two (Dyad) is marked by monolithic, static on one, or a(nta)gonistic (relational but dialectical, even to its very borders—violence and war) principles on the other side.² Now, I have already written on the so-called *triadic principle* in my book on intersubjectivity, ethics, and peace.³ In this analysis of mine, I have identified three ontological realms—microcosm, macrocosm, and mesocosm—as three ancient cosmic and ontological realms. Microcosm is the realm of our human existence, the space of our bodily-spiritual identity; macrocosm, on the other side, is the ontological (old metaphysical) realm of Gods and divinities; and mesocosm is the ritual space between divine and human realms.

We have already seen that the triadic model in Vedic thought derives from an ancient cosmological (mainly polytheistic or henotheistic) logic of ritual exchanges between three cosmic realms. It indicates the necessity of an intermediate realm, connecting both realities (Gods and humans), and, therefore, the line between microcosm and macrocosm is epistemologically weakened/interrupted. But let me now approach the problem of this trinitarian logic as represented in religion and the principle of multiplicity from a slightly different point of view.

The first ever account on multiplicity in the vicinity of the Jewish-Christian world can be found within the ancient Egyptian and African traditional religion. In *An African Interpretation of the Trinity*, African theologian A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya (Ogbonnaya 1994) presents us with a fascinating thesis of early African influences on Christian doctrine of the trinity (i.e., of Tertullian). Ogbonnaya even claims that

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1. See Plotinus' *Enneads* (Plotinus 1991, xxxv). On triangels and their cosmic role, see Plato's *Timaeus* (53d).
 2. On various trinitarian theologies in the non-Western world, see Phan (2011), especially chs. 16–20. In these chapters, we can see the rich variety of triadic thinking in Confucianism (Heaven, Earth, and Humanity) and Taoism (i.e., the dynamics and relationality within Dao as One, producing Two [yin-yang], and having their offspring as Three), and, of course, within both Hinduism as well as Buddhism (*triguna*, *tridoṣa*, *trikāya*, and so forth).
 3. See Škof (2015); especially cf. my triadic models on pp. 195–98.

ancient non- and proto-Semitic African cosmology was actually a background of Tertullian's own concepts of the trinity and trinitarian divinity. For Ogbonnaya, following the communitarian character of African religion,

mutual relation is far more than a dyadic relation in which two are lost uncritically in each other. The African emphasis on offspring assures that dyadic relation does not lead to egotism can be avoided because there is always the possibility of a "third presence." (Ogbonnaya 1994, 8)

What Ogbonnaya is arguing here is very important: first, dyadic relations (known from the old metaphysical and theological models (Heaven and Earth, God and the world, macrocosm and microcosm, but also the *mýthos*–*lógos* dichotomy, and the dichotomy between man and woman) *cannot* assure the space in which both ontological or divine realities would exist in a mutual *peaceful* atmosphere and without an ontological conflict or any other form of appropriation, either by higher or lower vertical realms, or by any one of two horizontal sides or realms of the dyad. The third presence is thus necessary for establishing a *full relationality*, without any form of appropriation by any member of the triad. Secondly, still more important, the third presence is related to the *offspring/child*, and thus marking a communal atmosphere with its cosmic-ontological and sexual-generational aspects included and, most importantly, preserved.

Now, we know from Plato's *Timaeus* that "a third kind" (*trítion génos*) or "the third type is space" (Plato 1997, 49a and 52a), known enigmatically as *chóra*, is a receptacle of becoming—its wetnurse, as it were; thus, it is an ontological category *par excellence*—and, perhaps most importantly—*chóra* (already for Plato) always resides in the feminine element.¹

1. According to Plato's *Timaeus*: "The new starting point in my account of the universe needs to be more complex than the earlier one. Then we distinguished two kinds, but now we must specify a third, one of a different sort. The earlier two sufficed for our previous account: one was proposed as a model, intelligible and always changeless, a second as an imitation of the model, something that possesses becoming and is visible. We did not distinguish a third kind at the time, because we thought that we could make do with the two of them. Now, however, it appears that our account compels us to attempt to illuminate in words a kind that is difficult and vague. What must we suppose it do to and to be? This above all: it is a *receptacle* of all becoming – its wetnurse, as it were" (Plato 1997, 1251, 49a).

But allow me one more intercultural digression, an important one as we will see: there is a striking similarity between this concept and Daoist philosophy as represented by Chinese philosopher Kuang-Ming Wu. In his magnificent effort on cosmico-material ethics and religion, *On Chinese Bodily Thinking* (1997), Wu presents us with an idiosyncratic mode of thinking, called “wombing forth” and “wombing motherliness.” Wombing forth is first based on a concept of the “womb-power” as a feminine ontological presence, which we can find everywhere—“in water, in roots, in valleys”—and, furthermore, also as a presence in ourselves, which enables us, as human beings, to be humble, compassionate, and devoted to others. Womb-power, according to Wu, is

the empty room between Heaven and Earth (...) a motherly bellows, vacuous, inexhaustible, continually letting forth [things] ...

Every human relation worthy of its name is a mothering and wombing—your being vacuous draws me forth, lets me become as I am ... The inner personal touch fills the void in me and in you, making us one. Yet we remain two, for two-ness enables touch. We are thus two in one, and one in two, thanks to our personal void and touch inside. All this describes mutual fulfillment. Personal void generates love—inner touch—that *mothers us* to grow into ourselves. (Wu 1997, 140–2).¹

We have thus the third kind/element represented in another intercultural context. Moreover, this element is *apophatic*, for it is necessarily related to my self-nihilation, a void-space in myself, to my absolute giving for the sake of the other (persons and things) in his/her... reciprocal, but again, absolute giving for me. The *womb-power* in her essential potency—wombing motherliness—is the ontological space of our mutual becoming, the possibility of an “inner touch” (Wu 1997, 141) between two realities: firstly between the mother and the child (foetus), but ultimately between God/dess and any human being. In Christian terms, we thus find Christ in ourselves as inner touch, the subtle, yet powerful spiritual (Holy Spirit; His breath

1. Wu refers to *Dao de jing*, chapter 6: “The spirit of the valley never dies./ It is called the subtle and profound female./ The gate of the subtle and profound female/ is the root of Heaven and Earth./ It is continuous, and seems to be always existing./ Use it and you will never wear it out” (Wu 1997, 139f.). My emphasis above in the citation.

of love) presence of love, humility and absolute self-annihilation *qua* self-transcendence.

Now, to return to the African communitarian and triadic context in religion and ancient cosmology: we know *ubuntu* as an African Bantu word for the cluster of dynamic ethical meanings of justice-compassion-reconciliation-friendship-peace (Škof 2005, 181f., n. 38). This word now marks the topos of all ethical considerations in African communitarian theologico-religious thought. In John Mbiti's famous words, within broader African contexts, *ubuntu* means the primordial and irreversible ontologico-ethical gesture of "I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (Mbiti 1969, 104). This is the all-relatedness in every aspect of our communal life; it is also "inclusive of all cosmos" (Ogbonnaya 1994, 14) and goes beyond mere dyadic relations within the cosmological or social contexts. Now, the most important consequence of this thought lies in an interpretive possibility, offered by Ogbonnaya, that within various analyses of later Tertullian's trinitarian theories of divinity, the African perspective has been largely ignored. Being from Carthage, and apart from being strongly influenced by both Jewish and Greek philosophy, Tertullian seems also to be strongly influenced by his 'native' African thought. Within the ancient Egyptian religiosity, we also come across the following interpretation, attested in the following verses from ancient Egyptian theology:

All the Gods are three
Ammun, Re, and Ptah without their seconds.

And, as interpreted by Ogbonnaya,

[F]or the Egyptians the number three was a sign of unity in plurality ... The importance of the number lies not in threeness but in its symbolic interplay of unity and plurality ... In addition to the symbols of three, considered above, there was the phrase *psdt* ("Ennead"), which means the group of nine of a group of three squared. (Ogbonnaya 1994, 45f.; both citations)

We cannot find similar early elaborations on the triadic structure of world/reality, neither in the ancient Judaic theology nor in the Christian and Greek literature before Tertullian and Plotinus. But we find them in an earlier cosmological thinking of ancient Vedic India and ancient African religious thought (in ancient Egypt as well as in other Nilotic and Bantu religious contexts).

What consequences can we draw from this? For the purpose of this paper, I wish to return one more time to the early development of religion in India and Iran—and thus to ancient Indo-Iranian religion and one of its most prominent deities: God Mit(h)ra, the protector of peace. On the basis of our earlier expositions of both mesocosm as a Vedic concept as well as various religious constellations of early trinitarian thinking, we will thus try to point to some ethical consequences of this thought as related to the God Mit(h)ra.

Part III: God Mit(h)ra as Guardian of Mesocosmic Sacred Space and Peace

Language evidence from the Indo-European Slavic languages shows that *peace/mir* and *cosmos/vsemir* (as preserved in Old Church Slavic and Russian) are indeed related to the cosmico-communal sense of peaceful dwelling and home, with a strong meaning of *reconciliation* (to set things into balance) included. Peace, or *mir* in Slavic and our Slovenian language (we will see how this word is related to another important Vedic and ancient Iranian God, namely Mithra, which, in the way of an ancient cryptophony includes *mir* in his name: “MIt(h)Ra”), is here related to “all people, whole world, human race, municipality, village municipality, assembly” (Golema 2013, 83). Therefore, peace has to be restored in this world. But how?

To be able to respond to this urgent call, I wish to devote my concluding thoughts to the ancient Indian tradition, to which I have devoted a lot of my previous work.¹ If we stay for the purpose of this essay within Vedic religiosity, then we can contend that the spirit of Vedic philosophy, or Vedic cosmological thought, is in its character very close to Heidegger’s “Indo-Germanic” philosophy of the Fourfold. Now, as we have seen in the previous sections of this essay, we now dwell between heaven and earth, and remain in peace, and close to our

1. Cf. some of my works on Vedic religion and natural philosophy: *Upaniṣade: Besede vedske Indije (Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad and Iśa Upaniṣad: translation from the Sanskrit with notes and a commentary)* (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 2005); “Il ruolo ed il significato degli elementi acqua, aria e terra nell’antica filosofia indiana e greca: uno studio comparativo [The Role and Significance of the Elements of Water, Air and Earth in the Classical Philosophies of India and Greece: A Comparative Study],” *Magazzino di filosofia* 5, no. 13 (2004): 123–37; “Rigvedske himne Varuni in vprašanje moralnosti v stari vedski religioznosti. [Morality in Vedic Religion As Exemplified by the Rigvedic Hymns to Varuna],” *Studia mythologica Slavica* 5 (2002): 163–88.

divinities only when we always already (esoterically) identify ourselves with the God. This is how we can safeguard our presence in the world. Now, as God Varuṇa and God Aryaman are God Contract and God Hospitality in the ancient Vedic Indian context (Thieme 1957), the protector of Peace is another Vedic god—Mitra (Iranian Mithra). Mitra is closely related to the triadic thinking and topology of the third presence. According to Toporov, the name Mitra derives from the Indo-European root *mi-, *mei-, “related to the idea of mediation, mutuality, legality, consent, and also to creating peace, friendship and affection” (Golema 2013, 81). Although we need to be careful in interpreting this old Indo-Iranian deity (and I do not intend to address this question today and generally in my interpretations and readings; I would rather follow Thieme vs. Toporov or Dumézil), we still can agree that Indo-Iranian Mit(h)ra is the God, *mediating between the cosmico-social functions of ancient societies and their dwelling places* (divine vs. human, the whole cosmos vs. villages, and gods vs. mortals; i.e., the Fourfold). Perhaps the most important role Mitra can play for us today is the role of this divinity as a mediating or *mesocosmic* God. We know that the role of Indo-Iranian Mit(h)ra was in safeguarding contracts and agreements, and thus peace—here understood primarily as an absence of hostilities or wars. But on the contrary, Slavic Mitra is much more related to the peaceful coexistence in a sense of *dwelling* as an internal or mediating condition of a community. Golema, in his beautiful exposition of Slavic Mitra (Golema 2013), argues for a close relationship between Mitra as “mir” and a group of words related to the Indo-Iranian root “jat-,” expressing activities of Mitra, also represented in numerous Slavic words (Croatian and Serbian “jatiti se,” Slovak “jatka,” Polish “jata,” Slovenian “pojata”—as related to herding/to stall/to flock, and then derivatives from this root, such as “prijeti” [to accept], “prijatelj” [friend], “objeti” [to hug], and so forth). This all marks the role of Slavic Mitra in “binding together in a collective” (Golema 2013, 84). Peace, or *mir*, thus, is an affection, being closely related to mutuality, mutual exchange, friendship, and charity. But peace, we have seen, is hospitality, or *dwelling in peace*. This, if I mention Heidegger here, is the meaning of his *hearth of being* (see § 18 of his *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister,”* “Der Herd als das Sein”; Greek *hestia*) in a context of his well-known reflection on the homely/unhomely:

[W]e initially know only that unhomely one who, among beings and through his or her own activity in each case, seeks a way out toward the

homely and seeks the site of beings ... Does this mean that the hearth—around which alone everything, and especially human beings, can be homely—is being? (Heidegger 1996, 109)

... What essentially prevails as harmonious commencement, the unifying One in the middle of the sphere, is called “hearth.” (Philolaos from the Pythagorean school; Diels, *Vorsokratiker*, Fragment 7, cited and translated by Heidegger [1996, 112])

This is now my final point: for Heidegger, being is the hearth; it is the *place* to which all beings (all world, in an ancient cosmological sense) are drawn. It is “the middle” (Mitra has the same sense)¹ that “gathers everything around it – that wherein all beings have their site and are at home as beings” (Heidegger 1996, 112f.). The mesocosmic and trinitarian logic also has thus in an idiosyncratic way been safeguarded by Indo-Iranian Mitra. It would be one of the most important tasks of religious thinking today to address this forgotten ancient triadic and mesocosmic logic and to relate it to our theories in ethics and interfaith dialogue.

1. Golema (2013, 96) convincingly argues in his paper on Mitra that this god actually is “a third member” of old Indo-European triades, and as such, in his mediating role, the essence of the mediation—and we may say gathering.

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