



FREPIK

OUR DIFFERENT IMAGES OF THE WORLD

None of us lives in the world as it simply exists. Rather, each of us inhabits a specific “image of the world” – one which we did not create ourselves, but which we usually mistake for the real world itself.

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Oskar Kolberg, the nineteenth-century Polish ethnographer and folklorist, published several volumes of folk stories and songs from various regions of Poland and surrounding lands. In vol. 3 of his monograph exploring Kraków and the region, we read: “Different peoples live beyond Poland, be they

Hungarians, Prussians, Swedes, Lutherans and other varieties of Germans, Italians with the Piedmontese King, the French, then the unbaptized Turks and the Amerikee, rich with golden mountains. Beyond those lie wild lands and warm lands, (...) And beyond the warm lands are the edges of the world, inhabited by savages who cannot speak yet squeal instead (...) These people have great big feet; when it is hot, they roll on the ground and shield their heads from the sun with their feet, as though they were shovels. (...) Beyond those lands one can already glimpse the furnaces of hell (...)” Thus, in the minds of the people Kolberg spoke to, hell is a physical space and belongs to our world, even if it is situated at its farthest reaches.



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Between recognizable lands and the distant furnaces of hell, there stretches a warm, wild space inhabited by people with customs first described by the ancients. The world geography of this peasant from a village near Kraków comprises at least three elements: the political and religious zone of Europe, the spatial realm of Christianity, and farther elements of the world as described by ancient authors. This world is nothing like our own.

Still, ours, too, has its own oddities. During the Cold War, the world was split into East and West, and – in spite of the fall of the Berlin Wall more than three decades ago – we are now witnessing a certain resurgence of the paradigm, with the growing tensions between the United States and China. However, our current “West” is not necessarily in the west, nor is “East” in the east. The American musicologist Richard Taruskin pointed out the complexities: “A Soviet music magazine I once subscribed to gave news of the pianist Yevgeniy Kissin’s ‘Western debut’ – in Tokyo.” There can clearly be no doubt that according to European geopolitics, Japan and South Korea are indeed Western states, but Bolivia in South America is much less so. And there is plenty of other nuance. Most of us believe that global events are the result of an interplay of economic and political powers and interests. If asked about who rules the world, most of us would likely name certain countries, corporations, finance groups, political parties, religions, military powers, and so on. And yet followers of QAnon – who, let’s face it, are in no short supply – believe the world is ruled by a satanist syndicate with close ties to the US Democratic Party. In the vision of the world held by many of us, Donald Trump is a highly controversial, divisive, populist former President of the United States, whereas they hail him as a messiah on a mission to destroy this syndicate.

Magic

None of us lives in the world as it simply exists. Rather, we live inside certain specific images of the world, provided to us by our community and shared with it. Of course we all have our personal variations, preferences, and dislikes. However, when our internal view of the world diverges too much from the one widely accepted by our community, we start being perceived as sick individuals and others attempt to isolate us and cure us. The origin of this concept of “images of the world” is clear: it emerges from the simple observation that people do not act according to what the world is really like, but according to what they know about it. It is also how we define things as ordinary or extraordinary. If someone inhabits a magical image of the world, then their attempt to stave off drought by dancing a rain dance is indeed rational because it is in accordance with what they and their community

know about the world – in this instance, they know that magic is effective. If someone inhabits a religious image of the world, their attempt to combat drought through imploring prayer is also rational – the community knows that prayers work. But, if your vision of the world reflects scientific knowledge, then rain dances and heartfelt prayers are no longer rational choices, since your community understands that your best option is to install water butts.

The principle is simple in theory, but much harder to fully understand. We all tend to believe that it is *other* people who have a different view of the world, while we ourselves live in the world as it is – that our image of the world is the correct one. This is known as ethnocentrism. It makes perfect sense that we are all ethnocentric in our day-to-day lives: when I am chatting with my neighbor in Polish, I can’t worry about the fact that it is just one of thousands of languages out there and that other, equally appropriate grammars, syntaxes, and vocabularies exist. I must treat the rules of Polish as obvious, otherwise I will not be able to say or understand anything. This means that certain discoveries can only be made by studying views and ideas distinct from our own. The notion of the “image of the world” has been explored and developed by experts on cultural differences (anthropologists) and on temporal differences (historians).

Science

The geographical description of the world, which we started out with, is a fragment which seems the simplest to comprehend. However, our overall image of the world contains far, far more. First, before it can start describing the world, it must adopt a series of underlying notions – known as categories – used as tools in its creation. These are axiomatic definitions attempting to answer what is space, time, labor, individual, truth. For example, is time linear, flowing from the past to the future, or perhaps is it a cycle of eternally repeating seasons, night and day, birth and death? Attempting to answer such questions forces us to adopt certain practices; if, for example, time is a cycle, then maybe it needs to be assisted to ensure its renewal and to protect the repetition of the cycles through rituals with a cosmic significance? On the flip side, if time is linear, does that mean that as it passes the world is improving (something we call “progress”), or is it rather degenerating, from a past golden age towards an iron-age decline? What about the truth: how should we define it? As accordance with reality? Accordance with the tales of our ancestors? Accordance with what we ourselves can see? And for that matter, how do we define accordance? It is only once these baseline definitions are pinned down that we are able to describe the world in a literal sense, leading us to the most easily captured part of its image.

According to some visions of the world, it is multifarious and includes both material and spiritual realms, while others insist it comprises purely the here-and-now. Some images contain unicorns and chimeras, while others do not. It all seems very simple at first glance, but caution is needed: when we encounter an unfamiliar image of the world, we can oversimplify it by trying to extrapolate our own categories to it. Let's look at an example.

Religion

Let's say a Christian person encounters a very different religion; for example, a contemporary Christian or post-Christian (someone who no longer identifies with the religion but lives in a world shaped by Christian heritage) wishes to understand the beliefs of the ancient Greeks. They read Hesiod and Homer to learn that Zeus, Aphrodite, and Hephaistos were gods – but they interpret this term through their own category system of basic definitions. In their readings of ancient authors, they assume that Zeus and Hephaistos were eternal, transcendental beings, perhaps omnipotent and even spiritual. What they miss is the idea of “divine fauna,” a term coined by the late historian Paul Veyne to explain that Greek gods are in fact corporeal, carnal; they are not eternal but they are immortal and forever young, not because of their inherent nature but thanks to nectar and ambrosia. Also, they do not dwell in the afterlife: Zeus, for instance, lives on Mount Olympus, Hephaistos in the abyss of Mount Etna.

This illustrates how categories, or systems of basic definitions, underpin the way we describe the world. But this is not the only way we build our vision of the world, because it is not neutral – rather, it imbues the world with certain values and axiological definitions. Let's return to the example of Christianity and look at its early days, as studied by the Irish historian Peter Brown. Brown showed that the vision of the world as perceived by early Christians was, in many ways, very similar to that of the followers of Greek gods. Early Christians did not deny the existence of the Olympian gods – far from it – but they simply flipped the polarity of their values: they perceived Zeus, Apollo, et al. as demonic, evil beings, enemies of the One True God; their values were now the exact opposite than in Hellenic traditions. And early Christianity is not an isolated example. In Persian Zoroastrianism, the names of the devas are the same as in the historic Vedic religion and later Hinduism. However, India's devas are benevolent beings with a huge cosmological significance, opposing the malevolent asuras. In Persia, Zarathustra's religious reforms flipped the values, and devas became demons while keeping their name. The overall image of the world is similar, but with an entirely different system of values. This is

because there are hardly any elements which are not ascribed a value. Progressives and conservatives do not just have different ways of viewing time – more than anything, they assign opposite values to the past and the future. Points of the compass, likewise, are not neutral (for Christians and Muslims, Jerusalem and Mecca determine the values of certain directions), mountains are holy, borders dangerous, a sacred furrow separates an Etruscan-Roman city from the rest of the world... And everything which has value is also subject to emotions. As such, our vision of the world is also – or perhaps mainly? – something experienced. If you are still skeptical, just take a look at the emotions accompanying the clash of incompatible visions of the world in contemporary politics – for instance in the United States, United Kingdom, or Poland.

Time and space

By this point, our seemingly simple discovery seems to have become rather complicated. And it becomes even more complex when we consider certain issues encountered by all researchers: that “images of the world” have their history and variability, that they encounter and penetrate one another, that they are in conflict with and modify one another. A single society can contain different, clashing visions of the world; they shift through time and space and change along the way; we absorb them in myriad individual variations, and none of us straightforwardly adopts the vision of the world of our society.

Should we conclude with a simplified relativism – by just acknowledging the huge variety of visions of the world and their relative incompatibility? It would be difficult to do so with a clear conscience: during the COVID-19 pandemic, choosing a particular vision of the world could be a matter of life and death, while the Russian propaganda of recent months has made it starkly clear that visions of the world can be manipulated for the benefit of those in power. How, then, do we avoid falling into the mindset of colonists who believe that we have the right to impose our own vision of the world on others, while also remembering that not all visions of the world are of equal value? Perhaps the key requirement of a trustworthy vision of the world should be that it constantly corrects itself, adapts to accommodate any setbacks, and questions its own validity.

We currently have just one such vision of the world, which is shaped by the tradition of critical thinking, as exemplified by science. Science can be manipulated, of course, and it can become blinded and confounded, but in the end, it is only science which can recognize and reject this confusion. As long as it can remain true to itself instead of becoming a tool for implementing goals defined elsewhere, perhaps by economics or politics. ■

Further reading:

Gurevich A., *Categories of Medieval Culture*, trans. Campbell, 1985.

Brown P., *The Rise of Western Christendom*, 1996.

Vovelle M., *La mort et l'Occident: De 1300 à nos jours*, 2000.