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ÁSATRÚ IN AMERICA:
A NEW AMERICAN RELIGION

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ÁSATRÚ IN AMERICA:
A NEW AMERICAN RELIGION

Jefferson Forrest Calico

Read and Approved by:

James D. Chancellor (Chair)

Theodore J. Cabal

Date _____

This work is dedicated to my beautiful wife, Cari,
who worked while I read.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Asatru Assembly
AFA	Asatru Folk Assembly
NNV	Nine Noble Virtues
NRM	New Religious Movement
OR	Odinic Rite

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PREFACE

Although an interest in World Religions has long been a part of my life, my perspective on the subject changed when I began teaching Comparative Religion at Somerset Community College. If studying and communicating about World Religions was to become a life focus, I realized that I had to grow. When I found James Chancellor, it was clear that he could take me from where I was to what I needed to become. He became a teacher and mentor in the academic study of religion. My return to seminary represented a shift from seeing World Religions as an interest to approaching it as discipline. And it has been a most rewarding journey.

I am indebted to my parents, Drs. Forrest and Patrica Calico, for their continual encouragement and sacrificial support of our family. Their many contributions to this project have been invaluable. My wife, Cari, has been a patient and loving companion throughout this journey. Her extraordinary diligence in caring for our family allowed me the freedom to study, travel, think, and write. Ethnographic work is not possible without the participation and commitment of many others. What follows constitutes the beginning of an encounter and engagement this new religion and my honest attempt at understanding its depth and complexity as well as its place in our American context.

Jefferson F. Calico

Louisville, Kentucky

May 2013

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ásatrú (Asatru) is a New Religious Movement (NRM) that seeks to revive the religion and culture of the pre-Christian Norse and Germanic societies. Although it looks to ancient Europe for its inspiration, Asatru is an American religion, part of the contemporary Pagan movement currently thriving in the United States. The following work comprises over two years of research done within Asatru including participant observation, interviews with adherents, and reading in the literature of the movement. The impetus for this project derives from two insights that shaped the direction of my doctoral work in the World Religions PhD program at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The first insight concerns the nature of religion as a human phenomenon. The study of religion involves an understanding of the history and theology of the great religious traditions. These are among the factors which give context to the specific personal religious experience. But religion is ultimately a lived experience. It occurs at the level of the human life, and its meaning is personal. Wilfred Cantwell Smith has written that “the study of religion is the study of persons . . . and indeed human lives at their most intimate, most profound, most primary, most transcendent.”¹ As Smith indicates, religion concerns human nature at its deepest and most transcendent moments as well as its most mundane and petty. Religion is always about people and their experience; it is a way that people experience and interact with the wider world. The

¹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1981), 48.

great scope of history, the ancient creeds and doctrines, the rituals of the religious traditions, our place in the “cumulative tradition,” provide the backdrop and the stage upon which people enact this living quality of religious experience. This focus on the personal dimension has shaped both my understanding of religion and my approach towards the study of religion. While I strive to be deeply grounded in the factual knowledge of religions, studying religion requires grappling with the nexus of faith and action in human experience since “the primary locus of religiousness is persons.”² In order to encounter and understand Asatru on the level of human experience, I have taken an ethnographic approach as my research methodology.

In his lectures on Primal Religion James Chancellor has stated that “primal religion, what you might call paganism, is making a remarkable comeback in the West . . . even here in North America you are beginning to see a growth of primal religion . . . drawing back on the old religion that pre-dated Christian faith.”³ He gives as an example the opening ceremonies of the 1992 winter Olympics hosted by Norway:

[The ceremonies] were filled with religious imagery, all of which was taken from the primal folk religion of Norway that pre-dated Christian traditions: gnomes, fairies, the goddess of the snow, all of those things and not one single Christian symbol whatsoever When they had the opportunity to show themselves to the world, they chose their pagan religious tradition to symbolize their country. It’s making a big comeback.⁴

This realization about the changing religious context was the second insight that shaped this work. We live in a time when Islam features prominently in our society’s news and awareness, yet contemporary Pagan religious expressions quietly continue to grow. Pagan religions and Pagan religious concepts increasingly have an influence on the American religious milieu. While I find myself fascinated by all the religious

²Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 87.

³James D. Chancellor, “Primal Religion” (recorded online lecture, Major Living World Religions, 2011).

⁴Ibid.

traditions, the development and growth of contemporary Paganism caught my attention. I had been taught that the rise of Christianity represented enlightenment and freedom, a release from the pagan condition of fear, mundanity, and barbarism. Why would anyone want to “go back” to the superstition and futility of pagan religion? Yet the growing numbers of people who are seeking out a pre-Christian religious worldview and experience confounds such a perspective.

Although pinpointing the number of pagan adherents in the U.S. poses some real problems, several studies indicate that the number of contemporary Pagan adherents has grown significantly in the past two decades.⁵ In 2007, James R. Lewis, a well-respected scholar of NRMs, presented data which indicated a 38-fold increase in the number of contemporary Pagans in the U.S. from the period 1990 to 2001. Nor was this growth only a phenomenon of the American context. Lewis discovered similar dramatic rates of growth in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, stating that “the data . . . clearly indicates that the pagan movement has been growing explosively in recent years.”⁶ Estimates for the number of Pagans in the U.S. range from Lewis’ conservative estimate of slightly more than 300,000, to Margo Adler’s estimate of 400,000 pagan adherents in 2006.⁷ The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) is a nationwide scientific poll which has tracked religious trends in the U.S. since 1990, using hard numbers of self-identifying adherents. In 2008, the ARIS survey indicated even more significant growth than Lewis and Adler had previously estimated. The ARIS

⁵This study uses the term contemporary Paganism to refer to the practice of pagan spirituality in the modern world. Neopaganism is another familiar term, which Michael York argues is best used to describe one subtype of contemporary Paganism. See Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 60-61.

⁶James R. Lewis, “The Pagan Explosion: An Overview of select census and Survey Data,” in *The New Generation of Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloï (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 13-23.

⁷Margo Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 104.

report notes a “marked increase in preferences for personalized and idiosyncratic responses as well as increases in the Neo-Pagan groups,” from 307,000 participants in 2001 to 711,000 Neo-Pagans in 2008 showing that the movement roughly doubled within that seven year period.⁸ Michael Cooper, writing in 2010, confirms this trend and states that “contemporary paganism is a viable movement in Western society . . . the growth rate seems to be nothing less than phenomenal.”⁹

The contemporary Pagan community itself recognizes the growing prominence of Pagan forms of religion within the American context. Some contemporary Pagans propose that the movement will become the third largest religious movement in America some time this decade.¹⁰ The percentage of Asatru adherents, the specific focus of this study, within the larger Pagan movement is difficult to determine. Though casual estimates of ten thousand are sometimes heard among Asatru leaders, this is likely an exaggerated figure.¹¹ However, the growing number of Heathen groups and events indicates that growth is occurring and Asatru organizations speak optimistically of a “reawakening” to Nordic Paganism that has been intensifying since the 1970s.

Furthermore, the cultural influence of contemporary Pagans may be greater than their numerical presence. Despite the common assumption that contemporary

⁸Barry A. Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey 2008 Summary Report,” [online]; accessed 31 March 2011; available from http://b27.cc.trincoll.edu/weblogs/AmericanReligionSurvey-ARIS/reports/p1a_belong.html; Internet. Additional detailed statistics on Neopaganism were provided for me upon request. The total number of Neopagan adherents depends on which survey categories are included as Neopagan. The 711,000 figure was obtained by adding the Wiccan: 342,000; Druid: 29,000; and Pagan: 340,000; survey categories.

⁹Michael Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*, electronic ed. (Salt Lake City: Sacred Tribes Press, 2010.)

¹⁰Ed Hubbard, “Christians and Pagans Agree, Wicca Emerging as America's Third Religion,” [online]; accessed 10 November 2010; available from <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2005/4/prweb231351.htm>; Internet.

¹¹Field notes taken by author, Hinkley, MN, June 2012. I have heard estimates from Asatru adherents ranging from several thousand to ten thousand practitioners.

Pagans do not proselytize, some Asatruar specifically speak both of growing numerically and of influencing the culture of America.¹² For instance, in a recent podcast Steve McNallen of the Asatru Folk Assembly indicated that one of the goals for his organization in 2011 was to add members, a focus that sounds peculiarly like proselytizing. Perhaps more tellingly, he hopes to “spread certain ideas to the larger culture,” and writes that “we want to have an impact that is out of proportion to our modest numbers.”¹³ This organization, the Asatru Folk Assembly, takes as its mission both “calling back” those of European descent to their native religion and popularizing Pagan ideas within the cultural mainstream indicating that changing minds and influencing lives is an important goal.

I came into the Ph.D. program at Southern intent on studying the major world religions, and I dismissed New Religious Movements (NRMs) as fairly unimportant and ephemeral phenomena. In this sense I began with a certain bias against NRMs, discounting them as lacking not only the pedigree but also the substance and seriousness found in the grand traditions of the major world religions. By holding this view of new religions, I was admittedly sharing in a fairly widespread “popular dismissal of these movements as fraudulent [and] shallow,” poor imitations of real religions.¹⁴ NRMs have often been portrayed as aberrant, bizarre and dangerous.¹⁵ However, it is clear to me that despite the problems both faced by and caused by new religions, they represent a type of

¹²The term “Asatruar” is used in the movement to signify more than one Asatru adherent. The “-ar” suffix represents the Old Norse plural form. It will appear synonymously with “Asatru adherents” in this study.

¹³Steve McNallen, “The AFA’s mission in 2011” [online]; accessed 16 March 2011; available from <http://Ásatrúrising.podbean.com/>; Internet.

¹⁴Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), viii, 2.

¹⁵Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

creative religious innovation that may be characteristic of pluralistic and free societies.¹⁶ As Philip Jenkins demonstrates in his book *Mystics and Messiahs*, fringe movements and unconventional ideas have long been a part of the American religious experience.¹⁷ From their marginal social vantage point, these new religions have often presented alternative religious solutions to social and personal tensions found within modern societies and left unresolved within mainstream religious groups. They may serve both as creative sources of new worlds of meaning as well as sites of social and personal experimentation. The majority of those who choose to be involved with NRMs are motivated by authentic religious feelings. Indeed, the great religions of the world began as small movements with new religious ideas and were often regarded as cults by their host societies. Although they lack the complexity of the great world religions, NRMs are indeed authentic forms of religious expression.

Additionally, as Lorne Dawson writes, NRMs offer “a good opportunity to study many of the essential elements of religious life in smaller and more manageable forms” as well as serving as “barometers of the larger social transformations occurring around us.”¹⁸ By studying NRMs we are able to gain insight into the structures and processes of religious life such as conversion, ways of knowing, the development of religious organizations, religious conflict, and the varieties of religious expression. NRMs also serve as laboratories for examining how people negotiate social issues such as the roles of women, marriage and family, cultural pluralism, and shifting religious attitudes. The study of NRMs not only helps us to better understand our own history and

¹⁶Rodney Stark, and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 187, 312. Also see Gordon J. Melton, “New New Religions: Revisiting a Concept” *Nova Religio* 10 (2007): 109.

¹⁷Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs*, 5, 16.

¹⁸Lorne Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179-180.

culture, but also deepens our understanding of the religious impulse in human life and ourselves as religious beings.

Several factors make this a fortuitous time to be researching Asatru. By all indications, the movement seems to be gaining rather than losing momentum and is now transitioning from a small, nebulous, and fractious network into a real movement, or as Graham Harvey puts it, “growing numerically and in coherence.”¹⁹ At this point, the movement is able to support four national organizations that represent a spectrum of religious and ideological viewpoints.²⁰ There is real diversity within the movement that is expressed organizationally as well as in ritual and theology. In addition to a well-developed exoteric side based in textual study and ritual, Asatru also has a fully esoteric component and is thus situated to engage a variety of participants with different spiritual interests. There are also aspects of the religion, such as its emphasis on family, which seem to reflect a degree of continuity with the values of the broader American context. Thus in many ways the movement seems poised for further growth. This project will attempt to take stock of the Asatru movement, assess various aspects of its development, and consider prospects for the future.

I first discovered Asatru during a student discussion on radical religion in a PhD seminar on NRMs. Asatru was presented as a fringe religion characterized by millennialism and racism. At the same time, other elements of Asatru seemed to belie that characterization. In particular, the Nine Noble Virtues of Asatru, the widely accepted table of virtue ethics for Heathens, lauded the ideals of loyalty, truth, industry, and

¹⁹Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 53.

²⁰The four national Asatru organizations are The Odinic Rite on the racialist end; the Asatru Folk Assembly and the Asatru Alliance representing the strong folkish center; and The Troth on the modernist, inclusive end. In addition there are many regional organizations and kindreds that make up the various levels of the Asatru community. See chap. 2, “A Brief History of Contemporary Asatru,” for more information.

steadfastness, among others.²¹ A fellow student asked the question, “What do we find objectionable about these values?” His comment prevented an all-too-quick dismissal of the religion by suggesting that these virtues, which seemed quite consistent with many American ideals, deserved more consideration. This first exposure to Asatru raised in my mind an awareness of discordance between the presentation of Asatru as a radical racist religion and the compelling, even commendable virtues, espoused by its adherents. I wondered if there was more to Asatru than may have been initially apparent. Could further research resolve this tension and round out a more robust picture of the nature of the Asatru movement? Could I find out more about this movement that was growing in the American heartland?

What follows is my initial attempt to present a fuller and deeper picture of Asatru, its people, worldview, and religious expression. The project is rooted in two years of participant observation, numerous interviews with practitioners, and extensive reading of both insider and scholarly materials. That said, I present this as initial research and acknowledge that it is both preliminary to further study and necessarily limited in its scope and conclusions. It should be noted that this project is something of a prolegomena to what I hope to be a longer engagement with Asatru. As my mentor and PhD committee chair mentioned at one point in the process, in this type of research one is never really “done.” The goal of naturalistic inquiry is to arrive at a point of saturation or “informational redundancy,” yet that goal can be difficult to achieve in a movement as fluid and disparate as Asatru.²² Within the relatively small community of Asatru adherents and despite their shared worldview, opinions and practices diverge fairly

²¹For a list of the Nine Noble Virtues of Asatru, see appendix 4. Also see Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Our Troth* (Charleston, SC: Booksurge Publishing, 2006), 1:525-42.

²²Yvonne S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 219.

widely. Heathenry seems to have moved beyond its initial founding into a phase of creativity and expansion, in which innovative and divergent subsets of beliefs and practices are arising quickly. So while I hope to present an accurate overview of the Heathen movement, the study also acts as a description of areas for further research, both in what I cover and in what I do not.

Regarding terms, I will generally use “Asatru” to refer to the religion itself. However, “Heathen” is a term that is increasingly being used within the movement itself to designate the family of practices included in the Northern Way. I will often use the word “Heathen” synonymously with Asatru, as an adjective to describe a “Heathen worldview” or a “Heathen practice” and sometimes as the noun “Heathen(s)” indicating those who practice the worship of pre-Christian Norse deities. Appendix 1 contains a glossary of additional terms.

Chapters

Chapter 2 presents a brief history of contemporary Asatru. While the focus of this study is not the history of the movement, a summary of its development will help to familiarize readers with the people and organizations that have shaped Asatru. The end of the chapter examines three innovative trends that are occurring in the movement. Innovation occurs in response to changes within NRMs and their social contexts. Some NRMs are forced to innovate in order to address the decline and shrinkage of the movements. Yet at the present time, Asatru is expanding and growing. The evolution and innovation that is occurring in Asatru reflects the creativity and specialization that growth brings.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological and theoretical framework for the study. Many scholars of NRMs have noted that new religions provide alternative solutions to the social problems which arise within modern society. The roles of women, ways of knowing, social organization, race and ethnicity, and human relationships with

nature are prevalent tensions in our society that have been addressed by NRMs. While a Viking religion may seem like an attempt to escape the present, Asatru has developed within the context of modernity and has been influenced by the tensions in its environment. Asatru provides innovative solutions by applying elements of its reconstructed Norse religious worldview to many of these social issues. In fact, reconstruction could be seen as an attempt to alleviate the perceived tensions and failures of modern society with ancient solutions.

Chapter 4 provides a basic introduction to the worldview of Asatru. The chapter begins by introducing the category of Reconstructionist Paganism and defining its various goals. The important elements that shape the Heathen worldview are then discussed. Taking into account definitions of Pagan religion by Margo Adler and Michael York, the chapter examines the extent to which Asatru exhibits elements of Paganism. A religious worldview can be analyzed in terms of three important components: cosmology, which describes the nature of the world; theology, which describes the nature of Ultimate Reality or the divine; and anthropology, which describes the understanding of human nature and its relationship with natural and supernatural reality. This chapter outlines the distinctive Heathen approach to each of these areas.

Chapters 5 through 7 draw on my own ethnographic research to examine three prominent features of Asatru practice and belief and discuss how each offers religious solutions to modern tensions. Chapter 5 addresses the Asatru ritual of *sumbel* (sumbel), which emphasizes the connection of individuals with each other in a quasi-familial relationship. This ritual is analyzed as a unique religious solution to the issues of modern rootlessness and the breakdown of family life. Chapter 6 focuses on the role of magical practice within Asatru and how it functions to address the ambiguity and limitations which characterize women's modern social roles. Heathen magic has developed in ways that expand both epistemological possibilities and the role of women in the religion.

Chapter 7 discusses the themes of nature religion within Asatru. It analyzes Asatru as an earth-centered movement that seeks to reconnect and re-envision the relationship between humans and the earth. Ritual, theological, and apocalyptic responses are examined as solutions to the growing awareness that modern lifestyles generate an experience of alienation from nature.

The concluding chapter addresses ways in which Asatru challenges some scholarly suppositions about the characteristics of NRMs in America. Lorne Dawson has suggested that America may be experiencing a Fourth Great Awakening in which a new type of religious consciousness is emerging.²³ Asatru exemplifies many of the features of the new religious consciousness described by Dawson. However, the particularly ethnic emphasis of Asatru sets it apart in many ways.

²³Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 64-66, 182-89.

CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF CURRENT HISTORY OF THE ASATRU MOVEMENT

Asatru is a New Religious Movement (NRM) that seeks to revive the religion and culture of the pre-Christian Norse and Germanic societies of ancient northern Europe. Often called the Northern Way or Heathenry, the movement is distinct from Neopagan movements such as Wicca as well as contemporary Druidry, Celtic and Hellenic forms of contemporary Paganism. Asatru takes its inspiration from the religion and culture of Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxon England, and the cultures from northern continental Europe, the territory the Romans called Germania. From approximately 688 to 1100 C.E., the pre-Christian Pagan religions of these areas gradually ceased to be practiced as the tribes converted to Christianity. Yet in the late twentieth century, attempts to revive or reconstruct the worship of the ancient northern deities began in earnest.

Contemporary Asatru movements can now be found throughout the world in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, continental Europe, and Australia, but most significantly in Iceland, where Asatru is recognized as a state religion. However, a significant part of this contemporary growth has occurred in the United States. In some ways, American Asatru is a result of the globalization of religion. American adherents look to a European past for their religious inspiration, draw on ideas that often originated in Europe, and maintain an awareness of the movement's transcontinental presence. However, the fact that few substantial ties exist between Asatru in the U.S. and similar movements elsewhere has caused American Asatru to take a unique shape. It has emerged and evolved according to its own particular context with little influence from the

outside. The American form of Asatru will be the focus of this work. The following brief history will provide a general sketch of the founding of modern American Asatru and describe several trends in the recent development of the movement. A more detailed history of the movement's early years has been well documented in several scholarly sources, as well as Asatru works.¹

1970s: The New Awakening

The contemporary Asatru movement has benefited from several earlier attempts to revive northern European paganism. Many of these attempts were closely associated with the German nationalist and folk movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. German esoteric philosophy, magic and runework were developed by individuals such as Guido Von List and others in the years leading up to World War Two. While these efforts were cut short by the war, they established theological precursors that later found a place within modern Asatru: an understanding of runes as esoteric symbols, a conception of the Germanic soul laden with Nordic archetypes, as well as the connection with racism that continues to linger over the movement.

A continent away in Australia, Alexander Rud Mills began developing a Norse-based religious program in the 1920s and 1930s that proved to be more influential to the modern movement. He was enamored by the Pagan developments in Europe and

¹See the following sources for early history of the Asatru movement: Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Matthias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); and Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Our Troth*, vol. 1, *History and Lore* (North Charleston, SC: Booksurge, LLC., 1993).

was significantly motivated by a strong antipathy towards Judaism and Christianity. As Kaplan mentions, Mills saw both Judaism and Christianity as “vile Middle Eastern Abrahamic cults” and blamed these religions for what he saw as the degeneracy of society.² Mills felt that a regeneration of Western culture could be achieved only by a return to the gods of the Nordic folk soul, the gods of Asatru. However his system mainly seemed to replace the Christian God with the Norse God Odin, while maintaining many of the trappings of Anglican Christianity.

While the initial impact of Mills’ efforts was negligible, his writing was discovered by Else Christensen in the 1960s. Christensen was a Swedish political activist who had immigrated to the United States after World War Two. Mills’ work had a profound effect on her, leading to something of a political and religious awakening that transformed her into the standard bearer for Odinism.³ Christensen became a more effective organizer than Mills and tirelessly promoted Odinism. She began publishing a long-running newsletter, *The Odinist*, which built the ideological basis for early Asatru and Odinist thought.⁴ She maintained a substantial correspondence, reaching out to other political and religious activists to build her movement. She founded the first Odinist organization in America in 1971, the Odinist Fellowship, and found a ready audience by promoting Odinism in the prison system, an emphasis that continues to be prominent in

²Jeffrey Kaplan, “The Reconstruction of the Asatru and Odinist Traditions,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 194.

³The term Odinism was used by these early founders to capitalize on the widespread recognition of Odin’s name among the general public, as well as to indicate Odin’s role as the preeminent Norse god. However, the term gradually became associated with the more radical political and racial positions taken by some adherents. It now serves almost as a denominational term, distinguishing the more mainstream Asatru from the militant, racist expression of Norse paganism. This distinction will be discussed in more detail in chap. 3. For more on Else Christensen, see William B. Fox, “Interview with Else Christensen” [online]; accessed 31 January 2013; available from http://www.amfirstbooks.com/IntroPages/ToolBarTopics/Articles/Featured_Authors/fox,_william_b/Fox_works/Fox_1990-1995/William_B._Fox_19930601_Else_Christensen_interview.html; Internet.

⁴Kaplan, “The Reconstruction of the Asatru and Odinist Traditions,” 195.

both Odinism and Asatru.

Christensen's work and personal influence extended into the lives of many early Asatru adherents who remain pivotal to the contemporary Asatru movement. These include Steven McNallen, who would go on to found the Viking Brotherhood, the Asatru Free Assembly and the current Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA); Valgard Murray, leader and inspiration for the Asatru Alliance (AA); and Heimgest Holley, a long-time member of the Odinic Rite (OR) and currently the Director of the Court of Gothar, the OR's leadership body. Although Christensen's legacy tends to run particularly strong among Odinists, she was influential throughout the Heathen movement. Christensen profoundly influenced the leadership of The Odinic Rite, who venerate her as the Folk Mother. Proponents of folkish Asatru resonate with the political and anti-Christian elements of her work. Even groups such as The Troth, who completely reject Christensen's racial rhetoric, commend her tireless dedication to the growth of the religious cause and her later work, which emphasizes the spiritual aspects of the belief system rather than political ideology.

The origin of contemporary Asatru is often referred to as the New Awakening or Rebirth by those within the movement and has taken on something of a mythic quality. In the early 1970s, almost simultaneously and without knowledge of each other, individuals throughout North America and Europe were drawn to the Norse religious heritage and began to pursue it as a viable religious practice. These individuals included Stephen McNallen, who formed the Viking Brotherhood in 1972 in the U.S.; Sveinbjorn Benteinsson, who formed the *Ásatrúarfélagið* in Iceland in 1972; and John Yeowell, who formed the Committee for the Restoration of the Odinic Rite (now The Odinic Rite) in 1973. As well, Garman Lord developed a movement called Theodism, a reconstruction of Anglo-Saxon paganism, in 1971. Theodism is often considered distinct from Asatru because of its strict hierarchical structure and its emphasis on ritual polarity of the sexes,

which derives from its Wiccan origins. However, the practice fits within the Heathen umbrella, and Theodish writers have been quite influential as a source of scholarship for the movement.

Clearly, sociological factors were at work in the modern birth of Asatru. The strands of the movement were woven in the atmosphere of the social and religious upheaval of the 1960s countercultural movement, the esotericism of the American cultic milieu, and from the identity politics of the civil rights movement, in which Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans were all asserting their presence in American society. However, from the perspective of many Asatru adherents, this remarkable “awakening” is clear evidence of divine activity. In their eyes, the old gods have stirred, becoming active again after a dormancy of almost a thousand years and calling their people back to the old ways.

1980s-90s: Race and Schism

The 1980s and 1990s were a period of development for the movement, often interrupted by controversy and schism generated by the issue of racial attitudes. The Asatru Free Assembly, which had grown out of Stephen McNallen’s Viking Brotherhood, became the main organized American Asatru group in 1970s and 1980s. During that time, distinct philosophies emerged about the nature of Asatru. Some saw it as primarily an ethnic religion, the manifestation of an ethnic “folk soul” while for others, Asatru was *about* a specific culture but could be authentically practiced by any sincere seeker. Stephen McNallen attempted for several years to hold together these increasingly divergent perspectives. Diana Paxson describes his meetings in Berkeley during this time as an explosive mixture of neo-Nazis and counter-culture hippies.⁵ However, by the mid-1980s the Asatru Free Assembly disintegrated amid leadership burn-out and the

⁵Diana Paxson, interview by author, Pawhuska, OK, June, 2011.

irreconcilable tensions among participants over the issue of race. Stephen McNallen, often considered the father or central figure in the growth of American Asatru, withdrew from active involvement.

By 1987, two new organizations had emerged from the wreckage of McNallen's group. Not surprisingly, each had a distinctly different stance on race. Valgard Murray, who had former ties to white supremacy groups, founded The Asatru Alliance (AA). Murray organized the AA as an alliance of autonomous kindreds (small local groups of Asatru adherents, similar to a Wiccan coven or a Druidic grove) to avoid the struggle over authority that plagued the AFA. The AA also championed a distinctly "folkish" perspective of the religion. The Folkish orientation maintains that Asatru is the indigenous religion of northern Europeans, an ethnic religion that is suitable only for those of Northern European ancestry.

As a response to the folkish AA, Edred Thorsson and several others formed The Ring of Troth, now simply The Troth. The founders emphasized the academic and magical aspects of the religion and enunciated a form of "universalist" Asatru decidedly more inclusive than the folkish persuasion. The universalist perspective maintains that being Asatru is a religious choice that can be made by anyone who feels drawn to the movement, whether one interprets that as a spiritual call by the gods or simply an attraction to the Norse cultural aspects. The Troth welcomes the involvement of racial and ethnic minorities, LGBT persons, as well as those on the theological margins of Asatru, such as Neopagans. The Troth builds its membership through a network of Stewards who represent the organization in all fifty states and several international locations. They emphasize their Lore and Clergy training programs, through which The Troth hopes to build a network of well-educated and competent Heathen religious specialists.

In the mid-1990s, sensing that universalist Asatru was becoming predominant

in the movement, McNallen returned to active involvement in the religion. In 1994, he formed the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) with the combination of a clearly enunciated folkish perspective and a tight centralized organization. He sought to rescue the movement from the universalism which he saw as threatening to dilute the essential nature of Asatru. McNallen, who has a military background, emphasizes political and cultural issues of Asatru, as well as the importance of a strong Norse warrior ethic as a vital part of surviving in the modern world. McNallen maintains friendly ties with Murray and the AA. However, his active and charismatic presence within the movement causes him to be seen as the folkish torchbearer. Similar to The Troth's stewards, the AFA has a network of representatives called Folkbuilders who act as spokespeople and recruiters for the organization.

The Odinic Rite (OR) remained active primarily in Britain until the late 1990s when it expanded into North America under the leadership of Heimgest Holley, who became the leader of the organization in 1989. The OR fought its own battles over the racial issue in the early 1990s. While this conflict led to a split of the organization, Heimgest successfully steered the main OR faction toward a more cultural and esoteric focus. However, the OR retains many of the distinctives of Odinism, including a racial outlook. For this reason, the group remains marginalized from most of American Asatru. The OR maintains a strong esoteric emphasis, focusing on spiritual evolution toward a higher state of awareness called Odinic Consciousness. The group's rhetoric has a revolutionary flair and decidedly political overtones and is often critical of mainstream Asatru as too religiously shallow, too concerned with dressing up like Vikings rather than pursuing the serious consciousness-raising that the OR advocates. The OR has been very active in prison work, establishing prison kindreds through the United States, particularly in California and a number of southern states.

2000s: Current Trends

For the most part, these groups: The Troth, the Asatru Folk Assembly, the Asatru Alliance, and the Odinic Rite, continue to form the core of organized Asatru practice in the United States in the current decade. Throughout the year, they each hold regular gatherings called Things or Moots, and they are active in publication, recruitment, and education for the cause. Yet there is little if any coordination or cooperation between the groups. All the organizations report continued growth in the last two decades. The AFA remains tightly organized around McNallen and prominently promotes him as the leader and founder of Asatru. The AFA has maintained a more political stance than the other Asatru groups. McNallen and the AFA are currently involved in a political effort called the Hammer Project to have the Thor's Hammer authorized by the U.S. government as an official religious symbol for military gravestones.⁶ The Thor's hammer, called the *Mjolnir* (pronounced meYOLneer), is commonly worn by Asatru adherents as a symbol of their faith, and is a ubiquitous symbol throughout Heathenry.

The Troth has taken a decidedly less political trajectory and has focused instead on scholarship, creative, and artistic development. Story-telling, drama, ritual innovation, seiðr (seidh, Germanic magic) have all found a home in The Troth. Diana Paxson, one of The Troth's long-time members and Elders, has had a significant role in the development of oracular seidh, a magical practice which will be discussed in chapter 5. In contrast to the AFA, the leadership of The Troth has been routinized into a committee called the High Rede elected by the membership, and seems to have stabilized since the upheavals which rocked the organization in the 1990s. However, the more democratic nature of its governance opens The Troth to recurring and potentially divisive controversies.

The Odinic Rite remains quite active though somewhat on the margins of the

⁶See "Hammer Project," [online]; accessed 28 January 2013; available from <http://www.runestone.org/component/content/article/89-news/106-hammer-project.html>; Internet.

Asatru mainstream. The OR has been a leading proponent of prison ministry as well as the most vocal Asatru group about environmental issues. The environmental stance of the OR will be discussed in chapter 6. However, the OR remains the most folkish of the Asatru groups and for that reason is often viewed critically as a racial organization. The tight centralized bureaucracy of the OR has provided stability and direction for the group, but has not facilitated rapid growth.

Flourishing of Independent Heathen Life

The life cycles of these national organizations are a convenient way to systematize the Heathen world as well as to study it. Yet, the national groups do not provide a complete picture of American Asatru. Religious and social developments often occur outside of, or in the orbit of national groups but without their direct involvement. Many Heathens criticize the role of national organizations in the movement, seeing them as unnecessary for growth, and countervailing the ethical qualities of independence and personal loyalty that are so important to the Heathen ethos. For these reasons, it is important to note the proliferation of independent Heathen endeavors. Heathens are often highly motivated and pour much significant personal effort into religious activities.

For instance, much of the development of magic has taken place outside of organized Asatru. Diana Paxson's reconstruction of seidr magic, while highly influential within The Troth, remains the independent endeavor of a religious entrepreneur. Numerous other independent magic workers, each with their own idiosyncratic spiritual practice exist throughout the Heathen community, such as the sub-movement represented by Kari Tauring's work of Volva Stav, which engages women in a type of spiritual training using magic, trance, song and rhythm for healing purposes. While each national group maintains its own publication, independent journals such as *Odvoerir* and *The Journal of Contemporary Heathen Thought*, podcasts, and self-published Heathen authors represent a constant source of new ideas, innovation, and self-analysis. There are

also several long-running independent kindreds on the East Coast such as Raven Kindred North and Gladsheim Kindred, which eschew any attachment to national organizations. These kindreds have maintained the long-running East Coast Thing annual gathering, which has been a major factor contributing to the development of a well-integrated Heathen presence in the northeast region of the U.S. Additionally, small Heathen-run businesses are also becoming important developments in the movement. Heathen artisans produce and sell home-brewed alcohol such as mead and beer, run tattooing businesses, and produce Norse-themed artwork, herbal and natural soaps, fiber arts, and Asatru music. Even blacksmithing is being revived as a Heathen art form.

Current Trends

Asatru continues to evolve in new directions. This dynamic is driven by two primary factors: the on-going recruitment of new, highly motivated converts and the decentralized nature of the movement which allows innovators a high degree of freedom. These innovators are similar to the religious entrepreneurs discussed by Stark and Bainbridge in that they draw on prior knowledge often gained through participation in Asatru and engage in religious engineering to produce new variations and elements of religious culture.⁷ Their innovations rarely result in distinctly new religions however. Most find an accepted place within the broader Asatru movement, a situation made possible again by the decentralized and flexible structure of Asatru.

Stark and Bainbridge state that religious entrepreneurs are often “motivated by the desire for profit.”⁸ While these Asatru innovators may obtain the intangible rewards

⁷Rodney Stark, and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 168-78. The important similarities with the Stark/Bainbridge model of the religious entrepreneur are cultural specialization, in which the entrepreneur masters part of the religious culture (170); religious engineering, which they define as the “conscious design of compensator packages and other elements of culture” (173); and their proposition of ongoing innovation designed to improve the cult (176). Asatru clearly benefits from this sort of “progressive innovation” (174-75).

⁸*Ibid.*, 169.

of recognition, praise, admiration, and some degree of influence, financial profitability is rarely achieved. The innovators are true believers, “honest entrepreneurs,” motivated by their own personal spiritual evolution as much as any other compensator.⁹ During my research I was unable to find any Asatru leaders who completely supported themselves financially from their religious endeavors alone. All held jobs outside the movement and pursued Asatru in their spare time. Generally speaking, the Asatru movement suffers from a lack of financial resources, a situation exacerbated by its relatively small numbers, the socioeconomic level of adherents, many of whom are working class Americans, and the decentralized nature of the movement which prevents financial resources from being concentrated.

Story-Telling on the West Coast

The work of one such innovator, Steven Abell, demonstrates the evolution of the cultural aspects of Asatru. Steve is going about the reconstruction of Asatru by reviving the art of story-telling. I attended a story-telling session that Steve held in a hotel room set aside as the “Heathen Hospitality Room” at Pantheacon, an annual Pagan convention held in California. When I arrived, I was struck by the fact that the hotel television was draped over with a cloth, effectively hiding it from view. This symbolic action signified a turning away from modern popular entertainment and a turn toward the older, more personal form of entertainment and interaction represented by story-telling.¹⁰ Steve sees story-telling as a cultural element of old Heathen culture which strengthened the community and functioned as a powerful socializing context, transmitting a living awareness of the Norse worldview to its participants.

These factors are at work in Steve’s dedication to reviving this art form in

⁹Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 174.

¹⁰Field notes taken by author, San Jose, CA, February, 2012.

contemporary Heathen culture.¹¹ While Heathens are known to debate about details of the lore and runecraft or discuss scholarly works and historical accounts, story-telling is an aspect of the historical culture that has not received an equitable amount of attention and practice. Steve is addressing this need by generating an interest and audience for story-telling in the Asatru movement. He has written and published books of original stories influenced by Norse myth. He teaches workshops at Heathen events about the mechanics of story-telling and sponsors story-telling events, such as the evening at Pantheacon in which almost twenty people crowded into a hotel room for over an hour listening to story-tellers. Additionally, Steve leads a group called the Story Pirates, which performs public dramatic readings of his original Heathen-based stories.

While debate and lectures may be important to the process of reconstruction, Steve's stories work differently: they enable listeners to imagine what it might be like to have the Norse deities actively involved in one's life. His stories often feature a modern character whose life becomes dramatically affected by the involvement of the Norse deities.¹² Steve's versions of the gods are not the staid descriptions found in many Asatru books that catalog the divine qualities and attributes, but living beings entwined in contemporary circumstances. To the characters who encounter them, the gods are lively but ambiguous entities who play havoc with the contemporary dilemmas in which the characters are enmeshed. For Steve, Norse reconstruction is not about returning to the past. He has a keen sense for the lived experience of religion. By telling contemporary stories into which the deities and values of Heathenry figure, he seeks to influence the way Heathens see and experience their present, a present in which Norse gods and Heathen values actively shape current lifestyles. Steve seeks to transform minds with the

¹¹Steven Abell, email to author, 28 February 2012.

¹²See Steven T. Abell, *Days in Midgard: A Thousand Years On: Modern Legends Based on Northern Myth* (Denver: Outskirts Press, 2008).

power of his stories, modern myths that engage his audience with the intricacies of the Asatru worldview.

Culturally Specific Heathenry on the East Coast

Another notable trend is the development of culturally specific Heathenries, sub-movements within Asatru that focus on one specific cultural expression of northern European Paganism, such as Manx (Isle of Mann) or Anglo-Saxon variations of Heathenry. While these sub-movements have the potential to develop into religious movements of their own, they presently maintain a strong connection with Asatru, benefiting from the ideological resources of the movement as well as access to potential converts. The religious entrepreneurs who develop them build new sets of religious compensators by researching specific historical cultures and introducing variations on the gods, rituals, terminology and symbols of Asatru. The sub-movements are often structured around a kindred or small group led by the entrepreneur that functions as the site of further development and evolution of the variation.

An intriguing example of this sort is represented by the Distelfink Sippenschaft kindred in Pennsylvania, which is reconstructing a variation of Heathenry drawn from the Pennsylvania German tradition. The Pennsylvania German culture has a three hundred year history in the central and eastern Pennsylvania region known as the *Deitscherei* and is primarily identified with the Anabaptist Amish and Mennonite religious groups. While many of the German immigrants who formed these communities were Anabaptists searching for religious freedom, others fled the economic devastation of the Thirty Years War and carried with them fragments of pre-Christian traditions. The Distelfink Sippenschaft kindred, which includes a native Pennsylvania German speaker, draws on the stories, folktales, and diaries of these immigrants as resources for rebuilding a viable Heathen spirituality. In many cases, pre-Christian spiritual practices are apparent within the living Pennsylvania German culture, such as the healing tradition of Braucherie,

which continues to be passed down from master to apprentice in lineages of magical and herbal practice.¹³

This emerging subset of Heathenry is called *Der Urglaawe*, or “the original faith,” in the Pennsylvania German dialect.¹⁴ Urglaawe has a number of correspondences with mainstream Asatru such as similar deities, cosmology, and ethics. However it also incorporates distinctive features of its Pennsylvania German origin, such as the continental European earth goddess Frau Holle, the symbol of the sickle rather than the Thor’s Hammer, the Hexerei magic derived from German sources, and the Braucherie healing tradition. In addition, Urglaawe maintains a more earth-centered orientation than is usually found in Asatru. It is very much a nature religion that reflects the strong agricultural tradition of Pennsylvania German culture in its calendar, imagery, and practice of herbalism.

The reconstructive practice involved in these sub-movements is well-illustrated by the story of a local Pennsylvania mountain known as Hexenkopf. Kindred members found references to this mountain in various historical sources which described it as a haunted place.¹⁵ This folklore was several generations old, demonstrating that the local Anabaptist community had perceived this mountain in spiritual terms, fearing it as the abode of evil spirits and harmful spiritual power. Intrigued by these references, the kindred sought out the mountain itself. After spending time and conducting rituals there, they felt that the mountain had a strong affinity with goddess Frau Holle. The kindred incorporated the mountain as a sacred site, a regular place of pilgrimage and ritual for the group. As Robert Schreiwer writes, “Thus, a place that is associated with ‘witchcraft’ in a

¹³Robert Lusch, email message to author, March 24, 2012.

¹⁴Robert Lusch, *A Brief Introduction to Urglaawe* (Bristol, PA: Die Urglaawisch Sippschaft vum Distelfink, 2009), 7.

¹⁵Ibid., 10.

negative connotation in Christianity becomes a splendid and positive location in which to honor our gods and goddesses.”¹⁶

The Hexenkopf story illustrates a process by which religious entrepreneurs can create new religious forms. Beginning with a pre-existing Pennsylvania folk tradition that recognized the mountain as a spiritual, albeit “haunted” site, the Heathen innovators reverse-engineered the historical Christian designations to discover or construct a pre-Christian, Pagan association. Thus the *Urglaawe* sub-movement draws on a new world folk tradition, reinterpreting and reimagining it as the basis for a new religious practice. These practices take on a type of authenticity through their strong continuity with the Pennsylvania German culture, an association that validates and legitimates the new forms.

Tribalism in the Mid-West

A remarkable new Heathen movement has begun to coalesce in the Midwest since 2008, consisting of a cooperative network of kindreds that cuts a swath across the America heartland from Minnesota to Texas. The gravitational center of this movement is the charismatic personality of Mark Stinson whose religious fervor, organizational acumen, and hard work has allowed him to build and maintain a growing network of relationships and loyalties in the region. Stinson’s story closely follows the career model of a religious entrepreneur. After a mid-life conversion process that brought him to Asatru, Stinson served as a Folkbuilder with the AFA. When conflict led to his removal from the organization, Stinson took that as an opportunity to coalesce a new movement with a folkish orientation like the AFA but without its tight central leadership.¹⁷ Stinson

¹⁶Lusch, *A Brief Introduction to Urglaawe*, 11.

¹⁷A joint statement issued by Stinson and AFA founder Steven McNallen suggested a personal rift between the two had led to Stinson’s expulsion. See “Joint Statement by Steve McNallen and Mark Stinson” [online]; accessed 28 January 2013; available from <http://theurbanasatruar.com/2010/07/26/asatru-rising-podcast-review-and-a-heathen-reconciliation/>; Internet.

has expanded his influence by forming a close-knit kindred, a group of co-religionists, Jotun's Bane Kindred, which hosts an annual Heathen event called Lightning Across the Plains, touted as possibly the largest Heathen event in the world.¹⁸ He is also a thoughtful writer who has authored a growing collection of self-published books concerning practical and theological ideas about Asatru, building a religious movement, and personal religious transformation.

A significant event in Stinson's life was a pilgrimage to Iceland, which strengthened his commitment to the importance of Asatru and the value of historical Heathenry to contemporary American lives. Despite this trip and his valorization of the historical importance of Iceland, he does not look to contemporary Icelandic Asatru as a source of inspiration. He seeks to reconstruct a very American form of Asatru which is consistent with the values of the American Midwest such as family and community, practicality, hard work, and loyalty to friends and neighbors.

Stinson's movement, called Midwest Tribes, is developing a form of Asatru that is focused on building family-centered kindreds called tribes. Tribalism is first a mode of Heathen organization emphasizing multi-generational families bound together by religious practice and personal loyalty. A tribe consists of several families and their children who build a shared religious culture with its own customs and traditions. The tribe is at once a religious community as well as a type of family united by bonds of friendship and care, modeled on the extended family. When the tribe meets, "the adults are talking, cooking, crafting, planning, learning, and laughing, while the kids are running around playing in the background or involved in the Tribe's activities."¹⁹

Tribalism is also a philosophy of group interaction which emphasizes alliances

¹⁸Rod Landreth, email to author, 11 July 2012.

¹⁹Mark Stinson, *Heathen Tribes: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Tribes of Our Folk* (Liberty, MO: Jotun's Bane Kindred, 2011), 20.

between autonomous tribes maintained through personal relationships and networking. Without a central organization to authorize and maintain membership, these alliances are sustained in a number of informal ways.²⁰ Kindreds travel to spend weekends with other kindreds, and they attend each other's Moots or annual gatherings. Recently the Midwest Tribes have begun to experiment with the practice of fostering, in which children from one kindred will spend an extended period, such as a month of summer vacation, living with families from another kindred. More formally these alliances are ritualized by oath-taking and gifting that occurs during the sumbel ritual. In a Heathen gathering in Minnesota, I witnessed two kindreds formalizing a relationship first by taking oaths of friendship and mutual support, then by sharing gifts of mead and soda for the non-drinkers and children.²¹

In addition to ritual ties, Stinson is leading the development of a cooperative decision-making body, called the Midwest Thing. The Thing is modeled from the quasi-democratic institution of Viking-age Iceland, in which landholders and their families gathered once a year for legal discussions and judicial rulings. In the Midwest Thing, the chieftains of these networked tribes take active leadership roles in cooperative decision-making. Using the structures of personal relationship, ritual performance, and consensus building, the Midwest Tribes movement is building a shared religious culture. Given the family-focus of the movement and the number of children involved, the movement could have a significant impact on the future of American Asatru. This outcome depends of course on resisting the schism and factionalism which have plagued other Heathen groups.

²⁰Stinson, *Heathen Tribes*, 18.

²¹Field notes taken by author, Hinkley, MN, June 2012.

Conclusion

Despite its often volatile history, American Asatru has continued to develop and grow. Two factors have significantly contributed to this situation. First, the movement continues to attract new converts, many of whom are young.²² These converts bring new ideas and direction to the movement and prevent a social implosion around one entrenched issue. Second, the decentralized structure of the movement provides social space for growth and innovation to occur. Asatru has developed as a family of closely related religious ideas, individuals, and groups with a common focus on ancient northern European Paganism. While a number of the original founders are currently still active in the movement, Asatru is quickly moving towards a generational transition in which leadership will rest with newer adherents. This gradual process has actually been occurring for some time and will hardly be noticed by the movement as a whole, which is driven more by ideas than ties of affection to any one charismatic leader. In its current phase, the development of Asatru seems to be picking up speed and the transfer of leadership to a new generation will intensify this trend. These qualities make the current period a fruitful time to be studying Asatru. The following chapter will address the issues involved with studying Asatru and discuss the theoretical basis and methodological approach for this research.

²²Diana Paxson, interview by author, Pawhuska, OK, June 2011.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Researchers studying religious movements approach their subjects from a variety of perspectives, and every research methodology to some extent shapes the results of the study. This study takes an ethnographic approach towards Asatru, focusing on the perspective and experience of adherents and the contours of the religion within their consciousness. It also addresses the factors that have shaped the religious consciousness of Asatru adherents, particularly the interplay of the religious worldview with tensions in modern American life. Another interesting and useful approach would look at American Asatru in a global perspective, as part of the global movement and culture of contemporary Norse paganism.¹ Global factors are clearly at work and a detailed description of the global processes shaping the movement would add to our understanding.

However, my research indicated that global connections play quite a small role in the religious consciousness of most American Asatru adherents. Thus from an ethnographic approach, the particularly American shape of the movement stood out as salient. While American Asatru adherents are aware of global Asatru, they do not express a sense of connection or closeness to it. They rarely defined themselves as part of a global culture or looked to European sources for religious inspiration or guidance.² For

¹Benjamin Zablocki and J. Anna Looney, "Research on New Religious Movements in the Post-9/11 World," in *New Religious Movements in the 21st Century: Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective*, ed. Phillip Charles Lucas and Thomas Robbins (New York: Routledge, 2004), 314-15.

²There are two exceptions to this rule. First, the Odinic Rite is a truly transnational

these reasons, American Asatru can be profitably studied as a movement in itself, while keeping in mind that it does occur within a wider context of global Asatru. The study approaches Asatru from an ethnographic perspective as a particularly American religion and examines the ideological adaptations the movement has taken in response to its context in modern America. This chapter will explore the theoretical and methodological considerations behind this approach as well as examining the theoretical frameworks that have shaped the work of previous researchers.

Contemporary Paganism is often referred to in a variety of ways, such as Neopaganism, Neo-Paganism, Wicca, Witchcraft, or even New Age. Since the use of differing terminology may cause some confusion, my attempt to apply a consistent set of terms necessitates some clarification. At least part of the problem arises from the degree of differentiation within the contemporary Pagan movement. Scholars and practitioners need a term to act as a meta-category that refers to the family of religions of which contemporary Paganism is composed, while at the same time having a set of terms to distinguish groups and orientations within the Pagan religious family.

From my perspective, “contemporary Paganism” best encapsulates the movement as a whole: “contemporary” identifies the modern origins and context of these religions in distinction to the ancient pre-Christian practices by which they are inspired, and “Pagan” points to a specific set of theological and practical commitments. Adding to the complexity, “Pagan” itself has taken on multiple meanings over time. The term has been used in several different ways in the modern period, as Ronald Hutton has so intricately described. “Pagan” was and still is often used to imply the negative connotations of non-Christian, savage, and primitive, a usage that became widespread

organization with a more global awareness. Second, scholarship produced by European academics or intellectuals plays a role in the movement. However, the European origin of this material is rarely if ever mentioned as a factor contributing to its authority.

during the colonial and missionary expansion of Europe and America into Africa, Asia, and the Americas.³ A second usage referred to the art, culture, and learning that had flourished in ancient Greek and Roman societies, and which could be incorporated into a thriving Euro-American Christian culture, enriching it aesthetically and intellectually. These Pagans were appropriated in such a way as to point toward Christ as the apex of history, part of the great march of Western civilization towards Christian truth.⁴ Another usage developed in the language of the Romantic poets, who began to associate the term with freedom, nature, and human creativity. For these poets, to be Pagan meant to be liberated from the constraints of a stifling cultural Christianity, to find one's true nature in communion with the natural world.⁵ As Hutton points out, this usage "was to become the language of late twentieth-century paganism."⁶ Around this understanding of Pagan, a set of theological, ritual, and cultural concepts have coalesced to provide definition to the contemporary religious expression of Paganism. This Pagan worldview will be discussed further in chapter 3.

In addition to identifying contemporary Paganism as a distinct religious movement, it is necessary to distinguish various types of contemporary Pagan expressions. Scholars have suggested a number of terms that indicate important differences among these contemporary Pagan religions. Michael York, for instance identifies three main types of contemporary Paganism: geo-, reco-, and neopaganism.⁷ According to York, geopaganism is a type of folk religion that is largely local and earth-

³Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

⁴Ibid., 11-12.

⁵Ibid., 20-21.

⁶Ibid., 31.

⁷Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 61.

centered, focused perhaps on a local holy spring or earth spirit. Some form of geopaganism is intertwined into many varieties of contemporary Paganism, including Asatru. His two other types are more important for this work. Neopaganism refers to those movements that derive from the foundational work of Gerald Gardner.⁸ Neopagan movements are often eclectic, drawing on many different historical traditions, and highly experiential, emphasizing the role of innovation. They have a duo-theistic conception of the divine as manifested in a Goddess and God and follow a calendar structured according to eight sabbats. Wicca and Goddess spirituality are examples of Neopaganism. Recon, or more commonly “Reconstructionist” religions are those forms of contemporary Paganism that are specifically tied to a particular historical cultural tradition and seek to recreate that culture’s religious practice with a degree of historical accuracy. These movements draw on historical textual sources, archaeological data, and modern scholarship in their attempts to revive ancient religions as viable contemporary practices.

Asatru is one of the least studied of the contemporary Pagan movements. Several reasons might account for this fact. Wicca or Neopaganism has received the bulk of the scholarly attention and has come to stand for contemporary Paganism in the mind of most Americans. Because of this perception, other types of Paganism tend to be subsumed under the Neopagan label. Additionally, Heathen people and practice are a decided minority of Pagans. Until recently, Asatru’s numbers were significantly smaller than those of Neopaganism and its adherents were more widely dispersed. This intersection of factors causes Asatru to be overlooked and relatively unknown. People often react in surprise when they hear about this Viking religion in the United States.

⁸Gerald Gardner was an English occultist who published a number of works in the 1940s and 1950s that laid the theological and ritual foundation for Wicca and other forms of Neopaganism. Ronald Hutton provides a detailed account of his life and work in chap. 11 of *Triumph of the Moon*.

Asatru's "underground" reputation may also contribute to this dearth of research. For most of its history the movement has looked inward, more concerned with its own internal divisions and controversies than with engaging the outside world. Not only has the movement been quieter and less in the forefront, but it is considerably more critical of the mainstream culture. Asatru has maintained a perceptible tension not only with the American society but also with the Neopagan community. High boundary markers have precluded many Asatru adherents from engaging in Neopagan events such as the popular Pagan Pride Days held in cities throughout in U.S., or accepting any sort of Christian affiliation among its members. Additionally, its association with white supremacist ideology casts a pall over the movement. While most Heathens vigorously distance themselves from this reputation, the movement is still often dismissed as a haven for neo-Nazis and racists even by other contemporary Pagans.

Although research on Asatru is limited, three types of scholarly literature are applicable to this study. The first is the small but slowly growing academic study of the Heathen movement itself. This literature is indispensable for the description and analysis of the movement's history, personalities, and culture. The two primary studies were done by observers external to the movement: Jeffrey Kaplan's *Radical Religion in America* and *Gods of the Blood* by Matthais Gardell. Newer work by Michael Strmiska has gone a long way in describing the religious dimensions of the Asatru movement. Heathenry is also beginning to produce participant (insider) scholars who are drawing on their own emic experience as data for their research. Secondly, a body of research exists on similar Reconstructionist Pagan movements, such as contemporary Druid movements by scholars such as Ronald Hutton and Michael Cooper. While not directly related to Asatru, the Druids and other reconstructionist groups represent a similar approach to Pagan identity and religion as that found within Asatru, thus serving as a useful reference for comparative study. A third, but no less important area of scholarship, is the large body of

work being done on the broader contemporary Pagan movement. While Heathenry is not the focus of this work, these scholars provide an account and analysis of religious phenomena such as magic, ritual, festivals, and analytical categories such as nature religion that can be profitably applied to the study of Asatru.

Asatru as a Response to Changing Notions of Race

As one of the earliest scholars to study Asatru, Jeffrey Kaplan's work provides excellent insight into the early stages of the movement and provides a detailed history of the controversies and personalities that shaped its development.⁹ He demonstrates a keen awareness of the sociological and religious dimensions of Asatru in his discussions of conversion and the authenticity of polytheistic belief.¹⁰ However, Kaplan's main concern is to analyze the issue of race in Asatru. He approaches Asatru from the perspective of radical religion which he defines as a concoction of beliefs of impending apocalypse, chiliastic hopes, revolutionary and potentially violent thought, and a quest for rejected knowledge. In this mix he includes racialism, identifying racial attitudes as the volatile force influencing the direction of the Asatru movement.¹¹ Certainly Kaplan distinguishes Asatru from Odinism, the darker manifestation of Nordic Paganism where most of these radical aspects find their home. However, his discussion of Asatru within the context of radical religion leads to confusion since few if any of these categories apply to the movement as a whole. While Asatru is countercultural, the lingering association with apocalyptic violence muddles more than clarifies the subject. Kaplan himself states that

⁹Jeffrey Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of the Asatru and Odinist Traditions," in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 193-236.

¹⁰Ibid., 197-98.

¹¹Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), xiv-xvi.

violence is “clearly atypical” within Asatru and even within the radical racial wing of Odinism, violence has been “random.”¹²

Kaplan clearly demonstrates the influence that racial attitudes have had on the development of Heathenry, even as he acknowledges the peripheral nature of the issue. He writes, “It is not atypical of small, fledgling religious communities that relatively marginal issues can often become divisive far out of proportion to their centrality to the religion itself. So it is with race and Asatru.”¹³ This suggests that while Asatru is not centrally about race, the issue has dominated the movement and shaped its topography. This in itself is a questionable proposition. Even the explicitly nonracial organization, The Troth, states,

Contemporary Asatru as a whole is an ethnic tradition, largely stemming from the interest in recovering a forgotten heritage . . . so the question of what role an awareness of personal ethnic background-or not to mince words, of race!-should play in the practice of our troth keep coming up.¹⁴

Thus, even if race itself is not central to the religion, the issue continues to color the conversation. Heathens struggle not only over who can “authentically” practice the religion, but also over deeper issues raised by the ethnic and ancestral dimension of Asatru: what does it mean to be connected to an ancestral past?; what is the nature of ethnicity?; and how is contemporary Heathen identity connected to the relatively modern and colonial category of race?; and what role should race play in human society? Within the scope of Asatru, there are various responses to these issues. The answers range from explicitly racist solutions of neo-Nazi Aryan dominance, to a modern pluralistic outlook, to suggestions that Asatru must reconstruct a “pre-White” ethnic identity more in keeping with a pre-colonial ancient worldview.¹⁵ While this preoccupation with race may be off-

¹² Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America*, 86.

¹³ Kaplan, “Reconstruction,” 201.

¹⁴ Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Our Troth* (North Charleston, SC: Booksurge, 1993), 2:31.

¹⁵ Thad Horrell, “Becoming Indigenous” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the

putting to those outside the movement and for some within it, Asatru serves as an incubator for a variety of ideas about race some of which are controversial or even virulent from the perspective of mainstream culture. However, it should be noted that the racial issue in Asatru has arisen in the context of American tensions over race. Asatru reflects the mainstream culture in this regard: race is an issue in Asatru because it has been and remains a deep tension in America history and culture.

In Kaplan's analysis, the racial attitudes of the movement are divided into three camps: that of the non-racial modernists, the racial Metageneticists, and the racist Odinists. Modernist Asatru is represented by adherents of a non-racialist "modernist theory" which approaches religious affiliation as a free choice of religious seekers unrelated to one's personal ancestry. From a modernist perspective, someone might be drawn to Asatru for any number of reasons, many of which are valid and appropriate. Modernists attempt to graft Heathen spirituality onto their lives as modern American citizens. These types of Asatru adherents, Kaplan writes, are productive members of the dominant culture while Odinists inhabit a subculture of white supremacy on the margins of mainstream America.¹⁶

Folkish Asatruar subscribe to a "genetic theory" represented best by Steven McNallen's theory of "Metagenetics." Metagenetics is a theory of religious and cultural transmission which claims that ethnic or race-specific archetypes within the subconscious mind are passed on and inherited generationally. For McNallen the gods and traditions of one's ancestors are inscribed on the subconscious of their descendants: for those of northern European descent, the gods and culture of the Norse; for Hispanics, the gods and culture of the Aztecs, etc.¹⁷ This theory links religion to race and ancestry but steers clear

American Academy of Religion, Chicago, IL, 17 November 2012).

¹⁶Kaplan, *Radical Religion*, 69.

¹⁷Stephen A. McNallen, "Metagenetics," "Genetics & Beyond: Metagenetics – An Update,"

of the apocalyptic, separatist, and racially motivated politics of Odinism. Adherents of Metagenetics often talk about Asatru as the native religion of northern Indo-European people and believe that each people group has a religion and culture that is appropriate and authentic for itself. McNallen writes, “Because we are more like our ancestors than we are like anyone else. We inherited not only their general physical appearance, but also their predominant mental, emotional, and spiritual traits. We think and feel more like they did; our basic needs are most like theirs.”¹⁸

Distinguishing the Metageneticists from the more hardcore racist perspective, Kaplan writes that “the Odinist path takes up where the Asatruers’ geneticist path ends – with race. Odinism is a religion of race and blood.”¹⁹ Culture, religion, and race are indistinguishable, being linked at a genetic level. Odinists link the race-specificity of their religion with its superiority, seeing Germanic culture as the height of human expression. For this reason they maintain doctrines of racial purity and may advocate for racially separate enclaves. They have a deep seated mistrust of mainstream institutions and see government as conspiratorially engineering the dissolution of the white race. Against this genocidal pressure, they look to the ancient religion of northern Europe as the best defense.

Perhaps Kaplan was right to focus on the controversies surrounding racial attitudes which proved to be highly divisive among Asatruar in the 1990’s. By categorizing the divisions of Asatru around racial attitudes, he identified a subset of the movement with potentially violent and anti-social tendencies. This fact should have and

and “Wotan vs. Tezcatlipoca: The Spiritual War for California and the Southwest,” [online]; accessed 12 December 2012; available from <http://www.runestone.org/about-asatru/articles-a-essays.html>; Internet.

¹⁸Stephen A. McNallen, “What is Asatru,” [online]; accessed 15 November 2012; available from <http://www.arcane-archive.org/faqs/faq.asatru-.9502.php>; Internet.

¹⁹Kaplan, *Radical Religion*, 85.

perhaps did reduce the pressure on those Asatru groups which maintain a lower level of tension with the mainstream society. Yet when painted with too broad a brush, his categories inevitably led to a reductionist view of the religion, casting it solely in terms of race and overlooking other significant dimensions of the developing movement. This was frequently the case for instance when Odinism in the prison system became a focus of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in the late 1990s. Racist Odinism was clearly present in the federal and state prison systems, a fact that the Asatru movement has taken more seriously since. Yet SPLC coverage of the movement often resorted to inflammatory rhetoric that distorted and overlooked important distinctions, casting all Asatru adherents as dangerous gang members and violent racists. A more accurate analysis would have acknowledged the issue of race within Asatru while avoiding the reductionist position that portrayed the entire movement in racist terms.

Perhaps the premiere study of Asatru has been Matthias Gardell's *Gods of the Blood*. Picking up on the trail blazed by Kaplan, Gardell was also primarily concerned with the dynamic of race within the Heathen movement. For Gardell, the "key divisive issues" in Asatru concern racial attitudes and like Kaplan, he makes racial orientation the focus of his interpretive schema. He writes that Asatruar and Asatru groups can be classified according to three "distinct positions", while at the same time stating that there are no "neat divisions" between racial and non-racial forms of Asatru.²⁰ His categories amount to three ideal types or positions which are almost identical to Kaplan's modernist, Metageneticist, and racial categories. Gardell points out that while these positions are distinguishable, the boundaries between them may be somewhat fluid. Gardell identifies an anti-racial position sometimes called "universalist;" a radical racist position often

²⁰Matthias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 153.

Asatru and the racist hardcore.²³ Similarly both Kaplan and Gardell subscribe to the distinction between Asatru as a form of Neopagan religion, and Odinism as a form of white supremacist, which appropriates Norse mythology to legitimize racism and violence.

Gardell appropriately identifies race as a perennially divisive issue for Asatru, as well as a useful tool for categorizing groups within the movement. While the topic often remains in the background among mainstream Asatru, the issues around race occasionally reemerge and are debated with passion. How individual Heathens situate themselves on this spectrum of racial orientation is personally and socially important in Asatru culture. Since these positions can lead to social conflict, they are important considerations when choosing to associate with a group, thus functioning something like denominational boundaries. This reality has given rise to such indicators as the Jarnsaxa scale which seeks to clarify a spectrum of racial attitudes in the Asatru movement (see appendix 3).²⁴

A few examples may indicate how this process of self-identification functions in Heathen culture. In email conversations with Asatruar, I have frequently been cautioned to avoid this or that person, group or resource because of its orientation on the racial spectrum. Gardell discusses how McNallen revived the defunct Asatru Free Assembly in the 1990's as the Asatru Folk Assembly specifically to rescue the movement from what he perceived to be a growing liberal, universalist presence.²⁵ Similarly, at

²³Kaplan, *Radical Religion*, 16. The members of the OR understand it as a "revolutionary" organization, a discourse intended to set the OR apart from mainstream Asatru groups. In my own discussions with OR representatives, they maintain that their use of the term "revolutionary" has nothing to do with violence or political revolt, but refers to the revolutionary transformation towards Odinic Consciousness that members pursue through meditation, ritual, and esotericism. Eowyn, email to author, 6 June 2011.

²⁴Kriselda Grey, "The 'Jarnsaxa' Scale" [online]; accessed 25 January 2012; available from <http://lyssandri.livejournal.com/313325.html>; Internet.

²⁵Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 261.

Trothmoot 2012, the annual gathering for The Troth, several of the Elders were vociferous in positioning The Troth as the bastion of universalist Asatru, in clear distinction from the more folkish groups. During the *blót* (blot), an Asatru sacrificial ritual, held to venerate the Norse goddess Idunna held every year at Trothmoot, one Elder passionately spoke about the acceptance her black, homosexual, and disabled friends found within The Troth.²⁶ Near me in the circle a comment was made, “Take that, AFA!”²⁷ The conjunction of these two comments, the former strongly identifying The Troth as the sole proponent of universalist Asatru, and the latter contrasting that identity with the folkish exclusivism of the AFA, demonstrates that these positions remain salient in Asatru identity and politics.

Globalization and Multiculturalism

An important aspect of this discussion involves the ways in which globalization has affected the American experience of race. Matthias Gardell argues that concerns about the homogenizing effects of globalization led to attempts to preserve racial and ethnic identity. He sees Asatru as a response to the fear that globalization creates a post-racial society.²⁸ On the other hand, Prema Kurien argues that globalization has produced not a homogenized “race-blind” society, but an increasingly multicultural environment in America. In this multicultural setting, racial, ethnic, and religious identities are increasingly important as people compete for a share in the society. People seek out or create ethnic religious identities as a means to find a meaningful place in society and to protect their own interests. Both of these theories are important for understanding the role of the Norse or Germanic identity that forms the basis of Asatru

²⁶In Norse myth, the goddess Idunna kept the golden apples of eternal youth, which the deities ate to maintain their immortality. She is seen as the goddess of renewal and a patron deity to The Troth.

²⁷Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012.

²⁸Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 6-18.

self-understanding.

Gardell opens his book, *Gods of the Blood*, with a discussion of the impact globalization has had on the understanding and role of race in modern society. He argues that globalization has been commonly perceived as exerting a homogenizing effect on societies and cultures by creating and spreading a global commercial culture which neutralizes or transcends racial categories.²⁹ In the globalized commercial system, race is not an important structural factor. In Gardell's analysis, globalization causes ambiguity regarding race and race relations and establishes a new social norm in which race and ethnicity become less important or lose their importance altogether to personal and group identity in favor of new forms of social organization. It is not only local economies and traditional cultures that dwindle and fade under the pressure of encroaching globalized consumerism, but race as an important social element.³⁰

In this analysis, globalization exerts a "dis-embedding" force that pulls people from a traditional localized identity structured by ethnicity or race, a reality that some experience as a threat.³¹ Gardell argues that the Asatru movement arose as a response to the threat of the erosion and loss of ethnic identity, particularly the white racial category, within a new, post-racial global system. Among racial ideologues the threat of globalization seems to be two-fold: the rise of a homogenized global culture that stifles or weakens the identities of various ethnic groups, particularly that of northern Europeans, and the threat of multiculturalism or pluralism, in which the rise of various ethnic identities within America out competes or displaces that of European-Americans.³² As a response to that threat, Asatru proposes a return to one's cultural and ancestral "roots" in

²⁹Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 68.

³⁰Ibid., 6-7.

³¹Ibid., 14.

³²Ibid., 11.

order to anchor one's identity. Heimgest, the leader of the Odinic Rite, expresses both the perceived threat of "dis-embedding" and the need to return to ancestral roots:

Humanity, as part of nature, has a diversity which is sacred and should be protected and cherished, not ground into a cultureless, spiritless, rootless mass. To destroy the uniqueness of humanity, that is hate. To seek to tear folk from their folk soul, to cut them off from their ancestors, that is hate; to destroy their culture, that is hate. We oppose all that which is hateful.³³

Similarly, Steve McNallen interprets materialism and globalization as a threat to the diversity and uniqueness of ethnicity and finds in Asatru a form of resistance against these trends, a way to protect and preserve white racial identity.³⁴

Seen in this light, Asatru challenges the cultural homogeneity allegedly produced by globalization with alternative solutions for the modern tensions regarding race and ancestry and the roles these should play in contemporary life. These solutions include sociopolitical ideas such as differing stances on the importance of race for structuring human communities (racist, folkish, universalist); anthropological ideas such as the folk soul, which sees at the heart of each racial and ethnic group its own unique cultural and religious essence; and religious practices such as ancestral veneration and rituals which maintain a focus on the racial lineage.³⁵ All of these solutions reject the marginalization of ethnicity and emphasize the importance of an identity rooted in the ethnic past.

However, the fear that globalization leads to cultural homogeneity seems to be unfounded. Rather than producing a society in which race is quickly disappearing as a category of value, America is becoming increasingly diverse and multicultural. In her analysis of Hinduism in America, Prema Kurien suggests that globalization has elevated

³³Heimgest, quote from Odinic Rite website [online]; accessed 26 October 2012; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/main/>; Internet.

³⁴Gundarsson, *Our Troth*, 1:34.

³⁵Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 271.

the importance of ethnic identification in the United States. She describes how Indian immigrants gain a meaningful place in the American cultural landscape as well as a voice in American politics by identifying as Hindus. Within a multicultural society, religions and religious organizations function as powerful “ethnic carriers.” The religious identity provides strong cultural identity markers as well as cushioning the adherent from “Americanization” or assimilation into the dominant society. Since religion is strongly protected by the First Amendment, it serves as “the most acceptable and non-threatening basis for community formation and expression.”³⁶ Thus religion becomes the “preferred means for immigrants to develop and maintain ethnic identity.”³⁷

Kurien argues that a religious identity forms a safe identity marker for minority groups and provides a means by which ethnic and cultural distinctives such as history, food, dress, art and music can be maintained and strengthened. The religious identity allows Hindu immigrants to be Americans while at the same time protecting their minority status, legitimizing both their place within American society and their distinctive differences. Kurien’s thesis indicates that in a multicultural society, we should expect identity groups to form around both ethnicity and religion. Religious culture and identity function as a means for people to ‘take their place’ at the multicultural table.”³⁸

Reconstructionist religious movements such as Asatru are one example of the process Kurien describes. Asatru adherents are appropriating or creating an ethnic religious identity both to achieve a personally meaningful life and to claim a stake and a place in American society. The Asatru identity works as a recognizable category within the American religious milieu. Yet simultaneously, the religious identity opens up a

³⁶Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 6.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 6-7, 143.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 9.

protected space that enables and even encourages the creation and expression of religious and cultural distinctiveness. Not only do minority religions create and anchor identity, but they also serve as social locations where alternative ideas and solutions to modern tensions are developed.

Race remains an issue in contemporary Asatru and many adherents hold racial attitudes that are clearly marginal to mainstream American values. However, the expanding middle in Asatru seeks to build an ethnically distinct religious culture that avoids the dangers of racism. To continue categorizing Asatru primarily through the lens of race and racism is ultimately a reductive position. It obscures the reality that Heathenry is developing a potentially sophisticated religious culture broader than the racial issue, and the fact that most Asatru adherents are motivated more by religious goals than racial goals. For most adherents, the movement is primarily and deeply religious in nature and the racial issue often serves as a distraction from that more important focus. This oversight is clearly evident in Gardell's book where he allots only a few pages to a brief outline of Heathen religious ideas and practice. While scholars have thoroughly examined the racial aspects of the Asatru movement, there is a clear need for deeper understanding and analysis of the religious ideas and culture that it represents.

Asatru as a Response to Modernity

If we accept the thesis that Asatru serves as an incubator of alternative solutions to social issues, we are still met with the inadequacy and reductiveness of a sole or even primary focus on race. While Asatru does address the social issue of race, it also addresses other significant tensions that result from globalization and modernity. These issues are both numerous and important. For instance, Asatruar respond to global mass society with new forms of social organization and decision-making, such as kindreds, tribes, and Things. The abstraction of human experience from the earth is countered with new ideas about the natural world such as world tree cosmology, animism, and herbalism.

Modern conceptions of human nature are criticized as limited and replaced with notions of orlog and magic. The value of consumerism is countered with self-sufficiency and disciplined individualism. New roles for women are developed as seers and healers. Significant experimentation and work is being done in developing alternative forms of community and values drawn specifically from the ancient Norse milieu. While Asatru was never only a racial religion, significant growth has occurred in the spiritual and cultural aspects of the movement, lending strength to Jeffrey Kaplan's suggestion that "Ásatrú is becoming increasingly distinct from Odinism," and ought to be viewed in different ways.³⁹

For many scholars, NRMs serve as "barometers of the larger social transformations occurring around us."⁴⁰ Lorne Dawson writes that "one pattern in the academic writing is an eagerness to point out that NRMs offer a complex response to . . . various types of social change . . . and bring into effect ingenious compromises between the status quo and some alternative state of affairs."⁴¹ Dawson indicates the social issues to which NRMs may respond include changes in social values, changes in social structure, and changes in the role and character of religious institutions. For example, Anthony Giddens proposes that modernity is uniquely disruptive to social and personal life and has produced distinct dislocations, "dis-embedding" people from traditional social contexts.⁴² Relationships have become more and more abstract resulting in the "pure relationship" which is completely disengaged from "external conditions of social or economic life." The pure relationship is "unprompted by anything other than the

³⁹Kaplan, *Radical Religion*, 14.

⁴⁰Lorne Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2006), 179-80.

⁴¹Ibid., 40.

⁴²Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 89-90.

[emotional] rewards that that relationship provides,” devoid of traditional external supports and dependent completely on voluntary commitment.⁴³ In response to these dislocations, NRMs arise as alternative ways to “re-embed” people into social contexts and give meaning and identity to their lives.

Susan Palmer’s study of women in NRMs illustrates this approach. She sees women’s conversion to NRMs as a response to the “dramatic upheavals in the structure of society,” the social dislocation and role confusion that some American women experienced in the 1970s and since.⁴⁴ In Palmer’s analysis, modernity has dramatically affected the place and identity of women in American society by dis-embedding women from traditional roles and producing a sense of identity crisis, particularly in terms of “rolelessness.” Women experience this tension in terms of their now ambiguous sexual roles, changing expectations about marriage, and the weakening of family bonds.⁴⁵ The movements she examines become social locations in which women can “put on” or experiment with alternative roles and identities, “re-embedding” themselves in a clear role and identity. Palmer persuasively analyzes the role of women in these movements and demonstrates that new religions provide “a remarkable range of possibilities” for addressing the tensions of modernity.⁴⁶

The idea of the uniqueness of modernity and its tensions is challenged by scholars who see the current wave of NRMs as a continuation of a long process of new religious development. For these scholars, NRMs exemplify the type of continual religious experimentation that can be expected to occur in societies in which freedoms of

⁴³Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 89-90.

⁴⁴Susan J. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), xiii.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 215.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 2.

belief and association are protected. For instance, Peter Berger argues that the breakdown of comprehensive religious worldviews by the secularization process allows dissenting and alternative ideas to arise and compete within the new marketplace of ideas. Similarly Stark and Bainbridge suggest that NRMs are market-like responses to the consumer demand for ideas and religious compensators that are unattainable in mainstream religion.

The suggestion that free societies experience the continual development of new religions is persuasive. This study does not suggest that Asatru arose merely as a response to the unique context of modernity. After all, Norse and Germanic Paganism has influenced the cultic milieu since the European Romantic revival of the late 1800s. It is too much to say that the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s produced these NRMs, or that they arose primarily as a response to the tensions of modernity. However, the development of NRMs in any time period is shaped by the social tensions of their specific context. NRMs respond to their social context, producing and offering alternative solutions to the tensions that their adherents and host societies are experiencing. Thus, while NRMs arise as a natural response to the human demand for novel ideas and practices, they are particularly shaped by their specific social and temporal context. Kaplan is right to note that Asatru is ultimately a deeply religious movement and cannot be reduced to “deifications of contemporary socio-political grievances.” He writes,

To attempt an analysis of Odinism and Asatru from a psychological, sociological, or historical perspective . . . while discounting the concrete impact of the gods and goddesses on the lives of the adherents of the Northern Way is to miss the vital heart of the reconstruction of the tradition.”⁴⁷

Asatru is not merely a response to perceived deficiencies in modernity: its origins are different and deeper than that. Almost every first generation Heathen I spoke to could recount deeply spiritual experiences, often involving an encounter with a god or goddess who pointed them in the direction of Asatru. However, the development of the

⁴⁷Kaplan, *Radical Religion*, 71.

religion has been decidedly shaped by its modern context. And because of this, the religious worldview has given rise to alternative forms of women's roles, epistemology, healing modalities, social organization, and the relationship to the environment. While Asatru is first of all a religious movement arising from a religious experience, it is situated in the modern world with its particular tensions, both shaping and being shaped by that context. Asatru is a socioreligious location producing innovative and alternative solutions to modern social tensions by approaching those tensions from the perspective of a Norse religious worldview. This understanding provides the primary theoretical basis for this study of Asatru.

The solutions found within Asatru, while often countercultural, also draw upon values with which many Americans are familiar. Lorne Dawson notes this tendency for NRMs to incorporate elements of the dominant society when he writes, "These supposedly deviant religions have many similarities to the dominant culture in terms of their objectives as well as their means of achieving these."⁴⁸ He quotes Alan Parsons to say that "while innovative religious movements often appear to arise as responses to tensions within their secular host societies, they also tend to incorporate central cultural elements from those societies."⁴⁹ The innovative solutions that NRMs develop to social tensions may incorporate and re-invigorate traditional values from which the dominant culture has moved away.

This study will address these countervailing tendencies within the context of Asatru. Rather than representing an anti-modern rejection of mainstream American ideals and lifestyle, Asatru responds to modernity often by seeking to re-invigorate and intensify aspects and values of American society. There is no doubt that for many in

⁴⁸Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 190.

⁴⁹Ibid., 189.

Asatru, the changes and tensions of modernity are experienced as a threat.⁵⁰ For instance, certain characteristics of modernity such as a loss of ethnic heritage, a breakdown of the family structure, a replacement of rugged individualism with consumerism, a devaluation of the earth, and a thoroughly rationalistic epistemology, all represent significant social problems from a Heathen perspective. Asatru responds to these challenges by drawing on Norse religious worldview to reinvigorate fairly traditional American values, both critiquing modernity as well as seeking a way back toward a more meaningful way of life.

Asatru values are often rooted in the traditional American ethos. For instance, family has been and remains an American value, yet the context of modernity dis-embeds the individual from traditional family structures and new forms of social organization are developed to take its place.⁵¹ Asatru adherents tend to interpret this tension as a threat to a full life experience and place a deep value on family, consciously seeking to repair the damage done to family by modernity. Asatru catchphrases such as “Faith, Folk, Family,” the motto of the Odinic Rite, draw attention to the importance of family in Asatru culture. Yet Asatru solutions rely on an older understanding of family drawn from the pre-Christian Norse worldview, which emphasizes networks of extended families or tribes, familial-like bonds of loyalty, and living ancestors. In this way, Asatru seeks to negotiate a modern tension by re-invigorating a traditional American value and investing it with these pre-modern notions.

Researching a New Religious Movement

To present an authentic picture of a religious movement, a researcher must strike a balance between the sociological aspects we have been discussing and the

⁵⁰Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 209.

⁵¹Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 147, 177.

personal religious experience of contemporary adherents. We seek to understand, not only a religion's place in history and society, but what it means to see the world from within the religion. The research goal is to understand the world from the perspective of an Asatru adherent. Achieving an accurate representation of that quality of experience takes a degree of work. For this study, I have relied on both textual sources and a close interaction with people, places, and activities. While there are no shortage of books, articles, and essays produced by Heathen authors, this study has drawn significantly on participant observation and interviews. In particular, significant time was given to attending and observing Asatru gatherings, as these represent important social and religious events in the lives of Heathen people and serve as useful entry points to the movement.

Unlike Sarah Pike's important work on Neopagan festivals, this is not a study of those Asatru gatherings themselves. Rather, these events were identified as important sources of religious data. As Joachim Wach writes,

'Festivals and pilgrimages . . . are outstanding occasions, for here we find a close interrelation between different cultic activities such as purifications, lustrations, prayers, vows, offerings, sacrifices, and procession, all of which are of particular interest both to the historian of religion and the sociologist of religion.'⁵²

Wach's portrayal of religious festivals captures the religious spirit of Asatru gatherings. These events, which Heathens refer to as Moots or Things, are highly anticipated occasions when friendships and social connections are made and renewed, worldview is reinforced, religious ideas are shared, and deep religious moments are experienced.⁵³

Moots and Things function as a significant means of socialization in the Asatru

⁵²Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 127-28

⁵³Michael F. Strmiska and Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, "Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael F. Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 131-32.

movement. The first moot a person attends often represents a seminal moment of transformation in a Heathen's life, a marker in the conversion career from a solitary online seeker to an adherent and participant in the movement. In the course of conducting this study, I attended all the most important American Asatru gatherings, including Trothmoot, East Coast Thing, Lightning Across the Plains, Northern Folk Gathering, and Pantheacon.

Research arising from close observation and involvement in the life of a community is often termed ethnographic methodology. Ethnography attempts to tell the story of a particular social community or culture from the perspective of its participants, to illuminate the worldview of the culture from the inside. In pursuing ethnographic research, the researcher "seeks a deeper immersion in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important . . . and to experience events and meanings in ways that approximate member's experiences."⁵⁴ In this study, ethnography serves as a technique within the larger approach of phenomenology of religion.⁵⁵ The phenomenological approach "attempts to interpret or understand religion . . . to disclose the meaning or meanings of it as they are constructed, perceived, and experienced within consciousness, or from the perspective of the religious subject."⁵⁶ In this attempt to approximate the experience of another, phenomenologists have traditionally adopted the stance of epoché, in which value judgments are bracketed or "parenthesized" during the study. "Epoché is the act of suspending judgment concerning the reality of that which appears to consciousness, and which . . . the phenomenologist of religion seeks to

⁵⁴Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 3.

⁵⁵While phenomenology of religion does not require an ethnographic approach, ethnography is ideally suited to the task.

⁵⁶Jason N. Blum, "Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2012): 1030.

interpret.”⁵⁷ The ability to bracket personal judgments is an indispensable tool for both phenomenology and ethnography which allows the researcher to maintain a balance between critical dismissal and hagiography, neither of which serves to accurately and fully interpret a religious worldview.

Epoché is a tool by which an outsider attempts to empathetically experience the world of another without necessarily abandoning his/her personal perspective. In other words, the researcher is immersed in another worldview while simultaneously remaining at a distance. Ethnographers have distinguished between the “exogenous project of studying or understanding the lives of others, as opposed to the indigenous project of simply living a life in one way or another.”⁵⁸ The researcher thus straddles a fuzzy line between being “socially close, but experientially separate.”⁵⁹ This line between participant and observer is referred to as the emic/etic distinction. The emic perspective is the insider view of a culture, while the etic perspective is that of an outsider looking in. The ethnographer seeks to negotiate these two positions: remaining an outsider while gaining deep insight and understanding of the insider perspective.

Pagan Studies has become the context for a re-evaluation of the value of this distinction. Pagan practitioners have been suspicious and cautious of outsider studies, which they find often misrepresent authentic Pagan practice. Meanwhile, scholars of religion have typically valued objective distance from one’s subject and remain wary of “going native,” a euphemism for scholars who lose objectivity or even become adherents of the movements they are researching. Researchers of Pagan religions have been out front in the development of new paradigms for ethnographic methodology that blur these

⁵⁷Blum, “Retrieving Phenomenology,” 1032.

⁵⁸Emerson, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 43.

⁵⁹Ibid.

distinctions.⁶⁰ And some contend that drawing upon one's own personal religious experience is a valid and important form of ethnographic research, a technique that can be observed in Jenny Blain's study of magic in Asatru and Wallis' interpretive framework of "autoarchaeology."⁶¹ These questions remain quite alive within the academic community of Pagan studies.

Negotiating these tensions requires conscious effort and practice, a type of reflexive critique of one's own methodology. While not an insider and without challenging my own etic stance, I sought at all times to take the intent and experience of Asatru religious expression seriously. Immersion, time apart, and emic critique all played a part in maintaining that stance. Jone Salomonsen emphasizes the vital role of repeated participation in a culture: "Through repetition, the skills and competence to participate and be distant at one and the same time are acquired."⁶² And James Chancellor writes that time away from the participant experience facilitates the distance needed to see the experience within a broader perspective.⁶³ In addition to these techniques I also sought out "expert witnesses," opinion makers within the movement to critique my own experience and thinking. This is an indispensable aspect of naturalistic inquiry.

I took as a foundational principle in my research James Spradley's statement that "rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*."⁶⁴ By

⁶⁰Jone Salomonsen, "Methods of Compassion or Pretention? The Challenges of Conducting Fieldwork in Modern Magical Communities," in *Researching Paganisms*, ed. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy, and Graham Harvey (New York: Altamira Press, 2004), 48.

⁶¹See Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-shamanism in North European Paganism* (London: Routledge, 2002). Also see Robert J. Wallis, "Between the Worlds: Autoarchaeology and Neo-shamans," in *Researching Paganisms*, ed. Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy, and Graham Harvey (New York: Altamira Press, 2004), 194.

⁶²Salomonsen, "Methods of Compassion," 51.

⁶³James D. Chancellor, "A Comparative Approach to Religious Fundamentalism: Egyptian Sunni Islam and American Protestant Christianity" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1988), 19.

⁶⁴James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 4.

framing oneself as a learner, the researcher mediates the emic/etic tension, maintaining an open, receptive and empathic awareness to the living religious expression without necessarily identifying as an insider. There is an aspect of humility in the learner's perspective that I found particularly important to the research process.⁶⁵ Humility is not a methodology as much as an attitude that enables the etic researcher to effectively negotiate the dynamic of participant and observer. I learned the importance of seeing these participant and observer roles not as oppositional but as complementary positions. Thus from a compassionate or humble etic perspective, I have done my best to describe a worldview that can be found both accurate by participants and analytic by an academic audience.

Conclusion

This study of Asatru in America seeks to deepen understanding of the cultural and religious aspects of this growing movement. The research presented here represents an ethnographic approach drawing on participant observation, interviews, and reading that privileges the religious consciousness of the adherents. Particular attention is given to how the conditions of modern life in America have shaped the development of the movement. In this effort, I am indebted to the scholars who have contributed their insights about the movement as well as to the many Asatru practitioners whose interaction was invaluable in operationalizing these methodological considerations. This phase of research included over two years of immersive observation within the Asatru movement, which could not have been accomplished without the cooperation and trust of Asatru leaders. Much of the relevance and accuracy of this work is a result of their contributions. It is my hope that this study provides a compelling and useful framework

⁶⁵Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1981), 77.

through which to understand the Asatru worldview and its place in American society. In the following chapter, we will begin to examine in more detail the religious ideas and practices that give consistency and shape to the Asatru movement.

CHAPTER 4

THE WORLDVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ASATRU

“We are Asatru, and we are to be feared!”¹

Diverse and complex are suitable descriptors of contemporary Paganism.

Unlike New Religious Movements (NRMs) with a single prophet or centralized leadership exercising significant control over theology and practice, the Pagan movement is composed of numerous beliefs, practices, and groups which are so varied they often seem only tangentially related. Asatru also shares these characteristics of diversity and complexity, lacking one statement of beliefs or one body of leaders who represent the movement as a whole. Without an “authorized version” of Asatru, it becomes a dizzying feat to provide a general and accurate description of Pagan or Asatru identity. The various groups and opinion makers within Asatru each have their own evolving perspective on what Asatru is or should be. Michael York describes these contemporary Pagan qualities of diversity and decentralized leadership as indications of a Segmented Polycentric Integrated Network (SPIN). The SPIN is a model of organization distinguished by multiple autonomous groups with a diversity of leaders linked together by shared membership, common ideas, and processes. York notes that movements organized around a SPIN model are characterized by “a lack of agreement on movement goals and means, lack of regulatory power, and lack of anyone who can speak for the movement as a whole.”²

¹Quote from an Asatru adherent, field notes taken by author, Louisville Pagan Pride Day, 1 October 2011.

²Michael York, *The Emerging Network* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995), 325.

The SPIN model accurately describes the situation within the world of Asatru, which is composed of numerous groups of varying size and influence, and a diverse set of influential leaders and individuals. Despite this situation, York notes that SPINs exhibit internal linkages that allow a degree of ideological consistency to develop across the movement.³ In Asatru, basic beliefs and ideology are communicated and reinforced in several important ways. Online forums and social networking sites are immensely popular and utilized extensively, allowing ideas to be communicated and discussed within distinct groups and to migrate across group boundaries. Large scale group events such as Moots and Things similarly draw together diverse groups of adherents to exchange ideas and develop on-going relationships. Books and journals written by practitioners remain an important means of exchange in the movement, and certain texts represent essential formational reading for adherents. Online interaction, group events, and books all represent networks through which information flows to construct a shared ideological foundation.

What is Reconstruction?

The shared religious goal among this diverse movement is that of “reconstructing” the pre-Christian religion of northern Europe. Yet what this means isn’t always clear. For Asatruar, reconstruction does not require replicating life in pre-modern society, “going back” to live as the ancestors did. For instance Josh Rood, a Heathen practitioner on the East Coast, acknowledges the impracticality as well as undesirability of somehow returning to a past way of life, saying, “Some things are outdated, and some things are no longer possible.”⁴ While it may not mean re-establishing an ancient Viking

³York, *The Emerging Network*, 326-27. York discusses five linkages, all of which are found in the Asatru movement: kinship and social relationships, leadership exchange, activities of traveling spokespeople, in-gatherings or large group events, and basic beliefs and ideological themes shared through multiple mediums of communication.

⁴Josh Rood, interview, *Eternal Haunted Summer* Autumn (2011) [online]; accessed 3

society, reconstruction involves an orientation toward the past as a vital source of information for the present. Asatruar seek to learn from and be influenced by the past in order to live well and authentically in the present. Thus the motivation for reconstruction arises from the perception that something is wrong with modern life, namely that modernity has cut off or “dis-embedded” modern individuals and societies from the wisdom of the past. This wisdom, contained within the culture and religion of the ancestors, guided people and their societies into situations of productive human thriving.

The Asatru movement has a number of sources from which to draw in this process of reconstructing the lost religion of the past. First and most important are the number of textual sources that concern pre-Christian Norse society. These include sources of mythology such as the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of poems recounting the stories of the Norse deities, the oldest manuscript of which, known as the *Codex Regius*, was written in the twelfth century.⁵ Another important source is the *Prose Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson, a Christian folklorist who compiled and synthesized Scandinavian legends in the thirteenth century. Heathen practitioners also obtain cultural and religious information from the Icelandic sagas, epic stories of families, heroes, and gods written from the eleventh century onwards. The fact that these textual sources are products of the Christian age complicates their usage, requiring modern Heathens to engage in a process of textual criticism to reconstruct a pure Paganism from the distortions caused by Christian ideology.⁶

In addition, Asatru adherents make regular use of contemporary scholarship

December 2012; available at <http://eternalhauntedsummer.com/issues/autumn-equinox-2011/josh-rood/>; Internet.

⁵Heather O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable Story of the Norse Myths* (New York: I.B. Tauris: 2008), 12.

⁶Michael F. Strmiska, ed., *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 19.

concerning northern European cultures, such as archeology, linguistics, and anthropology. Heathens also undertake their own study of historical texts and sources, when scholarly resources fall short. These self-taught Heathen experts are generally well-read in the source materials and may have some knowledge of source languages such as Icelandic, Old Norse, and German. They receive a great deal of respect in the movement, writing books and quasi-scholarly articles of considerable depth.⁷ Heathen gatherings and several Heathen journals provide a forum for these scholars to publish and discuss their research in lectures and workshops. A final, albeit controversial, source for reconstruction is the religious experience of contemporary Asatru practitioners themselves, sometimes referred to as “UPG,” unverified personal gnosis.

In his work on religious reconstruction among contemporary Druids, Michael Cooper introduces the concept of “ancientization,” which involves the use of knowledge from ancient sources to both construct and legitimize a contemporary religious identity. Cooper states that “this ‘ancientization’ authenticates religious identity through a connection with the ancient past.”⁸ Rather than seeing their religious work as either an innovation or fabrication, adherents believe they are accessing an ancient wisdom and link the new religion to the respected provenance of a well-known ancient practice. In this way, associating Asatru with Viking religion frames the new practice within a familiar and recognizable context and validates it as authentic religion.

The new religious identity may have very little concrete connection with the ancient practice. Indeed, as Cooper points out, while some groups may claim a continuity of practice with an ancient religion, such claims are difficult to establish. It is often noted that indigenous Paganism was incorporated into early Christian practice in northern

⁷Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, 137.

⁸Michael Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry: A Historical and Ethnographic Study*. Salt Lake City, UT: Sacred Tribes Press, 2010), Kindle ebook, chap. 2, location 875.

Europe, producing a folk Christianity that retained significant Pagan elements. This is a significant and influential thesis found in James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, for instance.⁹ Cooper further demonstrates the viability of this idea by tracing the survival of pre-Christian Celtic practices within European Christianity. Asatru adherents value the notion that Pagan practices and symbolism were retained within European folk religion. For instance, Diana Paxson writes that even as Christianity came to dominant Scandinavia, the "old beliefs lingered long in the countryside, and as in Iceland, the land spirits were honored even when the old gods were denied."¹⁰ A similar theory of continuity found widely in Asatru claims that Pagan religious concepts were retained in the subconscious, even while the religion ceased to be practiced or even consciously remembered. Again Paxson states, "Although the religion had been suppressed, the lore remained, and buried in the collective unconscious of the Germanic peoples, the old gods waited for men and women to call on them once more."¹¹

Despite the usefulness of these ideas for NRMs, Cooper finds that Pagan practices were so completely subsumed into Christian culture that they lost any viability as pagan religion. Even while Pagan "survivals" were incorporated into the culture of Christianized Europe, "Christianity was successful in glossing ancient paganism to such a degree that it was no longer identifiable as a religious system."¹² This is even more so the case with Norse and Germanic Paganism. While it clearly influenced the development and shape of Christianity in northern Europe, Paganism ceased to be practiced in any sort of viable or identifiable way after approximately 1100 C.E. and few Asatru adherents

⁹James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 358-59

¹⁰Diana Paxson, *Essential Asatru: Walking the Path of Norse Paganism* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 43.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 44.

¹²Cooper, *Contemporary Druidry*, chap. 3, location 1658.

make any claim to being the recipients of a continuous religious practice stretching into the pre-Christian past. Rather, in the discourse of the religion, the old ways are seen as being been revived or re-awakened from a dormant state.

Yet how effective is “ancientization” as a legitimation strategy? Tracing one’s lineage back to an ancient past seems counterintuitive in a society that values the new and innovative and seems quite happy to abandon tradition for what feels right in the moment. However, the emotional and psychological need for “roots” shouldn’t be underestimated if, as Giddens contends, modernity has “dis-embedded” our identities from a connection to the past. “Ancientization” is pervasive strategy within Asatru. Most Asatru are convinced that a connection to the past is vital to authentic living. In addressing the need of modern people for ancient roots, McNallen writes:

We are more like our ancestors than we are like anyone else. We inherited not only their general physical appearance, but also their predominant mental, emotional, and spiritual traits. We think and feel more like they did; our basic needs are most like theirs. The religion which best expressed their innermost nature - Asatru - is better suited to us than is some other creed which started in the Middle East among people who are essentially different from us.¹³

This reasoning is a strategy of legitimation that fits well with Giddens’s thesis of dis-embedding. However, rather than create “new” types of identity structures for a modern age, a tactic that might characterize the New Age movement, Asatru seeks to reconstruct old models of identity.¹⁴ The tensions experienced in modern life: in family structure, women’s roles, loss of connection to nature, etc., are all symptoms of the dis-embedding effect of modernity. Heathen solutions to these tensions lie in re-embedding the modern self within the lost wisdom of the Pagan past and reforming society with the

¹³Steven McNallen, *What is Asatru?* (Nevada, CA: Asatru Folk Assembly, 1985), 2.

¹⁴Sarah Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 34-37. Participants in the New Age movement see themselves as creating new evolved forms of consciousness suitable for a future harmonious Aquarian Age, while Neopagan practitioners orient their identities toward the wholeness and wisdom of a lost past.

values, social organization, and religious beliefs of those ancient cultures. Thus, religious reconstruction involves more than legitimizing a new religious identity through the appeal to an ancient tradition. Reconstruction also includes a critique of modernity, which is in keeping with Giddens's theory of dis-embedding. It involves a way of relating to the past as a source of solutions for modern dislocations. Michael Strmiska writes that "Nordic Pagans, like other Reconstructionist Pagans, are involved in a dialogue with the past, seeking not so much to imitate the past as to learn from it, for the purposes of the present and the future."¹⁵ We will note three aspects of this "dialogue with the past": its degree of authority, its impact on physical/cultural aspects of the movement, and its use as a strategy of identity creation.

First, Asatru adherents look to the past as authoritative, though the degree of authority attributed to the past varies. While some adherents attempt to conform their religious practice strictly to what can be known about past Pagan practice, others approach the past as a template for modern innovation. For instance, I attended a *sumbel*, an Asatru drinking ritual (see chap. 5 for a discussion of *sumbel*), in the summer of 2012 which attempted to follow as closely as possible to the description of the historical *sumbel* ritual provided by Anglo-Saxon expert Steven Pollington.¹⁶ This event represented an attempt to strictly appropriate the past and conform contemporary practice exactly to the historical antecedent. Strict reconstruction follows the philosophy that the more like the past a practice is, the more authentic and "right" it becomes. On the other hand, the modern practice of *seidh* magic, specifically the oracular *seidh* developed by Diana Paxson, begins with the historical sources such as the *Saga of Erik the Red*.¹⁷ But it

¹⁵Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, 142.

¹⁶Stephen Pollington, *The Meadhall: The Feasting Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2010), 43-48. Using *Beowulf* as his source, Pollington attempts to recreate the order of the Anglo-Saxon *sumbel* ritual.

¹⁷Diana L. Paxson, "The Return of the Volva: Recovering the Practice of Seidr," [online];

also draws on other cultural resources such as descriptions of ancient Greek oracles, and modern experiences of mediums and Spiritualism to fashion a magical practice that works for modern audiences.

The differences in pragmatic approaches toward reconstruction trace an ideological cleavage through the Asatru movement. This significant cleavage exemplifies the problematic nature of reducing our analysis of Asatru to one comparative dimension alone. While race clearly functions as a social and ideological cleavage, other factors are also salient to identifying important differences and categories of practice. Therefore, if we categorize Asatru along a spectrum of racial attitudes from racist to inclusive, we should also add another axis from strict reconstructionist to eclectic uses of the past.

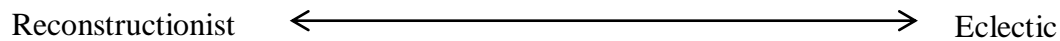


Figure 2. Spectrum of uses of the past

It is also useful to compare Asatru to the broader Neopagan movement in this regard:

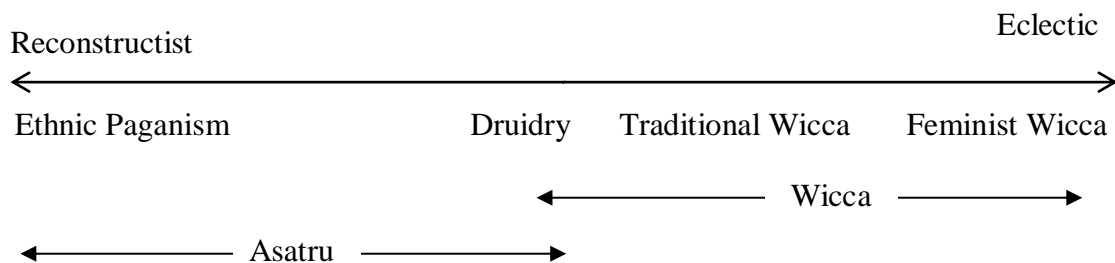


Figure 3. Comparison of Asatru and Neopagan uses of the past

While the approaches toward reconstruction vary, reconstruction also dramatically impacts the physical and aesthetic culture of Asatru. Heathens attempt to structure their religious environment according to the specific practices and beliefs of the past. The aesthetic appeal of the past exerts a powerful influence on the movement. Reconstructionists want to do the rituals of the past, not create “new” rituals. They want to drink what the ancestors drank, thus the movement-wide obsession for imbibing home-brewed mead from drinking horns as attested to in the historical record. They want to compose and recite poetry in ancient Scandinavian meters because the old gods hear these rhythms and are pleased.¹⁸ Heathens seek to build holy spaces like the Norse pagans did – the *vé*, *hof* and barrow mound, rather than a church.¹⁹ They practice ancient arts such as spinning, weaving, and blacksmithing. Heathen artists incorporate designs from Scandinavian runestones, build and play ancient musical instruments such as the Anglo-Saxon lyre, and reconstruct old forms of folk dancing. Heathen leaders urge practitioners to emulate the ancient Norse by not having their children circumcised.²⁰ All these are examples of the ubiquitous practice of reconstructing the physical artifacts of the past for use in modern life.²¹

Another interesting example concerns the emphasis in the Midwest Tribes movement to reinstitute a regional Thing, a form of social organization. The Thing was

¹⁸Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, August 2012.

¹⁹Both terms, *vé* and *hof*, are designations for types of Norse sacred space. The *vé* was an outdoor space open to the air, while the *hof* was a roofed temple. Ron Landreth, email to author, 11 July 2012. Also Jordsvin, “Hofs and Harrows: Then and Now” [online]; accessed 28 January 2013; available from <http://home.earthlink.net/~jordsvin/Jordsvins%20Writing/Hofs%20and%20Harrows.ht>; Internet. Heathens may incorporate a small mound of rock or dirt in their sacred site as a place for meditation and veneration of land spirits.

²⁰Mark Stinson, “Reasons Heathens Should Reject Circumcision” in *Heathen Families: Fables and Essays* (Liberty, MO: Jotun’s Bane Kindred, 2011), 28-31.

²¹Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, 129-30.

developed by the original Scandinavian settlers in Iceland as a gathering of freemen for quasi-democratic decision making and judicial rulings. The annual Althing was held at Thingvellir, now a national park in southwestern Iceland. The event drew the leading landowning families of Iceland together as something of a national parliament. Mark Stinson seeks to reconstruct a similar decision-making body in the Midwest modeled on the ancient Icelandic Thing. Note the reconstructive motivation in his statement:

Norse Heathens left Norway and went to Iceland They established a Thing . . . a way for chieftains to gather together, and decide regional issues. It was a gathering of strong equals. It was unique—and successful Let us emulate that model and modernize it to our needs.”²²

Heathens with an eclectic orientation toward the past might call it a “Board” and elect Officers to conduct business. But those with a stricter sense of reconstruction seek to recreate the ancient Thing, along with the Icelandic cultural apparatus that supported it, such as tribes, chieftains, and law speakers. The Midwest Tribes have been practicing this form of social organization for several years, holding an annual Midwest Thing. While it has yet to evolve into a real decision-making body or issue binding quasi-legal rulings, it has been a way for these regional Asatru chieftains to begin to cooperate on shared concerns. However, Stinson’s discourse about the Midwest Thing is that of reconstructing or appropriating a past practice, not innovating a new form of social organization. Reconstruction involves using and surrounding oneself with objects, rituals, and practices of the past.

The third aspect of reconstruction shifts the focus from rebuilding artifacts of the past to reconstructing the self. This goes to the deep agenda of Pagan reconstruction. Reconstruction involves more than modern people living with and among ancient things and practices, it also involves renovating identity according to ancient ways of looking at

²²Mark Stinson, *Heathen Gods: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Folkway of our People* (Liberty, MO: Jotun’s Bane Kindred, 2009), 103.

the world. Reconstructionists want to build “new” people based upon an “old” model. The Heathen thinker Josh Rood puts it succinctly, “Recon is about shifting our worldview, shifting our way of thinking.”²³ For Heathens, this involves dismantling a way of seeing the world shaped by oppressive Christianity and materialistic modernity, as Rood states, “Over time you start to set aside the Christian worldview, and replace it with a Heathen one. I think this is a lifelong process for us, but our kids will have it easier.”²⁴ Rood provides a personal example this process when his understanding of the afterlife shifted to a more Heathen perspective:

So when reconstructing a Heathen religion, the absolute best way to do it is to, while you are researching something on it, set aside your preconceived notions . . . Maybe you banked on going to Gimli, or to Thor’s hall. I know I did. Until I discovered that in reality, these concepts are not really a part of the Heathen mindset. Snorri [Sturluson, compiler of the *Prose Edda*] constructed the concept of Gimli as a place for the righteous, and the idea that we go to a god’s hall comes from a Christian understanding. When I first realized that our ancestors by and large didn’t believe in a golden hall in the sky, and that actual Heathen belief pointed towards the gravemound, it shook me. But I swallowed it.²⁵

For Rood and other Heathens, the real work of reconstruction is internal: a re-paganization of the mind. From this perspective, when one begins to think according to Heathen concepts and develop this new Heathen understanding, authentic Heathen practices begin to emerge from that recovered worldview.

Asatru reconstructionists frequently rely on etymology to discover the pre-Christian meaning of various religious words, a process that has been used for many years in Heathenry. For example, in an article published in the Heathen journal *Óðrærir*, Rood discusses the origins of the German words *sidu*, meaning “religion,” and *heilag*,

²³Joshua Rood, field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, August 2012.

²⁴Rood, interview.

²⁵Ibid. Gimli is mentioned in Norse myth as a golden-roofed hall in Asgard, the home of the gods, where the righteous reside after death. See H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 28.

meaning “holy.”²⁶ Rood seeks to inform Heathen thinking about religious issues by unearthing pre-Christian understandings of these concepts. By allowing these older concepts to shape their thinking, Heathen reconstructionists hope to deconstruct their own Christian worldview and begin to think like their pre-Christian ancestors. The emphasis is not so much on what the elder Heathen “did” as to what they thought and how they understood the world, not so much on reconstructing a practice as reconstructing a meaning. Josh Rood writes, “We know that human sacrifice existed, and we don’t plan on bringing back that practice, but we do want to understand why it existed, so that we can understand the socioreligious implications.”²⁷ Many scholars have suggested that the revival of Paganism is in part about re-enchantment, recapturing an experience of the numinous in a world that has been thoroughly dis-encharnted by Protestant Christianity and modernity. Yet the reconstructionist imperative seems to go a step beyond a generic sense of re-enchantment. It seeks more than an experience of wonder and awe in the world. Instead, it pursues a transformation of the concepts through which one experiences and evaluates the world, a change that is at once cognitive and emotional.

Why Reconstruct?

As indicated by the frequently used qualifier “pre-Christian,” Heathens seek to practice a religion free from Christian influence. For Mark Stinson and others, the goal of Heathen reconstruction is “to continue the Way of Life that our Ancestors followed prior to Christianity being moved Northward into Northern Europe by Rome.”²⁸ There is a strong feeling among Asatruar that Christianity interfered with, corrupted, or hijacked the ancestral religions of Europe. Similarly many adherents attribute the problems of

²⁶Joshua Rood, “Establishing the Innangard: Some Concepts Relating to Custom, Morality, and Religion,” *Óðrævir* 2 (2012): 19-24.

²⁷Rood, interview.

²⁸Stinson, *Heathen Gods*, 6.

modernity to the Christian dominance of the culture, as well as other monotheistic religions to a lesser degree.²⁹ Reconstruction, then, is the conscious attempt to draw on the pre-Christian past in order to create a post-Christian religion and culture. All contemporary Pagan religions reject Christianity to one degree or another as Michael Strmiska indicates: “In the popular discourse of modern Paganism . . . Christianity is frequently denounced as an antinatural, antifemale, sexually and culturally repressive, guilt-ridden, and authoritarian religion that has fostered intolerance, hypocrisy, and persecution throughout the world.”³⁰ This deep antipathy towards Christianity forms a significant dynamic within the Heathen community that deserves to be noted.

Heathens often express an animosity towards Christianity that ranges from anger and outright dismissal to a general disdain, mistrust, and suspicion. There are almost endless examples of this sentiment. For instance, during an email exchange with a Heathen woman, I made the comment that my cousin was an Anglican Christian. This generated an intense and immediate response: “Aren’t they the ones who oppressed our people?”³¹ In Heathen essays, Christianity is sometimes denounced as a “malignant desert philosophy” and a “life-denying paradigm.”³² During a conversation with a long-time Heathen about my Christian background, he related that his suspicion of Christians originated from being hostilely evangelized on a university campus.³³ During a conversation in a kindred meeting, the members stated that if someone was a Christian

²⁹There is an interesting silence about fundamentalist or radical Islam in American Asatru. This may reflect the lack of global consciousness in the movement, because the situation in Europe is quite different than the American context. Some adherents express an empathy with Muslims as part of a minority religion in America that faces persecution from the Christian majority.

³⁰Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, 29.

³¹J. H., email to author, 4 April 2011.

³²Eowyn, “MIDGARTH 911 (US) AND 999 (UK),” [online]; accessed 8 September 2011; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/Guardians/midgarth-911-us-and-999-uk/>; Internet.

³³Field notes taken by author, Pawhuska, OK, June 2011.

they would not be welcome in the kindred, dual allegiance of this sort would not be tolerated, although other Pagan affiliations would be.³⁴ Almost universally, Asatru kindreds would reject any attempt to mix Heathen and Christian affiliation as unthinkable. In kindreds of a more folkish persuasion, Wiccan or other pagan affiliations would also be discouraged or rejected.

While Asatru defines itself against Christianity, there is also a great deal of ambivalence in the movement regarding other forms of Paganism. Heathens often distance themselves from both Christian and Pagan religious traditions. These sentiments arise from different sources however. Heathen attitudes towards Paganism are formed by a critique of Neopagan eclecticism. Heathens feel that Wiccan or Neopagan practice is shallow, confused, and even silly, consisting of a mixed-up concoction of beliefs and practices. Neopagans flirt with the past without being significantly and seriously grounded in it. And their excessive “borrowing” from other cultures only exacerbates the problems of the dis-embedded and rootless modern identity.³⁵ Thus Neopaganisms are simply “made-up” new religions, symptoms of modernity.

While some Heathens attempt to take a nuanced approach toward Christianity, they have a strong awareness of the minority status of Asatru in a predominantly Christian America. They see themselves as standing in opposition to a dominant Christian culture. While this feeling often manifests as verbally expressed anger, called “Christian-bashing,” Heathens sometimes exhibit a more light-hearted and comical side. For instance, many Heathen gatherings feature an afternoon of Viking Games in which

³⁴Field notes taken by author, Lexington, KY, 2011.

³⁵See Sarah M. Pike’s excellent chapter on Neopagan “borrowing” in her book *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001). Issues of “borrowing” and cultural appropriation also arise within Heathenry, as the movement clearly draws on a historical culture not obviously its own. Both Reconstruction and Metagenetics can be seen as different ideological strategies that lend a type of legitimacy to cultural appropriation.

participants compete in events such as archery, hammer toss, ax throwing, and other athletic events. One such event at East Coast Thing features a canoe race in which the racers go “a-Viking,” rowing their canoes to a beach where they chop the “head” off a monk statue before continuing to the finish line.³⁶ Participants clearly understood this activity as a light-hearted game and not a preparation for violence. Yet at the same time, the event demonstrates that Heathens have a particular reading of history in which the growth and dominance of Christianity is interpreted in a decidedly negative light. Heathens in general are not comfortable with Christianity, nor content to exist quietly within a Christian cultural context. Rather they are highly alienated from Christianity, especially the Christianity of a fundamentalist variety.

There seem to be four primary reasons for this actively negative stance towards Christianity. First, Heathens perceive Christianity as historically oppressive to Pagan people and cultures. This sentiment is widespread in contemporary Paganism of all varieties. Heathens exhibit strong emotions regarding the oppressive, even violent, practices employed by Christians in Scandinavia prior to 1100 CE during the conversion period. Yet how could modern people so closely identify with events that took place over a thousand years ago? As we have noted, Heathen identity is rooted in the past and this conversion history is recounted in many of the sagas that Heathens study. This history also provides a convenient ideological reason for Heathens to distance themselves from the current Christian context. Heathens use these stories as a way to re-imagine their own experience with Christianity, drawing on the past to interpret Christianity as a negative experience for the Norse/Germanic peoples. While history has often interpreted Christian conversion as a positive cultural advancement for Pagan peoples, contemporary Heathens reject and invert this standard historical analysis. In their eyes, Christianity interrupted

³⁶Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, August 2012. The statue itself was a cement garden figure and its head was a tennis ball decorated with a face drawn in black marker.

and devastated a culture and has been a lamentable cultural setback for Western civilization. Their goal is to pick back up at 1100 CE and begin the development of pagan Norse culture again by asking, “What would our culture be like now, if it had not been interrupted by 1000 years of Christianity?”³⁷

Second, Heathens experience Christianity as contemporaneously oppressive and hostile. Many Heathens have experienced harassment or discrimination from Christian sources, and stories about Christian antagonism are numerous within the movement. A Heathen leader mentioned to me that his car was egged because of his faith while others talk about discrimination at work or school.³⁸ I personally witnessed an incident of harassment at the first national Heathen moot I attended. After a ritual, two women dressed in Heathen garb encountered some locals who shouted “Demon worshippers” and cursed them.³⁹ Additionally, many Heathens have had bad or oppressive experiences within Christianity prior to converting to Heathenry. For instance, one Asatru woman discussed theological and intellectual problems she had encountered with Christianity. One of her grandmothers was a Protestant, while the other was a Catholic. Due to these different affiliations, each grandmother thought the other was hell-bound. She felt caught between them in a personal drama motivated by the twisted, fear-inducing logic of Christianity as she perceived it and as a result rejected Christianity as inauthentic and unspiritual.⁴⁰

Third, Heathens see Christianity as a dying faith, on the wrong side of history.

³⁷Galina Krasskova, *Exploring the Northern Tradition: A Guide to the Gods, Lore, Rites, and Celebrations from the Norse, German, and Anglo-Saxon Traditions* (Franklin Lakes, NJ: New Page Books, 2005), 22, 25.

³⁸Mark Stinson, email to author, 26 July 2011. Also Mark Stinson, *Heathen Tribes: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Tribes of Our Folk* (Liberty, MO: Jotun’s Bane Kindred, 2011), 229-31.

³⁹Field notes taken by author, Pawhuska, OK, June, 2011.

⁴⁰Lori Woods, interview by author, Oakland, CA, November, 2012.

Mark Stinson states, “I think Christianity is losing its grip on our People. After centuries of religious domination by these foreign beliefs, people are finally starting to break free. It could very well be that they are able to break free because the Christian culture is failing.”⁴¹ Heathens interpret the slump in the numbers of Christian adherents as a sign of this gradual decline and feel that they are not only witnessing but participating in the demise of Christianity. In this version of history, modern society is experiencing an awakening and a revival of the old gods and religion which will throw off the last thousand years of Christian oppression of northern European peoples and culture. Heathens see their religion and culture as important in shaping this new post-Christian American context.

Fourth, Christianity is considered an “alien” worldview, unsuitable and destructive for those of northern European ancestry. Some contemporary Heathens, particularly those with a folkish orientation, consider Asatru to be the ancient worldview indigenous to Europe and the natural religion for those with northern European heritage.⁴² This argument often employs an ideological strategy similar to McNallen’s Metagenetics. Despite more than a thousand years of Christian history in Europe and America, the indigenous European worldview has only been suppressed, not replaced. As McNallen frequently states, “We have been Europeans for about forty thousand years. We have been Christians for considerably less than two thousand years.”⁴³ For these Heathens Asatru is in the blood, while Christianity represents a Middle Eastern religion

⁴¹Stinson, email.

⁴²Mark Stinson, *Heathen Tribes*, 229. Also see McNallen, “About Asatru.” While The Troth does not speak about Christianity as an “alien faith,” language used primarily by folkish Asatru, the organization sees Asatru as the traditional indigenous religion of Europe and Christianity as a non-European religion. See The Troth pamphlet “Heathens and Heathen Faith.”

⁴³Stephen McNallen, “Asatru – A Native European Religion,” [video online]; accessed 19 December 2012; available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDvPdWBeEFc&list=UUuWPZGha53HHRFoxFd7-7eQ&index=18>; clip 1:16 – 1:32; Internet.

that was forced upon European people and maintained only through the repression of the indigenous worldview. Thus, Heathens feel that the Christian worldview must be thrown off and eradicated in order to experience their true natural selves. In this Heathen understanding, worldview is not something that one can adopt based on rationality or learn through socialization. Rather, worldview is, to one degree or another, an organic part of one's nature, deeply embedded into the psyche through the cumulative experience of one's ancestors through millennia. Although Christianity was able to temporarily repress this worldview and mask it with another, Heathens are now rejecting this alien culture.

Heathenry Reconstructed?

In a now-classic book describing American Paganism, *Drawing Down the Moon*, Margo Adler describes three elements common to contemporary Pagan religions: animism, polytheism, and pantheism.⁴⁴ Since that time, other writers have refined Adler's definition. For instance, in attempting to formulate a contemporary "core" Paganism, Michael York identifies five characteristics of Pagan religion: 1) a number of male and female gods, 2) magical practice, 3) emphasis on ritual efficacy, 4) corpospirituality, and 5) an understanding of gods and humans as codependent and interrelated.⁴⁵ York's first and fifth characteristics define a Pagan variety of polytheism, and his "corpospirituality" reflects a cosmology colored by animism and pantheism. Magic and ritual are certainly characteristic of Pagan religious activity and thus play an important role in Pagan religion, a topic to be addressed in chapter 5. York's main contribution to defining

⁴⁴Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 23. Other Neo-pagan writers summarize the movement's core beliefs in other ways. For instance, Gus diZerega includes additional beliefs about the eternal present, no principle of ultimate evil, religious pluralism, harmony, and experience being more salient than faith. See Philip Johnson, and Gus diZerega, *Beyond the Burning Times: A Pagan and Christian in Dialogue* (Oxford: Lion, 2008), 92.

⁴⁵York, *Pagan Theology*, 14.

Paganism might be to push us from the realm of belief into the realm of behavior:

Paganism is not just a way of understanding the world, but also a way of interacting with it.

Yet, Adler's three characteristics remain definitive. Animism is the understanding that all parts of the natural world are alive and capable of interacting and relating. Animism is emphasized to a greater or lesser extent by various types of Paganism. It is less salient in Wicca, which tends to see divinity expressed primarily in the Goddess and God. Other Pagan traditions such as Druidry and earth-centered folk traditions often contain highly animistic cosmologies. Animism usually entails the personification of nature's vitality in the form of local earth, water, or tree spirits, such as the dryads and naiads of ancient Greece, the *kami* of Japan, and the *nats* of Southeast Asia.⁴⁶ These personal beings do not "inhabit" the tree, stream, or lake so much as they embody the soul, the animate dimension, of that geographical feature or element. These features are natural and physical as well as spiritual and alive: a tree may be perceived as just a tree and as living relational entity simultaneously, the difference being in how one approaches the natural object. Rather than worshipping a rarified universal concept of Nature, animists are particularly attuned to the spiritual qualities of their local geography.

Asatru recognizes *vættir*, or earth spirits, and therefore has a potentially deep animistic perspective. Animistic practices are included in most Heathen religious events. For instance, before any ritual, the local land spirits will be addressed and invited to participate, and often appeased with an offering. Animals are often regarded as other-than-human persons and encounters with them are interpreted as significant. At an

⁴⁶The dryads and naiads were tree and water spirits respectively. The *kami* are the local gods and spirits recognized by the Shinto religion of Japan. While many of these are ancestral in nature, earth-based *kami* abound, such as the spirits of rice and field, elemental *kami* such as fire spirits, and *kami* that represent geographical territory. Similarly *nats* represent both ancestral and earth-based spirits often housed in small spirit houses hung in trees and homes throughout Southeast Asia.

outdoor ritual held in Pennsylvania on a hot summer day, an exceptionally large dragonfly buzzed around the circle of participants. After it stopped and hovered in front of one particular group, a man lifted the ritual horn and hailed the land *vaettir* and “their representative, the dragonfly.”⁴⁷ A prominent kindred in the Midwest, Jotun’s Bane, created their ritual space around a large oak tree which they call *Forn Halr*, Old Man. *Forn Halr* is venerated with rituals and offerings and is understood to be presiding over and witnessing the religious activities that take place under his branches.

Adler seems to have trouble distinguishing between pantheism and animism, stating that pantheism “implies much the same thing as animism.”⁴⁸ Writing a decade later, Michael York places both these concepts within his category of “corpospirituality,” which “allows for perception of the divine in nature” in a variety of forms.⁴⁹ Pantheism does entail the belief that “divinity is inseparable from nature,” as Adler states.⁵⁰ However a religion or worldview could be pantheistic, understanding divinity as immanent, but also diffused throughout nature without the specificity and personification that is characteristic of animism. Heathens generally avoid the “All is One” language of pantheism that is often found among New Age proponents and many Neopagan Goddess worshipers. While the cosmos may be sacred, Heathens also see it as differentiated and not always accommodating to human interests.

Pantheism also suggests that the gods exist within the world or partake of materiality rather than being transcendent from it.⁵¹ A pantheistic worldview entails that the material world taken as a whole exhibits characteristics of the divine and may be

⁴⁷Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012.

⁴⁸Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 23.

⁴⁹York, *Pagan Theology*, 13.

⁵⁰Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 23.

⁵¹York, *Pagan Theology*, 63.

experienced as divine. In Asatru, the World Tree is often used as a symbol of the cosmos, giving the religion a pantheistic orientation. Similarly Asatru adherents will occasionally personify the earth as Mother Jorth or Erda, an earth goddess figure who emphasizes the organic and divine nature of the material world. Both these symbols indicate that Asatruar conceptualize their cosmology as pantheistic and see the multiplex itself as divine or holy. As Michael York puts it, these symbols present “nature as a chief metaphorical register expressive of the divine.”⁵² While the gods of Asatru exist in extra-corporal dimensions or states, these dimensions are inextricably linked with the physical world: the earthly and the spiritual are fused. Not only do the gods exist as part of the world, but the rewards of religious life are experienced as this-worldly gains. Pantheism takes as its goal not transcending worldly life but maximizing it by integrating and aligning it with the forces of the natural world.

Adler’s third characteristic, polytheism, is by far the most salient within Asatru. Polytheism is the belief that the divine is manifested as many different gods. This pantheon of deities represents both a diversity of divine personalities and a gradation of divine beings, major and minor gods, none of which have an exclusive claim on human veneration. Asatru adherents strongly emphasize the polytheistic nature of their religion and often distinguish themselves from Neopagans on this issue. Neopagans tend to understand the multiplicity of gods as a reflection of the bi-polarity of divine masculine and feminine, cultural manifestations of these universal principles or forces. York writes that “the plethora of names for goddesses and gods often used by contemporary Western pagans of the neopagan school does not represent independent, substantially or cosmically distinct entities but, rather and simply, designations for either its Goddess or God.”⁵³ To some degree, polytheism stresses certain ontological suppositions about the

⁵²York, *Pagan Theology*, 13.

⁵³Ibid., 64.

divine: particularly the ontological reality of multiple distinct and autonomous divine beings; an emphasis on the divine feminine; theogony, the coming into existence of the gods and their subsequent generations; and the attribution of divine functions or spheres of power to particular gods and goddesses. As well, Heathens and polytheists in general often exhibit a freedom of association with these various deities, actively venerating many gods at various levels of formality. Emphasizing the place of corpospirituality in their conception of the divine, Heathen worship ubiquitously uses images to represent the deities.

Asatru adherents hold different perspectives about the divine nature and may understand the gods as cosmic energies or psychological archetypes. However, most Asatruar view the gods as ontologically real beings whose anthropomorphic images metaphorically, not literally, represent their unique personalities.⁵⁴ Heathens often vociferously resist attempts to obscure the unique nature of the gods by relating them to deities from other cultural contexts. An important part of the experience of each deity is his or her sphere of power. Heathens tend to connect with particular aspects of the gods such as Tyr's emphasis on justice and self-sacrifice, Odin's wisdom or shamanic ability, Frigga's domestic arts, Thor's protective power, or Freyja's magical qualities. Yet, while often feeling particularly connected to one god, Heathens freely venerate all the Germanic and Norse deities.

For a religion that is often considered a Viking boys club, the divine feminine has a high profile and several goddesses take prominent roles in religious observances, particularly Frigga, the wife of Odin; and Freyja, goddess of love and magic. Heathen priestess Patricia Lafayllve has assembled a mobile shrine to Freyja which she takes to Heathen events throughout the United States.⁵⁵ And while it is often the case that

⁵⁴Asatruar is the plural designation for those who follow the Asatru religion.

⁵⁵Patricia Lafayllve, interview by author, San Jose, CA, February, 2012.

Heathen men primarily venerate the male warrior gods and women worship the female goddesses, this is not a universal rule by any means. Many women look to male gods and Asatru men are gradually opening to the experience of the divine feminine. For instance, Mark Stinson has written about his experiences with Frigga and suggests that male Asatruar should more actively venerate the goddesses in order to become better husbands.⁵⁶ Asatru culture will become more distinctly and authentically polytheistic as this broadening of veneration continues to develop.

Cosmology: The World Tree and the Precariousness of Life

The cosmology we have inherited from medieval Christianity is one of stability and uniformity. The medieval scholars looked up and saw the harmonious interlocking crystalline spheres moving in their perfect circular pathways ordained and controlled by a God who was also logical, orderly, and regular. The cosmos was depicted as a harmonious, integrated, perfect system: moving like clockwork, predictable and regular. Although this perception of the universe as a stable, integrated system now competes with a new model, generated by relativity and quantum physics, of an energetic, evolving, changing, unpredictable cosmos, the old model remains deeply ingrained in the Western consciousness.

Heathens are attempting to understand the cosmos according to an entirely different metaphor, one that arises neither out of Abrahamic religion nor out of the modern scientific worldview. This cosmology is evocatively pictured by Patricia Lafayllve, a Heathen *gythja* or priestess, who often opens rituals by visualizing the Norse cosmology. Stretching out her arms she says, “To the north, Ice; to the south, fire; between them yawned the gap, Ginnungagap . . . and the mighty Ash rose, Yggdrasil,

⁵⁶Mark Stinson, “A Conversation with Frigga,” in *Heathen Families: Fables and Essays* (Liberty, MO: Jotun’s Bane Kindred, 2011), 52-53.

three great roots anchoring it, its branches spreading forth touching all the nine worlds.”⁵⁷

At the center of the Heathen worldview stands Yggdrasil, the World Tree, in which the cosmos exists. "The world ash Yggdrasil is taken to contain within its branch and root structure the worlds of the gods, giants, dwarves, and most importantly Midgard, the world of men," writes scholar Paul Bauschatz.⁵⁸ The world tree forms the conceptual framework for understanding the contemporary cosmology of Asatru. While Heathens have no qualms with a scientific understanding of origins and tend to be evolutionist in their perspective, it is the religious concepts of Norse myth that deeply inform their thinking about and relationship to the world around them.⁵⁹

If the cosmos is like a tree, then we can observe several distinguishing characteristics about it. It is an animated universe, alive and interconnected. The cosmic squirrel Ratatosk climbs up and down its trunk; the gods, such as Odin on his eight-legged steed Sleipnir and Freyja in her falcon cloak, travel along the tree from world to world. It is a universe full of flowing energy with Midgard, the physical world, as the very nexus through which sacred power moves. These energies are understood to be physically represented in the runes, which "were not merely an alphabetic writing system to the Germanic peoples. Probably they originally represented symbolically some fixed and realized aspects of the forces that structure the universe.”⁶⁰ Each of the runes is representative of a type of esoteric or spiritual energy. By manipulating the runes, either

⁵⁷Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June, 2012. This is a summary of Patricia's longer introduction to her ancestor blot.

⁵⁸Paul C. Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 5.

⁵⁹Patricia Lafayllve, email to author, 9 April 2011. She writes, "It is important to note that we heathens have no issue with science or the scientific method. We understand science and believe in its evidence, same as most people; we just also have a spiritual component, and that is the kind of thing you'll see the most of in our conversations."

⁶⁰Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*, 68.

in writing or in vocal incantations known as *galdr*, practitioners attempt to attract or draw the energy of those runes to the specific location or need being addressed.

In addition, an important dynamic of Asatru cosmology is that of struggle. The Asatru universe is not stable or safe, but in flux and under threat: “The tree was continually threatened even as it grew and flourished.”⁶¹ The myths depict this condition of struggle by means of several beasts that attack, prey upon and threaten the tree’s existence: deer and goats that devour the leaves of the tree, and *Niðhogg* the serpent of the underworld who gnaws upon its roots.⁶² Another beast, the world serpent *Jormungandr* who lies at the bottom of the sea, encircles the tree and strains against it. As one Heathen author states, “The Tree that supports all that is and all that will be is under attack.”⁶³ Many of the giants who inhabit the worlds of fire and ice seek the destruction of the orderly cosmos that gods and humans have created, a constant threat delayed only by the vigilance of the gods. This struggle against chaos and disorder comes to a climactic resolution at Ragnarok, the battle of the gods and giants in which the cosmos is virtually destroyed.

The Heathen cosmos is unstable and at any moment the balance of power could shift. In fact the underlying tendency is one of destabilization or disintegration: the cosmos is only tenuously held together by effort. The Norns, the mythological figures of Time, stand at the cosmic well and water the Tree to nourish it; Odin searches for knowledge and information that will help him maintain the balance of power and delay Ragnarok; Heimdall ceaselessly watches from the Bifrost Bridge for signs of danger; Thor maintains order by constantly fighting back the aggressive efforts of the giants.

⁶¹Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 26-27.

⁶²Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*, 25.

⁶³Galina Krasskova, *Exploring the Northern Tradition*, 31.

Similarly, human beings are understood to be partners with the gods in their efforts to stabilize and prolong the existence of the orderly cosmos. As H.R. Ellis Davidson writes:

By supporting them [the group of two or three powerful deities ruling the world – namely Odin, Thor, and Freyr] men helped to maintain the existing order, and so ensure the continuing survival of themselves and their descendants in a precarious world They were very much alive to the threats constantly menacing them, and aware that the order of the world and the prosperity of the community would not endure forever their awareness of possible destruction; it was something deeply engraved into the framework of their religion.⁶⁴

This sense of life as a struggle against external threats plays an important role in the worldview of many contemporary Asatruar. Jason Van Tatenhove, a kindred gothi or priest in Colorado, sees Asatru as a worldview suited to resisting the challenges and threats of the world, whether those are economic, physical, or spiritual. For him, the values of Asatru, the Nine Noble virtues, and his own ancestral heritage are indicative of a constant and valiant struggle against the forces of disorder and disintegration. The very name of his kindred, Fimbul Winter, meaning “great” or “terrible” winter, is evocative of this mindset of struggle.⁶⁵ For Jason, Heathens must work hard and sacrifice to make their own way in the world, values that are relevant to such contemporary activities as surviving the current recession in the U.S., and running a small business in tough economic times.

Jason has also embodied these values of struggle, self-discipline, and sacrifice in his role as a mixed martial arts fighter. The intense training and fighting situations he has faced have strengthened his understanding and practice of the Asatru virtues. Courage and perseverance are directly applicable when facing an opponent in the ring. Fighting also functions metaphorically for Jason by picturing life as a struggle to

⁶⁴Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 221.

⁶⁵“Fimbul winter” is a phrase from the *Poetic Edda* used to describe a catastrophic environmental event in which the human population of Midgard experiences three years of constant winter and related hardships prior to Ragnarok.

overcome through the use of disciplined strength.⁶⁶ The morally strong and upright individual, one who is *trú*, approaches life with a self-reliant attitude and embodies the values of courage, discipline, perseverance against challenges.⁶⁷

Jason also incorporates the theme of the individual confronting challenges and facing tests into the rituals he leads. During an Odin blot at a large Heathen gathering, Jason instructed participants to walk around the ritual space through a series of preparatory stations.⁶⁸ Participants first came to a woman holding a horn, who said, “As Odin gave his eye for knowledge at Mimir’s Well, think about what you would give for knowledge.” After drinking from the horn of consecrated water, each person then approached another woman who held a bowl. She dipped a leafy oak branch into the liquid and sprinkled each participant, a symbol of both cleansing and blessing. Advancing to the next station, participants found themselves facing Jason, who flourished a spear and pressed the point to their chests, asking, “What will you sacrifice for Odin?” At this point each participant answered, declaring what he or she would do or sacrifice as a response to the god’s example. Jason would not let anyone pass until he or she had answered satisfactorily.

These elements of testing and challenge were unique to Asatru rituals I have observed. To some extent the challenge at spear point reflects the ideology of reciprocal exchange: a gift for a gift, which underlies Asatru theology. The sacrifice of Odin for the gift of knowledge requires a similar sacrifice from the adherent for the blessing of Odin. Yet at the same time, in facing the spear the individual faces a challenge, a test that must be met not physically, but spiritually. It is not a call to war, but a test of the individual’s

⁶⁶Jason Van Tatenhove, interview by author, 22 October 2011.

⁶⁷The term *trú* is used in Asatru to refer to those who live according to the ethical virtues of the religion.

⁶⁸Field notes taken by author, McLouth, KS, 2012.

mettle: can he or she stand courageously against the challenge, the obstacle in his or her path? The obstacle provided by the god becomes a metaphor for the challenges that the individual must confront on her own merits to achieve success in life. Life for the Asatruar is ritualized here as a series of challenges that must be confronted by the individual's own strength and virtue.

The elements of instability and danger inherent in life give rise to a pair of important ethical concepts in Asatru: *innangarð* (innangard) and *utangarð* (utangard). Deriving from the layout of Icelandic farmsteads, the innangard represents that which is within the boundary fence, representing orderly human society regulated by law and custom. The utangard consists of all that is beyond the fence: the wild, forces and beings that are potentially disorderly and disruptive.⁶⁹ Recognizing wildness and instability as the basic state of the cosmos, Heathens are driven to establish enclosures of order and community. If the cosmos is primarily utangard, a concept with which the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes might agree, then humans must build these enclosures of culture and society that hold disorder at bay and prevent the cosmos from destabilizing. In doing so, humans emulate the gods who have established Asgard, literally the “enclosure of the gods,” as a fortress of order, light, and culture against the elemental forces of chaos represented by the giants or Jotuns who inhabit the wilds.

Similarly, Midgard itself, the realm of human beings in the cosmos, is set apart as an enclosure suitable for orderly human life. This religious emphasis on achieving and maintaining order differs significantly from worldview of Neopagans, which is so often marked by the need to overturn order and lose oneself in ecstatic wildness. Unlike the Neopagan search for liminal experience, the Heathen ethic is one of order creation. If the stereotypical image of Neopaganism is one of individuals dancing ecstatically around a

⁶⁹Eric Wodening, *We are our Deeds: The Elder Heathenry, Its Ethic and Thew* (Baltimore: White March Press, 2011), 2.

fire in the night, the image of Asatru is of an orderly community gathered together and sitting at the family table. Thus through the cooperation of divine and human effort, the utangard, which continually threatens to spill over into the carefully maintained order, is pushed back and held at bay. Yet the image and threat of Ragnarok remains, the apocalyptic millennial battle of Norse myth in which the forces of chaos violate the innangard, overwhelm the gods, and bring almost complete death and destruction to their cosmos.

Time: The Presence of the Past

Three senses of time seem to structure different worldviews. Existential time, sometimes referred to as “A” Time by philosophers of religion, privileges the Present: actions occur in sequential order. Actions in the past have ceased to be and actions in the future have yet to be. The present alone is real, the moment in which we think, perceive, and act.⁷⁰ Buddhism for instance appeals to this sense of time: both past and future are unreal: the past no longer exists and is not capable of being recovered, and the future is similarly unreal as it has not yet happened. On the other hand, the religious ideas of Fate and teleology are understandings of time that privilege the future: while we may *experience* things as sequential, in reality the future is already written and the present is simply unfolding into its predetermined pattern. To some extent this understanding may coincide with “B” Time as understood by philosophers: time is a static field in which past, present, and future exist only in relation to one’s perspective and not as real ontological distinctions. Time then in this understanding is something like an eternal present in which, “from a God’s eye point of view, the whole tract of time may be seen and described.”⁷¹ Discussing these two senses of time, Olu Taiwo writes,

⁷⁰Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 149-50.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 150.

First is the idea that the present moves, like an arrow, forward sequentially through time towards an unknown future, leaving behind a dissolving past that is immortalized in written records and memory. The second notion is of an all-embracing, absolute, universal and mystical time that is a direct result of a single creator.⁷²

However, Robert Lawlor identifies a third sense of time he calls “gnomonic” time. Here time is understood as cumulative “growth by accretion or accumulative increase, in which old form is contained within the new.”⁷³ This understanding of time privileges the past: the past “grows.” It is in some sense active, shaping and structuring the present. The present merely builds onto or adds to the growing accumulative structure of past actions, as a coral reef or a woven garment might grow.

This gnomonic understanding is evident in the centrality of the past identifiable in the ancient Germanic sense of time. The Norse and Germanic cultures were oriented toward the structuring reality of the past, as Bauschatz describes it: “The power of the past and its operation through all of existence seem to provide the underlying principle with which the Germanic cosmos operates.”⁷⁴ Two images picture Time in Norse myth. The first is that of the three Norns, mythological female figures who stand at the base of the World Tree. They personify Time as *Urdh* or *Wyrd* (Wyrd), the Past; Verdandi, the past as it conditions the present moment; and Skuld, that which will arise if past conditions are left unaltered by present actions.⁷⁵ Situated at the center of the world, they continually water the tree, sustaining it and keeping it alive, by pouring water from a bubbling spring, the Well of Wyrd.

The Well of Wyrd is the dynamic principle of the universe and the second

⁷²Olu Taiwo, “Music, Art and Movement among the Yoruba,” in *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 178.

⁷³Robert Lawlor, *Sacred Geometry: Philosophy and Practice* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 65.

⁷⁴Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*, 150.

⁷⁵Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 137.

image of Time in Norse myth. It is the well of the accumulated past as well as the source of all that comes to be. As the actions and words of all beings are performed and fall into the past, they accumulate as layers within the Well. Symbolically watering the roots of the tree, this matrix of past events influences and informs the present moment. Thus the past is a continually evolving accumulation of actions which shapes and gives rise to present conditions. Bauschatz describes this sense of past:

The Germanic past is . . . a realm of experience including all the accomplished actions of all beings, men, gods, etc. It is ever growing, and it has a direct, nurturing, sustentative effect upon the world, which men experience as life, just as the water from Urth's Well nurtures Yggdrasil. The relationship implies a continual, supportive intrusion of past upon present existence."⁷⁶

Bauschatz notes that the Germanic worldview had no strong conceptual sense of the future, seeing it as a set of potential conditions that *may arise* if the trajectory of the past is left unchanged.⁷⁷ The present can only be understood by looking at the past, seeing that from which the present is emerging. As actions fall into the past, they do not simply dissipate into nothingness, retained only in memory; rather they take their place within the matrix of the cumulative past. This past continues to evolve and exerts a defining, though ultimately not determinative, influence on the present. Thus the past is more than the somewhat passive “structure” that Lawlor describes, but may best be thought of as a force that shapes and conditions present experience and possibilities. While all beings including the gods exist and live within the conditions determined by the past, their present actions in turn shape and influence the past.

Living beings are defined by their own past actions, but also by the line of causal and related events stretching into the deep past. This strand of past actions is

⁷⁶Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*, 15-16.

⁷⁷Ibid., 140-41. Bauschatz writes that Germanic time “is binary, not tripartite. It divides into past and nonpast, not into past, present, and future. There are no explicit references in early Germanic materials to a concept like the future.”

known as *ørlög* (orlog), a concept that Kari Tauring describes with the metaphor of the drop spindle. When using a drop spindle, one hand holds the raw wool, symbolizing the indiscriminate mass of future possibilities, while the other hand holds the spindle with the finished thread wound around it representing the fixed cumulative past. When the spindle is released, the raw wool is spun into a tight thread, adding its own texture and pattern to what has come before, just as actions are incorporated into the Wyrd.⁷⁸ The sense of time expressed in this metaphor privileges the past to the neglect of the future. The present is integrated into the pattern established by the past, just as the wool fibers are fed or entwined into the thread. As Bauschatz puts it, time involves not so much “the working out of the present into the future . . . [but] more accurately, the working in of the present into the past.”⁷⁹

Elaborating on this metaphor, Wyrd or the comprehensive past can be understood as a garment woven from these interconnecting individual strands of orlog. From a Heathen perspective, personal identity is formed and shaped by the actions and choices of one’s ancestors; one’s experiences and choices in the present are significantly influenced by those of the past. The “Folkmother” Else Christensen expressed the idea this way:

You, as a human being, did not just arrive on this earth out of nowhere. Your whole being, both body and mind, came from the past. Your physical appearance and mental temperament are both products of the heritage from your ancestors. And . . . your ancestors' intelligence and long hard struggles gave you something . . . far greater and far more valuable to you than your appearance or temperament. That something is the traditions and way of life of a particular culture. A culture whose traditions and life-style evolved from the life-outlook, or soul, of your ancestors and kinsmen.⁸⁰

⁷⁸Kari Tauring, interview by author, Pawhuska, OK, June 2011.

⁷⁹Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*, 11.

⁸⁰Else Christensen, “Why Odinism” *The Odiniist* 3 (1973), [online], accessed 7 January 2013; available from http://www.amfirstbooks.com/IntroPages/ToolBarTopics/Articles/Featured_Authors/Christensen,_Else/Christensen_index.html#The_Odiniist; Internet.

All things are shaped by the past, not only events and circumstances but objects as well. Bauschatz explains that the “artifacts with which a man surrounds himself during his lifetime can be seen to symbolize particularly important occurrences in that lifetime; the artifact, then, is felt to partake of or 'contain' the significant portion of the experience.”⁸¹ Objects can carry orlog and their properties are formed by past usage. Historical objects and family heirlooms hold more than sentimental value; they are thought to be lucky and powerful, embodying a connection to their former users. For instance, during the Yule holiday Nora enjoys baking family recipes and trimming the Yule tree with ornaments passed down through the family.⁸² She describes these activities as religious experiences in which she venerates her ancestors and feels their presence.⁸³ In this instance both the recipes and the physical ornaments themselves are associated with the family line; they “hold” orlog and facilitate an emotional and mental connection with the family members who used them in the past.

Sacred space

As described earlier in this chapter, the pantheistic aspects of the Asatru cosmology lend a sense of sanctity to the whole cosmos. To some extent, the world is infused with the sacred and Heathens stand in the midst of the holy. As one Heathen gothi or priest simply stated, “The whole world is sacred to us.”⁸⁴ At Pantheacon, I attended a Druidic ritual during which an elaborate rite was performed to open the metaphysical gate between the physical and spiritual worlds. A druid ran around the ritual

⁸¹Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*, 42.

⁸²Yule is the important Asatru New Year holiday associated with the winter solstice. Yule observances begin on December 20th with Mother’s Night and continue until Twelthnight on January 1.

⁸³Nora Ford, interview by author, 3 January 2013.

⁸⁴Michael, Asatru gothi, field notes taken by author, Pagan Pride Day, Louisville, KY, 2012.

circle with his staff as the other druids repeatedly chanted, “Open the Gates!”⁸⁵ The implication was that some sort of closure existed between the two worlds of matter and spirit, even if it might be easily passed through by asking the gatekeeper gods to open the gate. Yet this sense of closure and separation is absent from Asatru, in which a more organic conception of the relationship between physical and spiritual exists. While there is a distinction between world of matter and spirit, Midgard stands as a hub between the realms, through which divine beings pass. Midgard is infused with divine energies that flow through the material world. An action as simple as chanting a rune is thought to direct, attract, and focus spiritual energy present in the world. Any sacralized horn (sacralized through a simple prayer, or a rune chanted or traced above it) becomes a portal into the Well of Wyrð. Norse mythology describes bridges and gates linking the Nine Worlds of the cosmic multiplex.⁸⁶ These features serve not as obstacles to accessing those realities but as connective apparati that facilitate travel among the worlds. Thus with Asatru cosmology, there is a great sense of openness to spiritual realities and little sense of separation from them.

Religions are often defined by their sacred places. Space, set apart and sacralized, provides a religious axis around which the world turns, “an opening to the holy or divine, a place where communication with sacred power is made possible.”⁸⁷ Sacred space provides an organizing center for a religious community and becomes a symbol for its identity. While many religious traditions already have sacred space established in America, transplanted religious communities and NRMs face the important

⁸⁵Field notes taken by author, San Jose, CA, February 2012. The event was a ritual lead by Druids of An Draught Fein. The lack of any similar practice in Asatru ritual reinforces the sense of openness in the Asatru cosmos. As this event represents the sole Druidic ritual I have observed, I am not attempting to draw any conclusion about the Druidic cosmology or ritual practice.

⁸⁶See appendix 2, “The Nine Worlds of Norse Cosmology.”

⁸⁷James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), 56.

challenge of creating and establishing new sacred spaces that are both authentic and functional. In an insightful article, Carolyn Prorok describes several methods by which religious groups create sacred space in contexts where none currently exist.⁸⁸ While she focuses on the transplanted pilgrimage traditions of American Catholicism and Hinduism, her findings are incredibly relevant to NRMs. The process she describes is particularly applicable to Asatru, which is at once a NRM as well as a “transplanted” religion, since its point of origin is European and sites with religious significance are still extant in Iceland, Scandinavia, Great Britain, and continental Europe.

Prorok first describes the strategy of “co-opting indigenous sacred sites,” or utilizing the sacred sites of other traditions.⁸⁹ For American Asatru this would entail the recognition and use of American Indian sites as sacred places. This strategy has generally been rejected by Asatru adherents, who might recognize the sacrality of indigenous sites but dispute their relevance to Asatru. This strategy has been caught up in the continual issue of “cultural appropriation,” which is now seen in most of the Pagan community as “stealing” someone else’s culture and is generally avoided.⁹⁰

Rather than create sacred space in the new context, some traditions seek to maintain links with the religious homeland, continuing to look to those original sites as the authentic sacred places of the religion.⁹¹ In this case, the transplanted tradition may assume an “exiled” or diaspora status. This continues to be a possibility in American Asatru: numerous sites connected to pre-Christian Norse and Germanic Paganism are still

⁸⁸Carolyn V. Prorok, “Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions in the Americas,” *Geographical Review* 93 (2003), 283.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 288.

⁹⁰Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, 124-25. This is a different matter in Europe, where Asatru and other Pagan groups have been very active in reclaiming ancient sacred localities as ancestral sites. See Robert Wallis and Jenny Blain, “Sites, Sacredness, and Stories: Interactions of Archaeology and Contemporary Paganism,” *Folklore* 114 (2003), 310.

⁹¹Prorok, “Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions,” 289-90.

extant in Europe such as Thingvellir in Iceland, Old Uppsala in Sweden, runestones throughout Scandinavia, megalithic sites in Great Britain, as well as numerous archaeological finds throughout Europe. Heathens occasionally talk about desiring to see these sites and a few have made pilgrimage-like journeys to Europe. For instance, a significant event in the life of Mark Stinson, a Heathen leader in the Midwest, was a trip to Iceland with one of his kindred members, Will. Mark thoroughly documented the trip in blog postings that later became a section of his book *Heathen Gods*. His trip included making connections with Icelandic Asatru leaders as well as a pilgrimage to Thingvellir, the volcanic plain where the Icelandic parliament was held annually in the pre-Christian era. At Thingvellir, Mark and Will performed a blot, raising horns filled with consecrated mead, the sacred drink of Heathens, and calling upon the gods and land spirits. They dedicated their own Heathen work in America to the old gods and left gifts for the land spirits. This was a sacred experience for both men, as Mark put it, “It was an important moment. Everything was as we had pictured it really.”⁹²

Despite the significance of this pilgrimage, the connection to sacred sites in Europe remains a distant ideal to which American Asatruar are curiously unattached. While Mark mentioned the possibility of returning one day, Iceland seems to remain a significant personal experience rather than a religious focal point or *axis mundi* for him and most other American Heathens. For instance, American Heathens do not turn to the northeast in order to recognize the sanctity of the aboriginal homeland when praying or invoking the gods. Nor do they mention these sites in their invocations like the “Next year in Jerusalem!” declaration which caps the Jewish Passover. Rather, their eyes and emotions are connected fully to sites in their own local American context.

Another strategy discussed by Prorok is that of replicating homeland sites in

⁹²Stinson, *Heathen Gods*, 176.

the new context.⁹³ This strategy of rebuilding the homeland is one often taken by Hindu immigrants whose temples are often constructed to resemble the ancient temples of India and to recreate landscapes that reflect the sacred homeland. However, I know of no examples of this strategy in contemporary American Heathenry. While certain historical cultural features such as dress and other aesthetic elements are frequently borrowed, there is no attempt that I have discovered to “recreate” Iceland. Heathens are not interested in creating a miniature Thingvellir, or rebuilding a model of the pagan temple at Uppsala, not even a Viking theme park! Nor is a pilgrimage strategy adopted – there is just no sense that this is important or necessary. At a meeting of the American Academy of Religion, I was asked how Asatru can be practiced in the U.S. since the gods are in Scandinavia. But the answer is that American Heathens do not feel that the gods are in Scandinavia, nor is their spirituality connected to specific old world sites. These gods are as mobile as their worshipers and go with them throughout the sacred cosmos.⁹⁴

For the most part, Heathens have adopted the strategy of utilizing temporary space and creating movable rituals.⁹⁵ Like most American Pagans, Heathens typically gather in a private space such as a living room, a rented space such as a hall or lodge, or natural setting such as a local public park. Heathen ritual is oriented around such temporary sites and always includes some sort of hallowing which establishes the site as sacred for the ritual’s duration. The Hammer Rite is one of the most frequently seen versions of the hallowing ritual, in which a hammer symbolic of the protective hammer of Thor is used to set apart and recognize sacred space. The ritual leader will raise a ritual hammer always to the north initially, or trace the sign of the hammer in the air, and say

⁹³Prorok, “Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions,” 291.

⁹⁴The idea that the gods are not bound to one geographical homeland is reflected in the Icelandic sagas. When Norse settlers first came to Iceland, they brought their gods with them without any sense of cognitive dissonance or religious complication.

⁹⁵Prorok, “Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions,” 292-94.

something like, “Hammer in the North, hallow and hold this holy stead,” and often will repeat a variation of this statement for each of the directions.⁹⁶ Offerings and invocations are also made to the land spirits. For instance, at Lightning Across the Plains in the Midwest, held at a local Pagan campground, the land-taking ritual that opens the event includes throwing candy into the woods around the borders of the camp as an offering to the land spirits for their protection and appeasement.⁹⁷ Since all space is sacred to Heathens, any place can be hallowed and used for ritual. All space is recognized as part of the sacred cosmos.

Many adherents express a strong desire for more permanent sacred spaces for Heathenry. And Heathens are beginning to create their own sacred spaces in the American landscape, a strategy which Prorok labels Recognition because it involves recognizing sacred space and hierophanies in the new context.⁹⁸ For many Heathens, these sacred sites are simply a small area in their backyard. Many kindreds will hallow some sort of outside space around a tree or fire pit as a ritual space which they use to honor the land spirits. However, many kindreds and Heathen groups are discussing and planning for the purchase of land or buildings which can be converted into *hofs*, Heathen religious buildings. While there are no permanent sacred sites currently functioning, I anticipate that Heathen sites recognized by the wider Asatru community will begin to emerge as the community continues to develop.

Theology: The Heathen Gods

The gods, goddesses, and other divine beings of Norse mythology play an

⁹⁶Raven Kindred North, “What Happens at a Blot (and Why)” [online]; accessed 4 January 2013; available from <http://www.ravenkindred.com/blot.htm>; Internet.

⁹⁷Field notes taken by author, McLouth, KS, 2011, 2012.

⁹⁸Prorok, “Transplanting Pilgrimage Traditions,” 291-92.

enormously important part in the Asatru worldview and experience. The first noticeable characteristic of Heathen theology is its specificity in relation to that of Neopaganism. Neopagans freely choose from a variety of deities without consideration for cultural or ethnic boundaries. A Neopagan ritual might open with an invocation to a variety of gods: “Artemis!” “Kali!” “Ogun!” “Isis!” “Pan!” and “Great Spirit!”⁹⁹ However, at a Heathen event, one would hear specific warnings against calling on non-Norse deities. Heathens are well-versed and knowledgeable about the Norse deities. Most Heathen books contain descriptions and discussions of the gods, their histories, natures, as well as techniques to facilitate interaction with them. Many monographs on specific gods or goddesses have been published by Heathen authors. Asatru has been a decidedly theo-centric movement.

Polytheism, noted by both Adler and York to be an essential element of Paganism, is a particularly salient characteristic of Asatru theology. In speaking with Asatruar, I have heard the phrase “hard” or “true” polytheist several times. Most share the perspective of Tanya who says, “I’m a true polytheist. I like all the gods and I’ll work with them if they need me.”¹⁰⁰ The term “hard” or “true” polytheist is used by Asatruar to distinguish themselves from other Pagans. A hard polytheist believes in the existence of each deity as a distinct and specific being, “real and mighty beings, as free-standing and as individually aware as we who work their wills upon the Middle-Garth.”¹⁰¹ In contrast Neopagans are “soft” polytheists, who reduce the different male and female deities to manifestations of the Great Goddess and Horned God. For Heathens, such a theology is more duotheistic than truly polytheistic and misrepresents the objective reality of the deities.¹⁰² This approach of “choose your own goddess, for any will do” distorts the

⁹⁹Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, 123.

¹⁰⁰Tanya Peterson, interview by author, McLouth, KS, 25 September 2011.

¹⁰¹Kveldulf Gundarsson, *Our Troth* (North Charleston, SC: Booksurge, LLC., 1993), 1:131.

¹⁰²Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 157.

nature of true polytheism. For this reason, Heathens are often dismissive of Wiccans and Neopagans, although this attitude varies considerably according to the person's orientation on the reconstructionist/eclectic uses of the past spectrum.

According to *Our Troth*, two features are characteristic of the "Germanic view of the holy folk." First is the understanding of the deities as "elder kin" and second is the concept of *fulltrui* or the gods being "beloved friends" to humans.¹⁰³ As we saw earlier in Michael York's definition, Pagans tend to understand gods and humans as codependent and interrelated. The idea is apparent in the Asatru description of the gods as "elder kin," indicating that a family relationship exists between humans and the gods.¹⁰⁴ This awareness of divine/human kinship derives from one of the Norse creation stories found in the poem "Rigsthula" in the *Poetic Edda*. The poem features the god Rig, who is generally identified in contemporary Asatru as Heimdall, the guardian god who stands watch over the Bifrost bridge. In the story, Rig wanders across Midgard and is invited into three homes, in which he sleeps with and sires sons by the three wives. These sons become the progenitors of the three human castes: the thralls or servant caste, the free landholders, and the nobles.¹⁰⁵ While the caste implications of this story are downplayed by Asatruar, the idea of an organic, even biological relationship with the gods is seized upon. As one Heathen author writes, "The important things to remember is that humankind is kin of the Gods, first crafted by Their own hands, then imbued with Their own lifeforce, and later descended directly from Them."¹⁰⁶

The Norse gods are members of two distinct divine families: the Aesir who are

¹⁰³Gundarsson, *Our Troth*, 1:135.

¹⁰⁴Matthias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 268.

¹⁰⁵Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 57.

¹⁰⁶Krasskova, *Exploring the Northern Tradition*, 33.

deities of mind and culture, and the Vanir who represent the chthonic powers of earth and fertility. After a brutal war between these two tribes of gods, a truce was formulated and the two united to maintain the cosmos since that time. A third group, the Jotuns or giants, represents the elemental forces of nature, the fire and ice from which the primeval cosmos emerged. Some contemporary practitioners consider this a third family of divine beings and choose to “work with” or venerate them. This however this is a decidedly controversial position since the giants are also the adversaries of the gods and the initiators of Ragnarok. While some contemporary Asatruar consider themselves specifically “Asatru” or “Vanatru,” connected with one family of gods in particular, most practitioners venerate all the gods equally.

This pantheon consists of both male and female deities. And while Odin may be considered chief of the family of gods, the divine feminine is also emphasized. Goddesses are considered the equals of the gods, “no less holy are the *asynjur* [the goddesses] nor is their power less.”¹⁰⁷ While early Asatru has been described as a Viking boys club, this situation has dramatically changed in recent years.¹⁰⁸ Not only are women more numerous and prominent in the movement but the visibility of the goddesses has increased as well. Female deities are invoked by both men and women in rituals, and shrines or sacred enclosures, called *ve*’s, are frequently dedicated to goddesses and seen at Heathen gatherings. A blot for Idunna, goddess of new beginnings, opens each annual Trothmoot, and a blot to Freyja was featured at the height of East Coast Thing in 2012. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the goddesses are equally represented in Heathen religiosity. While most Heathens can describe personal experiences with the gods, Odin is by far the most ubiquitous subject of veneration among contemporary

¹⁰⁷Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 77.

¹⁰⁸Diana Paxson, interview by author, Pawhuska, PA, June 2011; Eowyn, email to author, 6 June 2011.

practitioners. No contemporary Asatru movement would exist without the presence of Odin. For many Heathens, their first foray into the religion came as a result of dreams or other experiences in which they interacted with the gods, particularly Odin. As one practitioner told me, “Odin is the gateway drug for modern Heathenry.”¹⁰⁹

While Odin may be widely venerated, Heathen religiosity is decidedly, even increasingly, polytheistic in its practice. Each deity is known for his/her spheres of power and skill and contemporary worshipers are often attracted to specific gods for this reason. Odin represents battle fury, as well as wisdom, poetry, and magic. Thor is the god of protection and might. Tyr, who sacrificed his hand so that the gods could bind the terrible Fenriswolf, is known as the god of the polestar with an unwavering sense of justice. Frey is the god of fertility and virality. Frigga, Odin’s wife, is the goddess of home and home arts, venerated by crafters. Freyja is the goddess of sexuality, the “witch” of the gods who is the source of magic and venerated by seidh workers. The polytheistic flavor of Heathenry is especially noticeable during the sumbel ritual during which many deities will be invoked in quick succession. At a sumbel in Minnesota in 2012, well over ten deities were named, with each of the kindreds present hailing its “patron” god: Volkshof kindred calling on Odin, Jotun’s Bane on Thor, Tyr’s Helm on its namesake Tyr, Wintershof kindred on Frey, Runatyr represented that night by four women called on Frigga; Kari Tauring and her group of female Volva (staff-carrying magic workers) remembered Freyja.¹¹⁰ In addition, many Heathens call upon lesser figures when given the opportunity, such as the sun goddess Sunna; Bragi the god of poetry; Skadi, goddess of winter and hunting; Ran, a sea goddess; various handmaidens of Frigga; and many others.

¹⁰⁹Nora Ford, telephone interview by author, 2 January 2013.

¹¹⁰Field notes taken by author, Hinkley, MN, June 2012.

The gods are represented in Heathenry through the use of idols and images, which reflect the corpospirituality of Heathen religion. The tangibility of the gods draws them close to human awareness. While Heathens acknowledge that a type of spiritual exchange can be made through these idols, there is little speculation or theological reflection about how this might occur. Veneration practices include sprinkling the images with sacred liquid such as mead, burning incense, saying prayers and leaving offerings in front of them. Many Asatruar will have images of the gods in their homes, particularly on a home altar. These images range from home-carved anthropomorphic images to expensive resin statues available on the internet. Godpoles, frequently found at Heathen sacred sites and gatherings, are semi-anthropomorphic figures often featuring only a face roughly carved from a block of wood, which harken back to the stylized carvings of the ancient Heathens. At a Heathen gathering in Pennsylvania, a kindred brought a wain (a small wagon) upon which was attached an image of the god Thor. Every morning and evening, a procession of kindred members and other participants pulled the wagon around the field while singing a ritual song honoring Thor. Historical evidence suggests that a procession was incorporated into ancient Norse worship of Thor.¹¹¹ This twice daily procession of Thor, reminiscent of the twice daily pujas to the *murthis* in a Hindu temple, represented the protective power and presence of Thor guarding the Heathens present at the gathering.¹¹²

The basic understanding of human interaction with the gods is that of reciprocal exchange, a theology summed up in the phrase, “A gift for a gift.” As a specifically religious practice, reciprocal exchange is concretely enacted by practitioners in the ritual of blot, the Asatru sacrificial ritual. Humans give gifts of worship,

¹¹¹Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, 76.

¹¹²Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, August 2012.

veneration, and offerings such as the ubiquitous mead offering included in every blot. Physical gifts of various sorts are also dedicated to the gods and goddesses. At one Asatru event I witnessed an elaborately painted wooden cask and its contents of home-brewed mead chopped up and burned as an offering to Thor, an expensive gift indeed.¹¹³ Additionally, while animal sacrifice remains a decidedly minority activity among Asatru adherents, it is nevertheless practiced by some on special occasions and seems to be increasingly so by serious reconstructionists.¹¹⁴ In response to these offerings and the petitions and prayers of the worshipers, the gods and goddesses are thought to reciprocate with both tangible and intangible gifts and blessings for their human kin and friends. While these blessings are primarily experienced psychologically and internally, they are sometimes manifested physically such as when the ritual leader sprinkles the participants with sacred mead that has been blessed by the gods.¹¹⁵ When a local kindred held a Charming of the Plow blot in early spring, participants were asked to bring tools used in their work to be blessed. During the blot, participants placed cell phones, computers, knitting needles, crafting tools, car keys, and other items around the altar to be symbolically blessed or infused with spiritual power during the ritual.¹¹⁶

Yet reciprocal exchange involves more than obtaining tangible or intangible results and should not be minimized to a “tit for tat” theology of either divine appeasement or bribery. More importantly, it is about relationship. In Heathen theology and practice, the ritualized act of giving gifts symbolically traces the network of relationships of loyalty and trust. When the ancient Heathen tribal leader presented gifts

¹¹³Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, August 2012.

¹¹⁴Field notes taken by author, McLouth, KS, September 2012.

¹¹⁵Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*, 130. Field notes taken by author, McLouth, KA, 2011, 2012.

¹¹⁶Field notes taken by author, Lexington, KY, February 5, 2012.

to his followers, it was not the physical gift itself that was foremost, but the relationship of mutual dependence that it signified. Similarly, exchanging gifts with divine beings indicates the presence of relationship. Gifting is seen as religiously efficacious in establishing and maintaining an ongoing relationship with divine beings.¹¹⁷ As Swain Wodening, an influential Heathen author indicates, “The exchange of gifts between Gods and men creates a bond between the two,” humans and gods are indebted to each other.¹¹⁸ As Michael York points out, this is a bond of “co-dependent” and mutual cooperation. The gods relate to humans as autonomous beings, not perhaps as equals, but at the same time not as submissive and dependent slaves, a type of human/divine interaction that Diana Paxson dismisses as the “sheep model,” referring to Christianity. Continuing with the ovine metaphor, Mark Stinson states, “I am not a lamb. I am an adult human being, and the Gods expect us to make our own decisions, fight our own battles, and make things happen for ourselves.”¹¹⁹ Heathens commonly make this distinction between Asatru and Christian theology. The Heathen gods are not shepherds of the flock. Mark Stinson describes how the original Heathens “honored their Gods, they respected their Gods But their Gods were seen as their kin—part of the Folk—or part of their village or tribe. They treated the Gods as mentors, or elders in their tribe. Many saw them and treated the Gods like honored Ancestors.”¹²⁰ Similarly, Raven Kindred North, a prominent and long-running kindred in the Northeast relates to the gods as “older members of a family who have worked and continue to work at strengthening that family

¹¹⁷ Amanda Wolfe, “The *Blot*: A Heathen Ritual Practice,” *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 37 (2008): 72.

¹¹⁸ Swain Wodening, “Connecting with the Gods” [online]; accessed 15 May 2012; available from <http://swainblog.englatheod.org/?p=764>; Internet.

¹¹⁹ Stinson, *Heathen Gods*, 8.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

physically, emotionally, and spiritually.”¹²¹

Anthropology: Orlog and Ancestors

From a Heathen perspective, the individual and her autonomy are of paramount importance in both anthropology and ethics. I have often heard Asatruar state that they do not bow to anyone, even the gods: “The Gods are most pleased with someone who stands on their own two feet. This is one of the reasons for the Asatru ‘rule’ that we do not kneel to the Gods during our ceremonies.”¹²² A pronounced libertarian value exists in contemporary Asatru, an attitude that corresponds well with the historical American virtue of rugged individualism expressed by the famous Gadsden Flag, the Revolutionary War banner that stated “Don’t Tread on Me.” Several of the Nine Noble Virtues of Asatru emphasize the importance of individualism, especially the virtue of “free-standing.” Heathens value self-reliance, “individualism or free will, the freedom to be one’s own man (or woman) . . . to make their own way in the world and not to lean on others for their . . . needs.”¹²³ The emphasis on free-standing and individual autonomy may account for the sentiment against national organizations as well as some of the divisive behavior and in-fighting that has troubled the Asatru movement. This dynamic was expressed in a talk given by an influential Asatru leader on the East Coast:

The same things that draw us to this faith: the individuality, the freedom, the resistance for a central authority, those things are also the characteristics that can divide us. Our ancestors had this issue as well. You read the sagas, there were a lot of blood-feuds going on on the very tiny island of Iceland, not that many people. And our ancestors were very first warriors, but whenever they got together as an army to fight another army, consistently they did not win. The Battle of Ashdon, they lost; the battle of Stamford Bridge they lost, ‘cause they were unable to act as a cohesive unit, as a community.”¹²⁴

¹²¹Raven Kindred North, “The Gods and Goddesses” [online]; accessed January 6, 2013; available from http://www.ravennorth.org/?page_id=12; [Internet].

¹²²Gunderson, *Our Troth*, 1:538.

¹²³*Ibid.*, 1:536-38.

¹²⁴Joe Marek, speech recorded by author, Milford, PA, September 2012.

As important as individualism may be, it is buttressed by a number of other aspects of the Asatru worldview and ethic. Individuality works best when accompanied by other virtues such as truth, honor, loyalty, self-discipline, hospitality, and industriousness, also part of the Nine Noble Virtues. Practicing these nine virtues together produces a strong robust individualism that is conditioned by openness to and mutual support for others. This sort of life is an ideal sought in the tension between individualism on one hand and the well-being of society on the other, expressed in the values of kindred and group life and frith, the ethical quality of peaceableness within the group.

Nor does a simple rugged individualism fully define the human being. Heathens reject the modern notion of the individual as an autonomous being bound in time and space. They derive their anthropology neither from the Lockean *tabula rasa* nor the Sartrean individual alone in the world.¹²⁵ The anthropological vision of Asatru is decidedly more complex. The individual may be against the world, but is never alone in the world. Instead, a specific individual could be thought of as the point of the spear: while the spear's point is of immediate concern, it is everything *behind* the point, the weight and heft of the shaft that allows the spear to be aimed, thrown, and to strike effectively. Just as what is *behind* the point gives the spear its power and effectiveness, there are realities behind the individual that give Heathen individualism a metaphysical robustness. These additional anthropological realities, such as the soul complex, the concept of personal luck or *hamingja*, and the levels of relationships into which one is born, enhance a person's concrete individuality.

Heathens see the individual as born into concentric circles of relationships that are vital and defining for identity. Four levels of kinship provide continuity and support

¹²⁵Simon Blackburn, "Existentialism," and "Individualism," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 125, 184.

to supplement the individual life. These levels consist first of one's immediate kin and family relationships; second, community bonds and "fictive kinships" (see chap. 5), the voluntary relationships of loyalty and friendship represented primarily by the Asatru kindred; third, ancestors and relationships with the living dead; and fourth, the gods, who are understood as "elder kin" to human beings. These relationships of kinship lend power and effectiveness to life. Thus one is never an individual abstracted from social relationships. Every individual is born into a web of relationships, linked to other beings in ways that are meant to bring strength and wholeness. Heathens believe that all humans come into the world carrying these active qualities of soul and ancestry. It is important to note that these concepts do not remain theoretical in Heathen life. Besides actively influencing the self-identity of Heathen practitioners, these anthropological concepts influence and give rise to a number of related practices such as spiritual counseling, divination, seidr magic, and rituals such as the *súmbel*.

Heathens posit a complex soul consisting of many parts. According to Norse mythology, this soul complex was gifted to humans by the gods. Each soul is endowed with powerful natural capabilities which have only to be improved and mastered. One such aspect of the soul is the *fylgja* or fetch, which is understood to be "an independent being attached to one's soul for life," a spirit guardian which is a manifestation of ancestral power.¹²⁶ Thus in addition to the skills and knowledge acquired through the course of life, the spirit guardian offers a type of supernatural protection and guidance for the individual.

Another important anthropological concept is that of luck or *hamingja* (*hamingja*). We have this modern notion of luck as the experience of "things going our way," our daily lives somehow enhanced by moments of ease, fortuitous coincidence, or

¹²⁶Gunderson, *Our Troth*, 1:502. Sara Axtell, "Heathenry 201: Wyrd and the Soul," lecture, field notes taken by author, Hinkley, MN, 2012.

unexpected 'breaks.' This idea is related to the Heathen understanding of Luck as a metaphysical force attached to human beings that facilitates their efforts and allows them to make their way through life more easily. Pagan author Galina Krasskova explains the effects of Luck: "In many ways, our Hamingja determines the quality of our lives, the degree of difficulty we will have to expend to reach our goals, and our chances of success."¹²⁷ Luck is a characteristic of human beings, "our store of psychic power," that amplifies the strength of the individual.¹²⁸ Hamingja is understood to be a quality inherited from one's ancestors, grown from the cumulative effect of their honorable deeds and lending power to their family line.

There is an oft-used illustration in Christian circles that illustrates this concept by comparing the legacies of Jonathon Edwards and a contemporary named Max Jukes. Jukes was an unbeliever who made many bad choices and his descendants struggled in life: "Jukes had 1,029 known descendants: 300 died prematurely; 100 were sent to prison for an average of 13 years each; 190 were prostitutes; and 100 were alcoholics." However, the descendants of Jonathon Edwards, an upright man, were astoundingly successful: "300 were preachers; 65 were college professors; 13 were college or university presidents; 60 were authors; three were elected to congress; and one became a vice president of the United States."¹²⁹ For a Heathen, this illustration is a lesson in ancestral hamingja: the good deeds of one's ancestors produce positive effects and an easier life path for their descendants, a metaphysical force which can be used to effectively negotiate life's challenges. In addition, Heathens see themselves as building Luck for their descendants through their own noble actions: "The luck we gather in our

¹²⁷Krasskova, *Exploring the Northern Tradition*, 129.

¹²⁸Gunderson, *Our Troth*, 1:506

¹²⁹Stan Toller, "The Greatest Legacy" [online]; accessed 19 December 2012; available from <http://www.preaching.com/leadership/11625881/>; [Internet].

own lives gets folded into the family hamingja for our next generations.”¹³⁰

Closely related is the concept of orlog, the sum of the past deeds of the ancestors which determine the current conditions from which individuals live and make choices.¹³¹ Heathens strongly believe that each individual has free choice in the present moment; Heathens have no concept of Fate or inescapable destiny such as might be found in ancient Greek Paganism.¹³² However, the range of choices available to any individual is conditioned by one’s inherited orlog, which some Heathens describe as the habitual patterns of action built up through time by generations of learned behavior. As the concepts of orlog and Wyrð imply, the past is to a great degree a fixed and inherited reality. An individual cannot easily escape its consequences or be severed from its influence. As Heathens are fond of saying, “This is not a religion of forgiveness.” The possibility of freedom from the past, which the Apostle Paul described as “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,” is simply absent from Asatru anthropology.¹³³ The permanence of past actions that characterizes the Asatru worldview might be interpreted as constraining the free will of the individual. However, a powerful orlog built from a history of family success, status, and effective relational patterns, may work to one’s personal advantage in life.

Because behavior has permanent consequences in the cumulative strand of one’s orlog, Heathens tend to take their actions seriously. Or at least to act consistently within the worldview, actions should be carefully chosen and their long range effects considered. Yet Heathens are not those to take the “safe route” of inaction. Timidity in the face of life’s demand for action brings about its own stultifying effects, such as

¹³⁰Patricia Lafayllve, email to author, 9 April 2011.

¹³¹Wodening, *We are Our Deeds*, 57. Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 137.

¹³²Kari Tauring, interview by author, Pawhuska, OK, June 2011.

¹³³Phil. 3:13 (New International Version).

weakening the family's luck and orlog. Bold and noble deeds are called for, as the Heathen motto "We are our deeds" attests. However, as Asatru matures, many Heathens are abandoning the hot-headed Viking ideal and contemplating what it may mean to build and protect healthy orlog.

In an interesting article entitled "Protecting Our Heathen Children from Divorce," Mark Stinson discusses the role of orlog in Heathen ethical decision-making. He lists several reasons why divorce should be avoided if possible, but most compellingly from a religious perspective, he argues that divorce damages the orlog of one's children. Divorce entails breaking an oath that has been spoken into the Well of Wyrd. He argues that "if they break their marriage oath . . . their Luck will wane . . . and they will likely bring unnecessary and disruptive complexity and chaos into their Wyrd."¹³⁴ Using the spindle image, one could say that divorce causes the thread of orlog to become knotted or frayed. Children who inherit this damaged orlog will struggle with disruptive and dysfunctional patterns in their own lives. Thus, divorce has metaphysical consequences that are serious and multi-generational. These consequences are not a result of "sin" but another sort of soul damage. Stinson's ethical solution reflects the belief that actions have consequences:

So, honor your Oaths. Protect your Wyrd. Preserve your Luck. Pass good Orlog onto your children. If you find yourself having marital problems, tackle the challenge like Heathens tackle any challenge . . . intelligently, fearlessly, generously, honorably, and with lots of hard work.¹³⁵

While damaged orlog can be rebuilt, it "takes years of right action and deeds of worth. That is how one repairs one's Orlog, and becomes a man of Worth."¹³⁶ Here we see the working out of a mature ethic built from Heathen worldview principles and

¹³⁴Mark Stinson, *Heathen Families: Fables and Essays* (Liberty, MO: Jotun's Bane Kindred, 2012), 50.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Stinson, *Heathen Gods*, 122.

consistently applied.

Ancestors

Asatru exhibits some characteristics of animism and accordingly recognizes other-than-human persons such as animals, living ancestors, quasi-spiritual beings such as *tomtes* or house spirits, and spirits of place also called land *vaettir*. For the most part, these are accepted as part of the cosmology because they appear in the lore, although they do not always rise to a level of significance in the daily experience of Heathens.¹³⁷ The exception to this is the ancestors, a category of spiritual beings that features prominently in the lives of many Asatruar. It is hard to find an Asatru adherent who does not have a strong emotional connection to his or her ancestors, and many will recount religious experiences such as dreams, visions, or emotional events in which ancestors have played a role. Patricia Lafayllve describes the ancestral aspect of Asatru: “Ancestor worship is probably the oldest form of religion in human history, so we Heathens are a lot like traditional cultures: we keep their mementos, remember them by telling their stories, and pray to them for guidance and support.”¹³⁸

Perhaps Asatru is tapping into a broader cultural phenomenon. Kari Tauring senses a crisis among contemporary Americans who are longing to strengthen their sense of identity by being connected to an ethnic past:

There is a global urgency to identify, understand and heal ourselves as individuals and as part of a cultural root group illustrated by the popularity of television shows about tracing DNA, migrations Genealogy has become a national hobby. Americans have a deeper urgency because we are removed from the continent that holds the bones of our ancestors and the memories of the landscapes that contributed to the development of our various folksouls.¹³⁹

¹³⁷Most first generation Heathens exhibit a worldview more theocentric than animistic in its orientation. I suspect that this will change among second generation Asatruar who are growing up without a Christian background. Future generations of Heathens may show a more profound sense of animism.

¹³⁸Lafayllve, email to author, 9 April 2011.

¹³⁹Kari Tauring, email to author, 5 May 2011.

Current popular television shows, such as “Finding Your Roots with Henry Louis Gates Jr.” and “Who Do You Think You Are?” are dedicated to telling the stories of family lineage and connecting celebrities with their forgotten family history.¹⁴⁰ In doing so, these shows present an understanding of personal identity that is rooted in a connection to the past. Many Americans feel a sense of loss regarding their heritage and experience deep, even spiritual, emotions about connecting to their ethnic past. For instance, Vigen Guroian, an Orthodox Christian theologian, shares his emotional experience of returning to Armenia, the homeland of his ancestors, for the first time at the age of forty:

I mean, the first time I ever stepped foot in Armenia, it was next to a mystical experience. I arrived early, early in the morning as the sun was coming up. I had flown in from Moscow, and I felt as if I landed on a different planet. Maybe it was just the climate or something, but there was something else going on inside of me. I've never had that — quite that experience again going back to Armenia. But that first time — I don't mean to make too much of it, collective memory or whatever it might be — but, yeah, it was like I returned home. I'd never been there.¹⁴¹

This experience made Guroian realize that he had been living in a state of “exile” from his Armenian identity.¹⁴² His wording, indicating a state of being pulled out of or removed from a native context, vividly recalls Giddens’ “dis-embedding” thesis. Guroian’s experience of going to Armenia as a person of Armenian ancestry was a transcendent experience of homecoming, in which he discovered another dimension and deeper level of his identity by connecting to the ethnic past from which he had been alienated.

Heathens share this belief that connecting to ancestral roots and to the

¹⁴⁰NBC Entertainment News [blog online]; accessed 4 January 2013; available from <http://www.nbc.com/news/2012/01/06/nbc-announces-the-celebrities-tracing-their-family-trees-on-season-three-of-who-do-you-think-you-are/>; Internet.

¹⁴¹Vigen Guroian, “Restoring the Senses: Gardening and Orthodox Easter,” transcript of interview, 21 April 2011, *On Being* [online]; accessed 8 July 2012; available from http://www.onbeing.org/program/restoring-senses-gardening-and-orthodox-easter/transcript/4521#main_content; Internet; quote is found at 35:58 minutes into the interview.

¹⁴²Ibid.

ancestors themselves allows contemporary people to experience who they “really are.” Most Asatruar have had significant experiences of their ancestors. In one moving story related at East Coast Thing in 2012, an adherent described being on the brink of suicide. In a moment of final despair, he called out to his ancestors. He was immediately caught up in a vision in which his dead sister came to him and led him out of his apartment, through the streets, and into a mysterious landscape where he entered a fort-like complex. After waiting alone in terror, he began to notice that others were gathering around him. He soon realized that he was surrounded by his ancestors who were giving him strength to go on. When he recovered from his vision, he was no longer suicidal and had a new sense of his own identity. He now begins each day with a meditation to connect with the living presence of his ancestors and their strength.¹⁴³

Another adherent described a dream of Viking-like men who spoke a language he didn’t understand but accepted him into their fellowship. He met a man dressed as a Viking-period warrior who offered him a handshake. Immediately he made an emotional connection with this man. The warrior led him to a beach at night where a large wooden ship had been pulled up on shore and a group of men were gathered around a fire. They began to pass around a horn, a practice with which he had not been familiar before the dream:

From what I remember, there was a loud thunder crack and I woke up in a cold sweat. It was like I had been sitting too close to the fire for too long and I still had that smoky smell in my nostrils. That just put this weird impression on me that nothing else ever had. Because I don’t usually dream. And it wasn’t like a dream; it was like I could seriously remember being there on this beach . . . I didn’t know who these guys were either, obviously, the strange man in my dream and these other strange men. And the more I think about it for myself, the research that I’ve done, um I think that those men were my ancestors from long ago basically welcoming me home. I didn’t feel like I was a stranger; I felt like I kinda belonged.”¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, August 2012.

¹⁴⁴Dave Carron and Sandi Carron, “New to Asatru,” *Ravencast* 7 (2007) [podcast online]; accessed 17 December 2012; available from <http://ravencast.podbean.com/2007/03/>; Internet; clip 5:50 – 10:26.

Note the discourse of belonging and home-coming that both the Heathen adherent and Guroian use to describe their experiences. While the two circumstances were quite different, these encounters with an ancestral past caused changes in self-identity, a connection to a deeper understanding of self.

Heathens often cultivate work and hobbies that enable them to feel close to their ancestors. Karl Kreuger comes from a long line of brewers, in fact his last name, Kreuger, means brewer or tavern-keeper in German. When he took up brewing, almost by accident, he said he immediately felt the presence of his ancestors. He now is an avid amateur brewer and sees the hobby as a religious practice.¹⁴⁵ Tanya describes how she feels connected to her ancestors while she makes jam:

“I’ll tell you, the most spiritual thing I do is making jam . . . I have a canner that was my grandmothers. And then my mother has had it and I remember as a kid we would can, do strawberry jam in that. And then she gave it to me, so now I have it. I love it because it has so much history. And I definitely feel when I am making jam . . . my disir are totally there. And they’re keeping me company and giving me that positive vibe that’s awesome, that only the disir can give you.”¹⁴⁶

For Tanya, not only is the activity of making jam a type of ancestor veneration, but she sees the canner itself as a powerful object that holds ancestral orlog.

Volva Kari Tauring recounts a dramatic event in which she viscerally experienced an ancestral memory. The experience began when her hands got sticky with caulk while doing some household repairs:

I went to the basement to wash my hands and began to scrub them with a brush. As I scrubbed I began to cry. I felt shameful. Now, I knew this was unrelated to the circumstances of repairing the basement so I allowed the tears to come . . . I cried and scrubbed my hands harder, until they were sore and red. Suddenly, an ancestor came through and began to speak through me. “I didn’t mean to. It wasn’t my fault. I’m just a little boy and it feels so icky.” He was getting his hands scrubbed to bleeding for touching something he was told not to. When I understood this, I let the emotion shift and became the loving parent. I stopped the scrubbing and began to smooth my hands with lotion saying “it’s ok now. You are a good boy. It’s ok. I

¹⁴⁵Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, August 2012.

¹⁴⁶Peterson, interview. “Disir” is a term that refers to female ancestors.

love you and there is no one who can hurt you now.” I felt his being inside me relax. Warmth spread over me, contentment and relief. I began to rock, grounding and aligning with the World Tree. I began to hum a lullaby. I felt my ancestor move through my legs and into the roots of the tree where this once fractured part of his soul could join the rest of him in wholeness.”¹⁴⁷

The immediateness of this experience, and her ideas about healing ancestral orlog, may not be characteristic of most Heathens’ experience. Yet Kari’s story demonstrates how Heathen life and psychology is permeated by an awareness of ancestors. As Kari says, “They may show up in dreams or as feelings and thoughts when we look at their photos, prepare their recipes, sing the songs they taught us, pray their prayers.”¹⁴⁸ Another Heathen writer describes how the ancestors remain “vital and active members of the family” who are included in important decisions and sought after for advice.¹⁴⁹ Heathen identity is enhanced by this connection: “An awareness slowly develops of being one gleaming pearl in a strand of pearls stretching back to the beginning of time and endlessly into the future. Our connection in the ongoing thread of ancestors becomes part and parcel of our daily consciousness.”¹⁵⁰ While communicating an experiential ideal, such a statement demonstrates the religious significance of ancestors to Heathens.

Do these experiences amount to ancestor worship? Most Asatruar would answer affirmatively and lay claim to that religious category. As Lafayllve clearly remarked, “We are ancestor worshipers.”¹⁵¹ Heathens certainly venerate their ancestors and most will have ancestral elements on a home altar. At a Heathen event in the Midwest, a *vé* or sacred place was set up just for ancestors. Participants were asked to spend quiet time in the *vé*, thinking and meditating on their ancestors and writing tributes

¹⁴⁷Kari C. Tauring, *Volva Stav Manual* (Minneapolis:Kari Tauring, 2010), 34.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹Krasskova, *Exploring the Northern Tradition*, 135.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Lafayllve, email to author, 22 March 2011.

to them in a book. A Heathen priestess has created an ancestral ritual in which participants connect with ancestors through meditation and galdring, chanting the Othala rune which symbolizes ancestral inheritance. After chanting and invoking the ancestors, participants in the ritual have a quiet time in which they listen for the voices of their own departed relatives. Heathens find these relationships with ancestral beings to be positive and comforting experiences.¹⁵² Rather than pursuing ancestor worship out of fear, Heathens seek the ancestors in order to broaden their experience of family, which includes the departed relatives, and ground their own sense of identity. As Nora stated, “I feel lucky because I get to interact with my [deceased] grandmother and the rest of my family doesn’t.”¹⁵³ Almost universally, Heathens seek after the presence of their ancestors, drawing on them for strength and guidance, and structure their identity in relation to their ancestral past.

Conclusion

At Trothmoot in 2012, a problem arose between two members of the High Rede, the Troth’s leadership board. One of the men had commissioned a new oath ring for the Troth. An oath ring is a band perhaps four to five inches in diameter used to ceremonially swear solemn promises, such as the induction oaths taken by new officers of The Troth. These rings were a part of the historical Heathen culture and are now commonly used throughout Asatru. The other man had promised to support the project with a financial donation. When he failed to do so, a personal rift had arisen between the two.

The broken oath jeopardized not only the personal relationship but also the man’s standing in the organization. Oaths are taken seriously in Asatru. To make an oath

¹⁵²Ford, interview.

¹⁵³Ibid.

is to speak words in the Well of Wyrd, to set them into one's orlog. Gundarsson writes, "Making any oath is a serious matter, and should never be entered into lightly An oath should feel like an iron collar around your will, not so tight as to crush it, but heavy enough for you to feel its weight."¹⁵⁴ During the Troth's business meeting, the man announced that he had failed to follow through on his promise and had broken his oath. In recompense, he offered to pay twice the amount of his original promised donation. This offer represented his shild: a payment of some sort that functions as recognition of one's debt and recompense to those who have been harmed by the broken oath. As Gundarsson makes clear, what is at stake is one's honor in the community: "If you must break an oath, all you can do is pay your shild in full, do everything you can to redeem your honor . . . and keep going."¹⁵⁵ This offer of shild was accepted by all concerned, the two men were reconciled, and the potential for further social conflict was eliminated.

This incident was a striking example of orderly conflict resolution or "frith-making," in Heathen parlance. It stood in stark contrast to the political in-fighting and personal squabbles that so often afflict contemporary Paganism. Conflict is such a common occurrence within the Pagan movement that the term "witch wars" has been coined to describe it. The reconciliation in this situation demonstrated the facility of the Asatru worldview to solve these social problems. Resolution was achieved when the contemporary religious community recognized and applied ethical principles that had been reconstructed from an ancient culture. These are cognitive and ethical resources that other contemporary Pagan religions have yet to develop. Asatru is still in an early stage of development. Yet this small incident demonstrated that the religion could potentially develop a robust worldview that defines a type of religious experience as well as a

¹⁵⁴Gundarsson, *Our Troth*, 2:444-45.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 452.

structure for building and regulating a social community.

The following chapters take a more focused approach toward specific aspects of Asatru belief and practice. Though Asatru takes its inspiration from the ancient world, it is not an ancient religion. It is a new religion in a modern context. As part of that context, it has adapted to creatively respond to the problems of modern life. Ancient elements are re-purposed to function as solutions to the tensions and dislocations experienced in modernity. The next chapter will begin by looking at Asatru solutions to the problem of weakened family structure in American life.

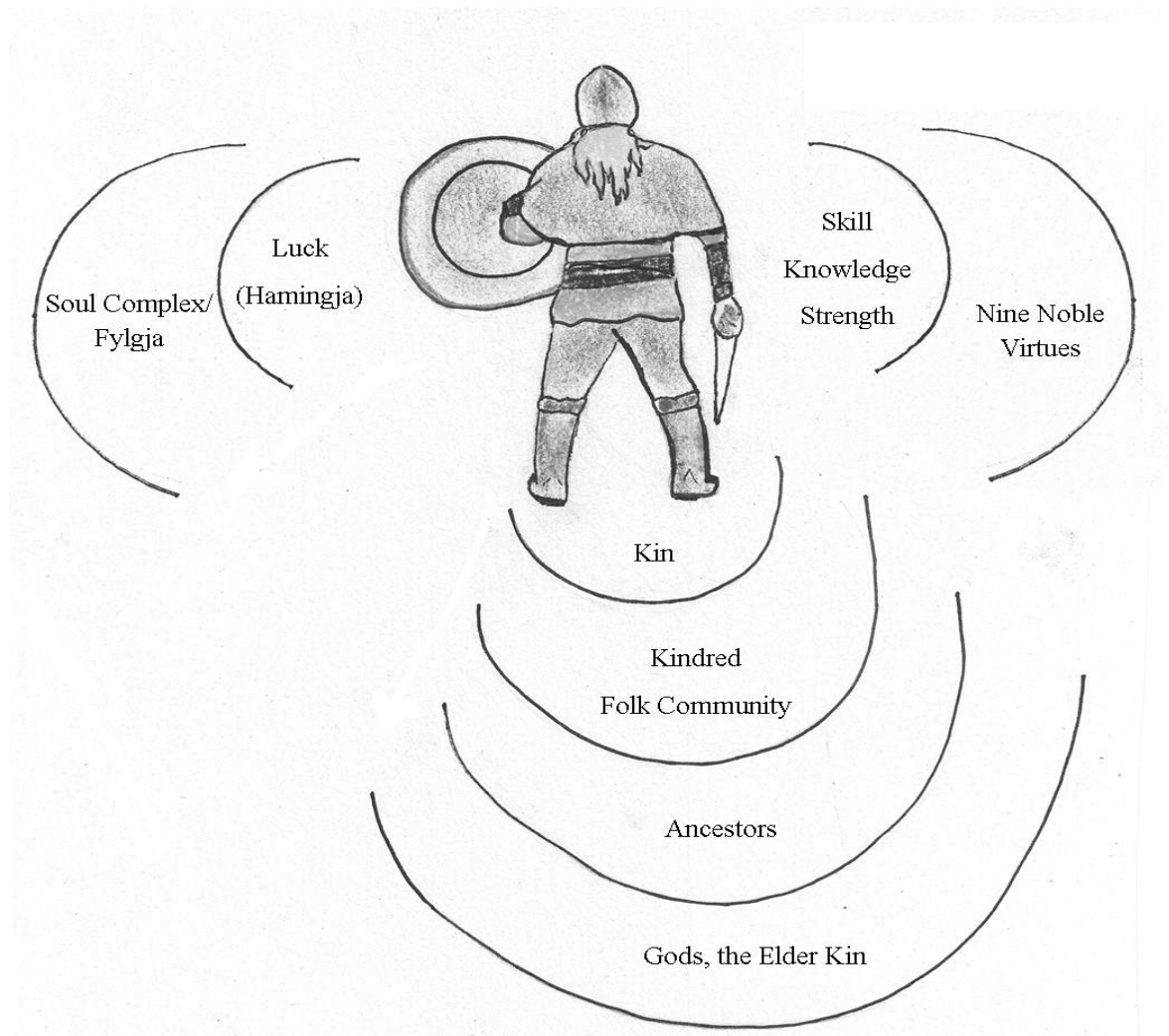


Figure 4. Heathen anthropology

CHAPTER 5

ASATRU AS FAMILY RELIGION

A gradual transformation has occurred in Asatru regarding the understanding and importance of family in the movement. American Asatru began as a New Religious Movement (NRM) in the 1970s in which young men sought to recapture an experience of rugged heroic individualism modeled on the Viking warrior, as well as to drink large quantities of alcohol. Steven McNallen, who was there at the very beginning of American Asatru remembers:

When I first approached Asatru back in the late 1960's, what attracted me was the panache, vigor, and passionate assertiveness of the Vikings. Bold and free, it attracted my testosterone-laden teenage soul like a magnet . . . and it still calls to me, after all these years Underlying the insistent Viking freedom was a deeper validation of a heroic view of human individuality, and for me this was an essential.¹

However, as these men began to start families and new adherents joined the movement bringing families with them, the situation began to change. Diana Paxson describes this cultural shift:

In the early days of Heathenry, Heathens were unmarried young men You know in the eighties, it was these young guys. And [two women] would go to a Heathen gathering and the guys would say, "Oh wow, we have so many women!" Of course eventually the unmarried young men attracted young women and then you know now we have the "Faith, Folk, Family," thing and a lot of Heathens are "It's family; it's family!"²

¹Steve McNallen, "Fire and the Fog" [online]; accessed 23 January 2013; available from <http://www.runestone.org/about-asatru/articles-a-essays/140-fire-and-the-fog.html>; Internet.

²Diana Paxson, interview by author, Pawhuska, OK, June 2011.

We know that the presence of children in NRMs leads to adaptive responses within the movements.³ These changes often involve addressing the needs of the children themselves, such as developing childcare, educational programs, and methods of socializing children as participants in the movement.⁴ However, the presence of children may also initiate a re-evaluation of the role and understanding of family in a movement's ideology. In Asatru, the re-interpretation of ideology has resulted not in the abandonment of the heroic warrior ethic but its supplementation with an increasingly prominent family ethic.⁵

As part of this ideological development, some Asatruar critique the modern American family as a failure that has been destructive to children. Penny Edgell and Danielle Docka note that the predominant cultural schema for the family in modern America since the 1950s has resembled the “‘Ozzie and Harriet’ ideal” of a “married male-female couple oriented to the bearing and raising of children.”⁶ This nuclear family itself resulted from the effects of modernity, which dis-embedded many Americans from the older ideal of the extended family context. The American nuclear family has similarly been disrupted by the continuing effects of advanced modernity. The realities of the double-wage earner lifestyle, extended school schedules, popular culture, single-parenting, and the fragility of modern marriage have weakened the relational bonds within the nuclear family.⁷ Aware of the breakdown of the American family, Asatru

³Susan J. Palmer and Charlotte Hardman, *Children in New Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 1. James D. Chancellor, *Life in The Family: An Oral History of the Children of God* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 205-06.

⁴James D. Chancellor, *Life in the Family: An Oral History of the Children of God* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 205-06.

⁵Diana L Paxson, *Essential Asatru: Walking the Path of Norse Paganism* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 162.

⁶Penny Edgell and Danielle Docka, “Beyond the Nuclear Family? Familism and Gender Ideology in Diverse Religious Communities,” *Sociological Forum* 22 (2007): 27-28.

⁷Ibid., 28-29. Susan J. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's*

Chieftain Mark Stinson remarks,

Stable families are on the decline . . . and have been steadily in decline for decades. More people get divorced than stay married. More and more children are born out-of-wedlock. More and more children are raised in a family situation that involves only one parent, usually a single woman These are trends in our current culture.⁸

Some NRMs have interpreted these trends positively as the inevitable withering away of an inherently flawed family structure.⁹ Heathens, however, generally regret the failure of the modern family and see these trends as problematic and undesirable. Mark Stinson, for instance, warns against the weakening of the family bond: “It is a sign of our decaying culture that parents have abandoned their own children.”¹⁰ Heathens value the social function of the ideal nuclear family. They believe that families are the best context for raising strong, mature, and skillful children. However, the nuclear family model no longer supports that value system and has been dis-embedded from that function, giving way to a culture in which children are neglected for reasons of work, entertainment, and convenience.¹¹

Heathens who interpret these trends as threats to the family and society are seeking spiritual solutions that draw on Asatru theology.¹² Stinson clearly expresses this goal: “Heathenry is the answer to the widespread emotional abandonment of children within our failing culture, and our children are the future of our native folkway.”¹³

Roles in New Religions (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 215.

⁸Mark Stinson, email to author, 26 July 2011.

⁹Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 222-23. Palmer discusses several groups including the Raelians and the Rajneesh/Osho movement which interpret the family structure as inherently oppressive. In the perspective of these groups, society must evolve beyond the need for biological families.

¹⁰Mark Stinson, *Heathen Families: Fables and Essays* (Liberty, MO: Jotun’s Bane Kindred, 2011), 26.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 209

¹³Stinson, *Heathen Families*, 27.

Stinson's nod to religion as the appropriate source to re-invigorate the American family is a common and particularly American reaction. Religious groups have often been the source of ideals about the family's structure and role in American life:

Historically, religious institutions in the United States have been centrally concerned with the production of familism, or ideals of family life. Religious familism has idealized certain forms and functions of the family, defining them as legitimate, valuable, and morally correct even essential for a healthy social order.¹⁴

While mainstream religious groups have been important and prominent promoters of "familism," this has been no less the case for NRMs. Mainstream religions have often promoted some version of the modern nuclear family, but NRMs have often created and advocated solutions outside of that ideal.¹⁵ Religions, especially new religions, are "creative cultural arenas where new understandings of the meaning of religious traditions, doctrines, and teachings are forged They are places to look for the innovations that may lead to larger changes over time."¹⁶ NRMs have frequently modeled new visions of family structure as a response to the tensions and changes experienced by families in modern society.

Susan Palmer discusses three types of responses toward the problem of family structure frequently found in NRMs. These responses can be summarized as: dissolving the family, sacralizing the nuclear family, and creating a superfamily. Both the Raelian and Rajneesh movements have advocated dissolving the family as an outmoded, superfluous and oppressive social arrangement. These groups see spiritual advancement as possible only when an individual is liberated from the family structure.¹⁷ Groups that

¹⁴Edgell and Docka, "Beyond the Nuclear Family," 28.

¹⁵Ibid. The authors write, "Mainstream religious institutions in the United States have promoted the SNAF [Standard North American Family] model, emphasizing the importance of stable, monogamous, heterosexual marriages which produce children; supporting parental authority; and discouraging premarital and extramarital sex."

¹⁶Ibid., 46.

¹⁷Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 164 on the Raelians, 222-23 on the Rajneesh movement.

sacralize the nuclear family generally see the family as a natural or divinely ordained structure and desire to strengthen and preserve its function as the primary socializing context for children. The Unificationist (Moonie) and Latter Day Saints (Mormon) movements, both of which valorize the nuclear family as a potentially eternal family unit, take this form of response.¹⁸ “It takes a village,” the popular phrase borrowed from the title of Hillary Rodham Clinton’s book, captures the emphasis of other new religions on creating superfamilies.¹⁹ These groups, such as the Messianic Community and The Family (Children of God), maintain that the modern nuclear family by itself is insufficient for the function of adequately socializing and supporting healthy individuals. In these groups the nuclear family either exists within, or is dissolved into, a larger community structure that may resemble the older extended family model and often takes the shape of communal living situations.²⁰

The spiritual solutions of Asatru revolve around this third type of response: the creation of superfamilies. These Asatru superfamilies are always supportive of nuclear families and no Heathens that I know of advocate communal living situations that negate the nuclear family. The Asatru solution draws on three religious resources to encourage the building of superfamilies: theological, sociological, and ritual. The theological resource involves the use of ancestor worship to create superfamilies. The ancestors are considered living presences connected to their descendents’ lives through orlog, the theological term expressing the cumulative past of the family line which is inherited by each individual. Orlog is the sacred connection by which the past becomes an active force in an individual’s present life. Heathens understand their lives, not just as products of the

¹⁸Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 212.

¹⁹See Hillary Rodham Clinton, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²⁰Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 215, 217.

nuclear family, but as the result of a deeper past of known and unknown ancestors. Through orlog, Asatru adherents see themselves as directly connected to an extended ancestral family. This theological awareness is enacted through the concrete practices of ancestor worship.²¹ Heathens use these practices to cultivate a psychological and emotional connection and closeness to their ancestors, like personal relationships that function as a supportive superfamily.

The sociological resource for the Asatru superfamily focuses on the kindred, the basic organizational unit of Asatru. The name, kindred, itself carries familial implications. From early in the history of American Asatru, the kindred came to represent an alternative family that shared a faith and set of values, in addition to or in place of one's family of origin. While acting as a center of religious activity, the kindred also seeks to incorporate the functions of family life. Stinson describes the kindred as "coming together as an extended family. Caring for each other, looking out for each other's interests, coming to each other's aid The children should . . . come to see each as brothers and sisters."²²

While kindreds often start as groups of religiously interested individuals, now in many cases they are expanding into "tribes," multigenerational groups consisting of several families that function as a religious and social unit. This is especially the case in the Midwest, where a specific emphasis is placed on developing Asatru in this tribal direction. Additionally, several Midwestern kindreds are beginning to enhance the tribal model of superfamilies with the practice of fostering, in which children from one tribe are

²¹Mark Stinson, *Heathen Tribes: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Tribes of Our Folk* (Liberty, MO: Jotun's Bane Kindred, 2011), 197. Stinson advocates learning about one's family predecessors through genealogy, remembering and honoring them through meditation and ritual practices, and making them proud by living honorably and raising healthy children by passing on good orlog to them. In these ways, ancestor worship has theological, sociological, and ethical implications.

²²Mark Stinson, *Heathen Gods: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Folkway of our People* (Liberty, MO: Jotun's Bane Kindred, 2009), 54-55.

sent on extended visits with another tribe. Fostering is a relatively new innovation being reconstructed from examples found in the Asatru lore in which Icelandic families raised a child from another related family. These exchanges, which are carefully monitored by parents and occur only between families who know each other well, function to create a superfamily dynamic in which adults outside of the nuclear family are instrumental in socializing children.

The ritual resource for building superfamilies is the *sumbel*, one of two rituals that form the basis of Asatru spirituality.²³ The first and most common ritual described by many Heathen sources is the *blót* (blot), a rite in which gifts of blood or mead are sacrificed in exchange for the intangible gifts of the gods.²⁴ The phrase “A gift for a gift” is often heard at these rituals and outlines the basic pattern of reciprocal exchange between human and divine beings involved in the blot. Of the two rituals the blot has received the most attention, as it is the ritual most directly concerned with the worship of the gods.²⁵ Swain Wodening, a well-known Heathen author, states that the blot provides the highpoint of Heathen religious experience, while the *sumbel* provides the highpoint of

²³Also written, “*symbol*.”

²⁴The word *blót* (pronounced BLOAT) is an Old Norse word usually translated as “blood,” signifying the offering of animal blood as a sacrifice and gift to the deities. See Amanda Wolfe, “The *Blot*: A Heathen Ritual Practice” *Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin* 37 (2008), 71. While mead has almost universally replaced animal blood in the contemporary Heathen setting, a minority of Heathens are seeking to reconstruct the practice of blood sacrifice.

²⁵Just as the blot is the ritual that has received the most attention, the drinking horn is an important symbol within Heathenry, and its role in Heathen culture ought to be addressed. The horn is certainly a ubiquitous and multivocal symbol with significant religious meaning, including the mundane love of a good drink, the source of divine inspiration, and a cosmological symbol of the Well of Wyrd. Perhaps most importantly the horn functions as a metaphor for community, particularly in the willingness to *share* a drink (since it cannot be easily set down, the horn is passed from hand to hand), and one rarely fills a horn for solely private consumption. The horn also carries with it the potential for deep cosmological significance as a symbol of the Well of Wyrd. However, it only achieves that level of meaning when the horn is enmeshed in the *sumbel* ritual. It is the context of *sumbel* and hall that elevates the horn to its full metaphoric potential within Heathenry. The mead-hall acts as the base symbol which gives significance to the others.

social or community experience.²⁶ This distinction between the two rituals is helpful and instructive. However, in actual practice, the religious and social experiences are not so easily separated. The sumbel is a complex and formal drinking ritual in which gods, ancestors, and other beings are honored. In a typical sumbel, a horn of sanctified mead or other beverage is passed among the participants while each makes a toast or verbal invocation.²⁷ The sumbel and its setting, the mead-hall, is the ritual most evocative of Heathen religiosity, picturing a structured cosmological community of kinship, a superfamily composed of both divine and human beings living and dead. The remainder of this chapter will examine the mead-hall as metaphor for the Asatru superfamily and will focus on the sumbel as the ritual resource to unfolding this solution to the problem of the modern family breakdown.

The Sumbel Ritual

There are several reasons for privileging the sumbel as a means to understanding Heathen religious experience. First, the sumbel frequently takes a climactic position in Heathen gatherings, often occurring at the height of the festival experience along with a feast, entertainment and accompanying practices.²⁸ Second, the sumbel best expresses the complex cosmology of the religion and the polytheism that is so important to Heathenry. During the “God round” of the sumbel, participants venerate the deities of their choice. These heartfelt invocations to a multitude of Heathen gods and goddesses emphasize the plurality of religious devotion within the community. Third, the

²⁶Swain Wodening, e-mail message to author, 22 July 2012.

²⁷Mead is an alcoholic beverage made from honey, sometimes referred to as honey wine. It is one of the oldest forms of alcoholic drink.

²⁸Mark Stinson, e-mail message to author, 7 July 2012. For example, Stinson writes, “From a religious and spiritual standpoint, the High Symbol is the main focus of LATP [Lightning Across the Plains].” LATP is an annual regional Heathen gathering hosted by Mark Stinson’s Jotun’s Bane Kindred and is one of the largest gatherings in the US.

sumbel makes apparent the essential family aspect of Heathen religious experience. As Mark Stinson, a Heathen chieftain in the Midwest writes, “Heathenry is about community.”²⁹ It is in the group setting that the fullest expression of Heathen spirituality is achieved, when humans experience the gods *as part of* that community of kinship. Steven Pollington emphasizes this when he writes, “This vision is particularly communal—not personal and private. The activities are about sharing with others — not personal communion with the divine. The divine is experienced in the context of the gathered community.”³⁰ For these reasons, we should see the sumbel as the ritual most evocative of Heathen religiosity.

I became aware of the metaphorical importance of the *sumbel* while observing regional and national Heathen gatherings in which the ritual often represents the high point or climax of the event. Prior to the sumbel, I frequently noticed a shift in the atmosphere and activity of these events. For instance, at a Heathen gathering in the Midwest, the sumbel was held in a large picnic shelter. Preparations began hours before with an announcement that no one was to go near the shelter while it was being prepared for sumbel. Meanwhile the participants dispersed and began changing clothing into their Heathen garb, Norse Viking period clothing often worn during rituals. Over the course of an hour or two the event changed visually as well as thematically. And as the heat of the day faded and the horn was sounded calling participants to the sumbel, we were clearly in a different space. No longer a picnic shelter, the building had been transformed to recall an ancient tribal long house or mead-hall, a gathering place for the tribes, with altar, banners, and shields. It had become a liminal space, undergoing its own temporary

²⁹Stinson, *Heathen Gods*, 39. Rod Landreth, e-mail message to author, 11 July 2012. Landreth, a Heathen *gothi* or priest, explains that “Heathenry is ultimately a communal religion.”

³⁰Stephen Pollington, *The Mead-hall: The Feasting Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2010), 226.

transformation into a sacred site where a sacred ritual was about to commence. This process of transition caught my attention and raised the question in my mind: “Why is this picnic shelter being re-imagined in this way?”

Mead-hall as Metaphor

The combination of activity that I witnessed that night was replicated to one degree or another at various sumbels that I attended throughout the U.S., demonstrating that a shared underlying metaphor was at work structuring the way Heathens are thinking and practicing the ritual. The metaphor of the mead-hall has been made accessible to contemporary Heathens through the work of several scholars who have examined the literary and archaeological sources for the historical mead-hall and sumbel. Michael Enright draws on historical and literary sources, such as Tacitus’ *Germania* and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, to describe the development of the sumbel itself. He argues that powerful symbols from pre-Christian Germanic culture were combined over time to create a ritual intended to bind unrelated people together into a “fictive kinship,” a concept quite applicable to the creation of superfamilies within the contemporary Heathen movement.³¹ According to Enright, the sumbel served as a religio-political ritual at the heart of the Germanic warband, forming its extra-tribal members into a cohesive and effective unit. The sumbel was efficacious in creating social unity, a fictive family, out of disparate elements and giving that unity religious significance.³²

³¹Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1996), 16. The two primary symbols he discusses are alcohol and women, the combination of which did not yield a frat party but a powerful religio-political event, or at least the potential for such an occasion in which marriages, alliances, coming of age, bonds of fealty and other community-building events occurred.

³²Enright’s term “fictive kinship” refers to a non-biological relationship which is perceived or articulated in biological terms. For instance the relationship of a leader and his warband might be thought of in terms of a father and his sons with the leader’s wife acting as mother. This is applicable to contemporary Heathens because many kindreds are composed of non-biologically related individuals who seek to function as a family.

Stephen Pollington contributes to the metaphor by demonstrating that the historical *sumbel* was a place-specific ritual: it was inextricably linked to the mead-hall, a prominent feature of Germanic communities for hundreds of years.³³ Its form was preserved in Anglo-Saxon architecture even beyond the survival of traditional Anglo-Saxon society: “The concept of the hall as the community's centre remained constant to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, even though by the ninth century there were new social and economic forms of secular community.”³⁴ The longevity of the hall indicates that its cultural importance was more than functional. Its place in Germanic and Norse cultural life was celebrated and idealized in the *Beowulf* poem. *Heorot*, the hall Beowulf fights to defend from the ravages of the monster Grendel, stands as the epitome of civilized life, human culture at its pinnacle. The hall is described in ideal terms as a “wonder of the world forever . . . a timbered hall, radiant with gold. Nobody on earth knew of another building like it. Majesty lodged there, its light shone over many lands.”³⁵ Those who gathered in the hall enjoyed the riches that were the result of community life: food and drink, finely crafted objects, culture and art, and companionship.³⁶

While not all halls lived up to the high ideal as presented in the *Beowulf* poem, Pollington shows that the hall was “physically replicated in most Anglo-Saxon communities, even small ones seemed to have had a ‘hall’ even if it was simply a room in the leadman’s house.”³⁷ The hall’s ubiquity and longevity indicate its important metaphorical value in the culture. The hall stood for, or represented a sort of ideal

³³Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 147.

³⁴Pollington, *The Mead-hall*, 31.

³⁵Seamus Heaney, trans., *Beowulf: An Illustrated Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), ll. 70, 307-11.

³⁶*Ibid.*, ll. 88-99, 1010-18.

³⁷Pollington, *The Mead-hall*, 226.

Germanic lifestyle, “hall life,” which “invoked the ideal of human togetherness.”³⁸ Hall life encompassed the moral/political/social order of the community as well as the enjoyment of its abundance, the “pleasures of the hall.” These included “friendship, hospitality, fellowship, brightness and warmth. They represent the ‘indoor’ aspects of men’s lives, the world of shelter, hierarchy and comradeship.”³⁹ So strong was this metaphor that it was also used to represent the supernatural world. For instance, in pre-Christian mythology, Valhalla is described as a mead-hall. And in later Christian Anglo-Saxon culture, heaven was occasionally depicted as sitting in *sumbel* in the mead-hall.⁴⁰ Thus the mead-hall long functioned as a metaphor for ideal life.

That the *sumbel* occurs within the mead-hall signifies the community aspect of the rite. The mead-hall historically functioned as something of an *axis mundi*, symbolizing the sovereignty of the community geographically, politically, and spiritually. The *sumbel* ritualized that function: it reinforced the boundaries and bonds of the community and served as the means by which outsiders could be included in the community.⁴¹ As Pollington writes, “By sitting with their peers to share food and drink, men and women publicly affirmed membership of the group. The drinking horn circulating around the mead-hall benches described a path which was effectively the boundary of that community.”⁴² The basic image of the *sumbel* is simply the family sitting together at table. This image of family informed the rite by which the tribal group, consisting of an extended family, formalized and renewed its bond as a single unit.⁴³ But

³⁸Pollington, *The Mead-hall*, 31.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁰Paul C. Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 73. Pollington, *The Mead-hall*, 116.

⁴¹Enright *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 76.

⁴²Pollington, *The Mead-hall*, 226.

⁴³Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 86.

it eventually came to function as a religio-political ritual within the Germanic comitatus, the war-band, in which the familial-like bonds of “fictive kinship” were invoked in order to bind together the extra-tribal members of this community.⁴⁴ The mead-hall became both the site of this efficacious ritual and a metaphor picturing the ideal community as a kinship forged from sacred bonds of loyalty. It was both a means of community-making and the symbol of community.

Moreover, Paul Bauschatz points out that the historical *sumbel* deeply resonates with Germanic cosmological concepts, particularly that of *orlog* and the Well of Wyrd. *Orlog* refers to the accumulated actions of the past which give rise to and condition the present. Mythologically, the *orlog* of all beings was contained or collected in the Well of Wyrd, a well at the base of the world tree. Here at the Well, the past was seen as a living, evolving force, the Wyrd, the interconnected web of past actions from which the present emerged. The Norns, mythological figures representing time, did their work of sustaining the cosmos here and the gods gathered at the Well for their councils. Bauschatz connects the Well of Wyrd symbolically with the horn of mead at the *sumbel*, indicating that the act of holding the horn, speaking into it, and drinking from it represented the placing and layering of the person’s words into the Well of Wyrd.⁴⁵ As words are spoken over the horn, “they disappear into the drink; as it is drunk, the speaker of the speech, his actions, and the drink become one, assuring that all now have become part of the strata laid within the well.”⁴⁶ In the *sumbel*, the horn functions as the Well of Wyrd. The words spoken over the horn are considered to shape the cosmological pattern of time and potentiality, and influence the lives of those who share in it. To speak and drink from the same horn binds the *orlog* of those who share it.

⁴⁴Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 17, 128, 283.

⁴⁵Bauschatz, *The Well and the Tree*, 70.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 77.

The Contemporary Sumbel: A Brief Description

The contemporary sumbel draws upon these ideas and what can be known about the historical pattern of the sumbel ritual to create a significant religious event for contemporary practitioners.⁴⁷ Mark Stinson writes, “The High Symbol [sumbel] is the culmination . . . the holy moment where all of the community and bonds we have built . . . are celebrated before our Gods, our Ancestors, and the Folk.”⁴⁸ The basic pattern of events making up the contemporary sumbel is illustrated below:

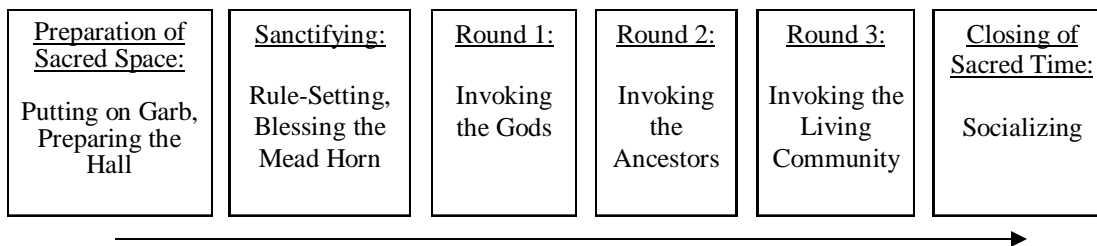


Figure 5. Order of the sumbel ritual

As mentioned earlier, a transition occurs prior to the sumbel. First, the physical environment itself may be manipulated to resemble that of a historical mead-hall. An altar, kindred banners, shields, and other accessories such as tapestries and table coverings evoke an idealized version of the ancient mead-hall, an atmosphere furthered enhanced by the period garb often worn by participants.⁴⁹ One notices a shift in rhetoric

⁴⁷Academic work on ancient Germanic culture is often closely and consciously appropriated by contemporary practitioners who use it as a guide for Heathen practice. For example, at an event in Minnesota I was told that the order of the sumbel would draw on Pollington’s reconstruction of the Anglo-Saxon sumbel ritual from the *Beowulf* poem. See Pollington, *The Mead-hall*, 42-48. Field notes taken by author, Hinkley, MN, 16 June 2012.

⁴⁸Stinson, e-mail. Note that Stinson uses a spelling derived from Old English, symbol, rather than the Old Norse derived, sumbel.

⁴⁹In the sumbel, the garb or period dress worn by some participants serves as part of the liminal transformation in which one’s real or ideal self is revealed and displayed. Modern dress in our society has a homogenizing or denaturing effect which cuts us off from ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. But in putting on garb, the participant temporarily reveals this deeper true self, a cultural religious self, an ideal

as well, as the site of the ritual becomes referred to as a “hall,” setting the space apart linguistically.⁵⁰ The sumbel often begins with some type of sitting ritual: the host occupies a high table at the front and other participants are seated in hierarchical order from front to back, often according to kindreds led by a chieftain.

The land spirits are called upon to sanctify and protect the hall, and invited to be present for the ritual. Rules are established that define the limits of acceptable behavior, the boundaries of frith.⁵¹ The ritual leader then invokes the gods to bless the horn and mead. What follows are three rounds of speech-making and drinking. The blessed horn symbolizing the Well of Wyrd is passed around the room by a valkyrie, a female ritual leader. Each participant stands, takes the horn, and gives a short speech which is generally greeted with a loud cry of “Hail!” by the participants. Mark Stinson describes it this way:

In the first round, participants toast a God or Goddess of their choice. In the second round participants toast an ancestor or hero with great meaning for them personally. In the third round, participants can boast of their own accomplishments, toast other Heathens for their accomplishments, or even make oaths about future deeds they will accomplish. As the gathered group says these words over the horn, they are putting them into the horn. This is akin to putting layers in the Well.⁵²

At the end of each round, the mead now laden with sacred words is poured into

self who is formed by the Germanic worldview.

⁵⁰This rhetorical shift was particularly noticeably in the introductory speeches to a sumbel in which the space was referred to as “the hall” several times. The ritual leader used this rhetoric to verbally re-cast the space in metaphoric and ritualistic ways. Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, 9 June 2012. Some Heathens have constructed in their homes a ritual room which they refer to as a hall. Stinson, e-mail.

⁵¹These rules define the limits of frith, the boundaries in which peace is maintained. The walls of the hall are a physical metaphor for the sacred cosmos, the realm of frith, while the rules of behavior designate the metaphysical boundaries of frith, the terms of inclusion in that sacred community. They often describe what may not be said during the ritual. For instance, oaths are forbidden in many instances, especially in large setting in which not all participants know each other. Another common rule forbids the hailing of Loki or other malicious beings. Transgressing a rule results in a warning from the warders. More serious penalties are occasionally enacted, such as expulsion from the hall or even terminating the rite itself as happened at Trothmoot 2010.

⁵²Stinson, e-mail.

an offering bowl. After these rounds are completed, the ritual is formally closed and the sanctified mead is given to the land spirits and gods by pouring it outside as a libation offering. This complex ritual can often last for several hours at a large gathering.

Liminality and Communitas

Victor Turner provides two concepts, liminality and communitas, that are especially useful in exploring the religious experience produced in the contemporary Heathen sumbel.⁵³ Liminality involves a ritual separation from normal roles and experience into an ambiguous state in which a person's experience is heightened. Turner writes that liminal personae "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."⁵⁴ Human beings, while in a liminal state, experience each other differently, outside of the norms that regulate most human interactions. Turner calls this experience "communitas," a state of fellow-feeling in which an idealized form of community or relationship is experienced.

Turner theorizes two models for human relationships: structure and anti-structure. He describes them in this way:

The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of 'more' or 'less.' The second . . . is of society as an unstructured . . . and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals.⁵⁵

Each of these relational states has its own type of liminality and communitas.⁵⁶ Turner

⁵³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94-97.

⁵⁴Ibid., 95.

⁵⁵Ibid., 96.

⁵⁶Ibid., 167.

spends a great deal of time analyzing the liminality and communitas of “anti-structure,” rituals in which the ordinary structure of society is temporarily broken down and members interact as a homogeneous community of equals.⁵⁷ However, another type of communitas is experienced in Rites of Intensification. These rituals enhance and reinforce underlying social structure by providing a “dramatic representation of the habitual relationships of the individuals in the sets of which the system is composed.”⁵⁸ Roles and the relationships between members are brought into stark focus and legitimated within the ritual. In these rites, liminality is experienced as status elevation, having one’s social position amplified and presented as an ideal self. Communitas is expressed as the sacred and almost transcendent experience of being part of an organic wholeness, sharing in and having a role within an idealized society.

Paul Hiebert’s excellent example of such a ritual is the college graduation ceremony, in which the formal occasion is marked by dress robes, processions, and seating arrangements that emphasize and magnify the role of rank and hierarchy. The ceremony idealizes the college as a great society and elevates the importance of its values as high and worthy commitments. The professor, who ordinarily appears in the classroom in shirt sleeves besieged by students, is now revealed as a master regally costumed in stately robes announcing his or her rank. The graduating student, though clearly lower in rank than the faculty, is given a seat, so to speak, in this great company that other students long to join. As Hiebert writes, “All this ritual enactment serves to intensify and reinforce the existing social and power structures of the community.”⁵⁹ The hierarchy that exists in everyday ordinary life is both accentuated and legitimated in these rites.

⁵⁷Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96.

⁵⁸Eliot Dismore Chapple and Carleton Stevens Coon, *Principles of Anthropology* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), 507.

⁵⁹Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 313.

Creation of the Sacred Community

The sumbel is best described as a Rite of Intensification that functions within contemporary Heathenry to unite disparate individuals and groups into a structured familial community. While common interactions and roles among Heathens are typically egalitarian and casual and social hierarchy is muted, the sumbel is a moment in which the “real” distinctions and relationships between individuals and groups are emphasized and clearly pictured. The deep underlying structure of the society that is often blurred in ordinary time is brought to the surface and affirmed as cosmologically significant. During the sumbel, Heathens are able to see themselves as part of a sacred superfamily.

Hierarchical Dualities within the Ritual

Hierarchy is signaled or displayed in the sumbel by notable dyadic structuring features demonstrated, as described by Turner, when “pairs of opposed values lie along different planes in ritual space.”⁶⁰ We can identify three of these dyads in the sumbel. The first is the inner/outer duality expressed by the physical structure of the hall itself. The sumbel typically takes place inside, unlike the blot which more often takes place in the open air. In the blot, the Hammer Rite or similar invocation is used to define a temporary sacred space. But in the sumbel, the physical hall itself represents the metaphysical boundaries of sanctity. The *communitas* of light, holiness, community, warmth and joy, the *innangard*, exists within the hall, while outside the hall lays the outer darkness, the unordered chaos, *utangard*. These are also moral distinctions: the inside is equivalent to the good, the trusted; while the outside is the evil, the questionable, that which cannot be trusted. So, the hall becomes a microcosm of the sacred cosmos. This sacred space is furthermore guarded during the ritual by warders, people who are set aside to protect the sanctity of the space. They watch over the internal mechanisms of the

⁶⁰Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 38.

sumbel and ensure an orderly process as well as restricting access and egress from the hall. Participants do not leave without explicit permission from the warders and do not enter without their consent and direction. Often, the ritual will be suspended for several seconds if people are moving around the hall. This dyad emphasizes the dynamic of belonging: within the mead-hall participants are part of the sacred community.

The second dyad is longitudinal and is visibly represented by the opposition of the high table and the benches. This duality signifies rank within the gathered community. The hosting kindred or leaders of the organization preside from the high table while the participants are seated at the benches often according to the host's determination of rank. An individual's location in the hall corresponds to his/her role in the superfamily and relationship to the host. There is a variety of approaches to this duality. In the Midwest, the host kindred occupies the high table, while allied kindreds are seated closest and guests and individuals are seated in successively distant tables. At Trothmoot, the High Rede or governing body of The Troth holds the position of rank at the high table, while participants seat themselves without regard to gradations of status in the benches. However, it is within this context of structure that a Heathen sumbel takes place and a *communitas* of sorts is achieved. It is a *communitas* that acknowledges and reinforces the underlying hierarchal nature of the Heathen movement. The community to which a Heathen belongs is pictured as a rightly ordered family, structured according to rank or worth. Worth is a Heathen moral concept similar to reputation, which is earned or built through doing good deeds and building relationships.

The third dyad is altitudinal and is represented by the dynamic of sitting and standing. Sumbel is specifically a sitting ritual in which the basic attitude is sitting at a table. The occasions when someone stands, thereby moving above the seated participants, noticeably breaks this pattern and upsets the hierarchal distinction established in the high table/benches dyad. We will address this vertical dyad in more detail below (see Creation

of the Sacred Individual).

Communitas of Structure

The sacred community is created through a ritual process in which religious hierarchy and increasing levels of sanctity are built. The preparatory period and the seating ritual embed participants within the structured ideal society.⁶¹ The blessing of the mead horn marks the true beginning of the sumbel in which the gods are present and the connection to the preternatural world is opened. At this point, the participants have fully entered into the first liminal moment: they are now gathered in a sacred place/time as a sacred community in the presence of the Well of Wyrð.

But this is only the seed of the sacred community, the Asatru superfamily. Around the group of gathered participants, layers of cosmological community are added through the repetitive ritual cycle of speaking, listening, and affirming of each other's words. In this way, the "fictive kinship" is grown. In the first round, the horn is passed and the participants invoke the gods and divine beings. The gods are not petitioned nor are they drawn down to possess or manifest themselves in the bodies of the participants, as in a Wiccan or Santeria rite. However, they are understood to be attentive and participating in the gathering, and are spoken about as if they were present in the hall.⁶² In the second round, participants invoke their ancestors, often in very personal ways. The experience is not merely an exercise in memory. The living presence of these hallowed ancestors is drawn to the attention of the participants and they are understood to be present at least psychologically around the table as members of the sacred family

⁶¹The garb worn by some participants should be seen as equivalent to the dress robes of a graduation ceremony. It reveals and displays status, one's true self, which is often obfuscated or downplayed in daily life.

⁶²Mark Stinson, "Symbel as a Complex Social and Religious Practice" (tape recorded lecture, Lightning Across the Plains, McLouth, KS, 21 September 2012). Stinson states, "If there is any time that the gods are paying attention it is tonight at High Sumbel."

gathering. During the third round, the final layer of kinship is formed as the relationships between members of the living human community are recognized and celebrated.⁶³

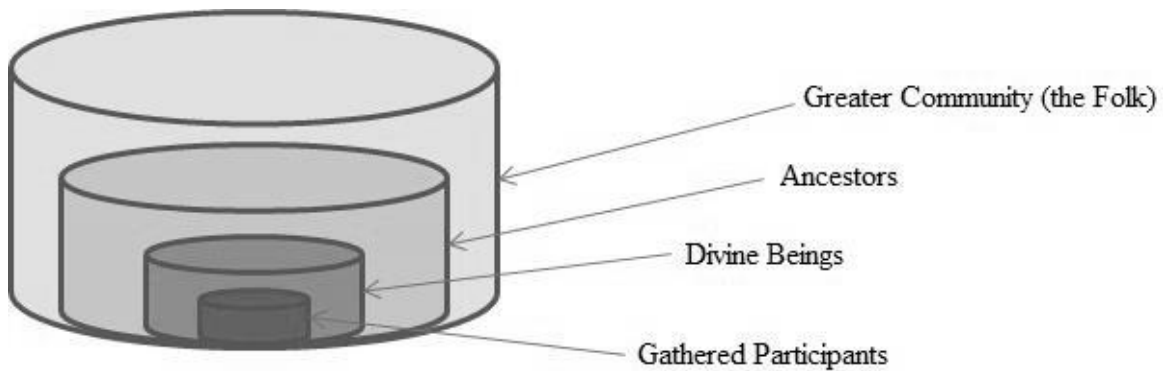


Figure 6. The Asatru superfamily

These three rounds trace the boundary of a community greater than the kindreds and families present. The fictive kinship formed by the sumbel represents the Heathen concept of “the Folk,” all of the human family in right relationship with their elder kin, the gods. In this way, the sumbel evokes the Pagan worldview described by Michael York as an “organic perception of the world, the supernatural, and humanity in which gods and human are seen as interrelated components of a single cosmic system.”⁶⁴ Thus the sumbel builds a microcosm within the roof and walls of the hall, and the hall has become a cosmological symbol.⁶⁵ The Well of Wyrd symbolized by the horn is the *axis mundi* around which is assembled a sacred hierarchal community. This may be viewed as

⁶³Rod Landreth, e-mail message to author, 11 July 2012. Landreth describes the sumbel as “a happy affair, but also extremely more solid more real because the words spoken are going into the Well, our deities, ancestors, and the vaettir [land spirits] . . . are also ‘present’ and listening. In many ways, for a short time . . . that Hall becomes the most important place in the World for Heathens” (emphasis added).

⁶⁴Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 38.

⁶⁵Pollington, *The Mead-hall*, 226.

a kinship, a cosmic superfamily consisting of divine, human, and ancestral beings in right relationship with each other.

Creation of the Sacred Individual

To observe the second liminal movement, the expression of equality and homogeneity, we must follow a different ritual trajectory and focus our attention on the passage of the sacralized horn through the hall. The valkyrie ritual leader moves among the tables and passes the horn to each individual, male and female, for their speech-making. At that moment, the attention of all the gathered participants is focused on listening to the one who stands and takes up the sacred horn.⁶⁶ Here the third structural dyad, the vertical dyad of sitting and standing, plays its role. When standing and speaking over the horn, each individual is elevated over the seated group, temporarily subverting the hierarchy of seating order represented by the horizontal dyad of high table and benches. Words spoken over the horn at this time are significant because they are ritually spoken into the Well of Wyrð.⁶⁷ The words take on cosmological significance by when and where they are spoken. This key point has not received a great deal of theological reflection within the movement. There is basic acceptance that the consecrated mead in the horn is connected to the cosmological entity of the Well of Wyrð and the words spoken over it influence the collective Wyrð of the whole sacred community.⁶⁸ All participants act as if this were so, giving their attention to the speaker. The attentiveness

⁶⁶Field notes taken by author, Hinkley, MN, June 2012. In a workshop entitled “Symbol as a Complex Social and Religious Practice,” Mark Stinson points out the role of attentiveness in the sumbel: “An important part of the Sumbel is listening.”

⁶⁷Stinson, e-mail. Also see Bauschatz, *Lady with the Meadcup*, 78. The significance of the moment is also communicated through body language and elocution. People speak up in a declaratory tone of voice. They peer into the horn, speak over the horn, or hold the horn aloft. There may be other horns in the hall, but they do not carry the same weight or importance.

⁶⁸I have not seen this metaphysical connection between the horn and the Well of Wyrð explained conceptually or theologically. It is accepted as a reality in some way more than metaphorical.

makes it a sacred moment, signaling that this person and their words are significant, an attitude confirmed by the loud “Hail!” of the gathered people at the conclusion of each speech. In this second liminal moment, rank is forgotten. Each participant who stands at the *axis mundi* and speaks words of religious and social weight is clearly pictured as a sacred individual.

This interruption of the hierarchal structure during the toasting is not a subversive act. Within the confines of the *sumbel* it is sanctioned and affirmed by the participants. There is even a subtext at work of friendly competition regarding who can speak most eloquently and movingly. At the same time, the hieratic position assumed by each participant is not only temporary but dependent upon the goodwill of the audience. The person speaks words into the Well of Wyrd to which the attentive audience is joined and bound. If the individual speaks in a way that is seen as inappropriate or dangerous, the role will be cut short by ritual leaders.⁶⁹ So while the individual is recognized in that moment as a spiritual equal, even this moment is subject to the authorization of the sacred community. The sacred individual must keep *frith* by acting within the accepted bounds of behavior in order to be given license to speak and express him/herself in this binding way. This protects the gathered audience from whatever potentially hazardous cosmological implications might be engendered by those words.

The oath is a type of speech that receives particular attention among Heathens. Oaths are binding promises about future behavior that must be fulfilled once they are formally spoken. Oaths can be made in various ways but a common practice involves speaking the oath into the horn at *sumbel*, a method that involves or binds all those who affirm the oath during the ritual. Because of this collectively binding nature, oaths are frequently ruled “out of bounds” or outside of the boundaries of *frith*. For instance,

⁶⁹Landreth, e-mail. Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012.

during a sumbel I attended in 2012, a man was speaking emotionally about an ancestor who was a war veteran. The participants were very engaged and listening intently. With tears running down his cheeks he loudly declared, “And I swear by the ancestors . . . !” Suddenly from around the room, shouts of alarm rang out. Warders ran forward and the man stopped speaking. After a brief consultation, he was allowed to continue, “but without the oath.”⁷⁰ By preventing the oath, the sacred community avoided becoming cosmologically bound to whatever words might be spoken in the heat of the moment. On one hand, this incident is an example of the religious intensity that can be generated by the sumbel and the importance that words carry in Heathenry. Yet it also illustrates an anthropological point: the sovereignty of the sacred individual is a gift from the community and is subject to its authorization. Hierarchy reasserts itself as the underlying structure of this superfamily.

Conclusion: Sumbel as Superfamily

In Asatru, the mead-hall is a powerful symbol of family. Those who sit in the hall and share the sumbel horn are bound together as loyal kin. That picnic shelter in the Midwest was reimagined as a mead-hall in order to activate this metaphoric meaning in the lives of contemporary Heathens. The sumbel portrays the ideal community as a familial relationship between divine and human participants. Through the ritual, Heathens interact with each other and with the divine in a way that is neither reciprocal nor ecstatic in nature. Divine and human beings are seen as part of an *innangard*, a bounded community of identity and relatedness, kindred beings and members of a family.

Does sumbel really establish or create a sense of kinship and family among the participants? Victor Turner raises the possibility of “pseudo-hierarchy,” which occurs

⁷⁰Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012. Sumbels can be affected by rash words even more dramatically than this incident, such as Trothmoot 2010 in which the ritual was disrupted and canceled when a group of participants violated the terms or boundaries of *frith*.

when hierarchical relationships structure a ritual performance but do not actually reflect the relationships of group members in daily life.⁷¹ In this light, the sumbel could function to create the felt experience of belonging to a family without entangling people in the actual difficulties of close family-like relationships. Is sumbel in reality a cathartic, temporary experience of community, an imagined family that doesn't substantially impact or alter the state of unencumbered individualism? As with any rite, it is more or less effective in any given enactment and people's experience varies. Participants do say important things and express themselves in ways they ordinarily would not. Deep emotion is often felt during these rounds and an almost cathartic sense of *communitas* may be experienced, resembling a family-like atmosphere of closeness and caring. Similarly, conflicts within a group can be resolved by the careful exercise of words during sumbel.⁷² This felt experience of fellowship, called *frith*, is the realization of the Heathen concept of *innangard*, the family enclosure, being part of one's own.⁷³ Additionally, the formalities of sumbel are often utilized to enhance relationships that exist beyond the ritual moment, such as when friends enact their relationship through giving gifts and boasting about each other. In these ways, the ritual emphasizes and drives home what contemporary Heathenry is in part about: calling together a new type of sacred family within a world perceived as sacred and blessed.

Because of the dispersed and often fractious nature of contemporary Heathenry, some metaphor is necessary to communicate a sense of greater unity. This

⁷¹Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 192-94.

⁷²Field notes taken by author. Hinkley, MN, 2012. During the sumbel at this event, two kindreds resolved a long-standing rift through the conciliatory speeches of several female kindred members. The metaphoric significance of the superfamily created in the sumbel ritual enhanced the "frith-weaving" or peace-making role of the women.

⁷³Eric Wodening, *We Are Our Deeds: The Elder Heathenry, Its Ethic, and Thew*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: White Marsh Press, 2011), 9. For instance, Mark Stinson stated that "the individual is only a small part of something greater." Field Notes taken by author, McLouth, KS, September 2012.

metaphor is found in the mead-hall and its ritual, the sumbel. Sumbel can function to unite the “extra-tribal” Heathens from different localities and different theological perspectives. It can create a temporary experience of harmony and unity, even new friendships and lasting bonds. Not only is the community seen, but it is created as individuals and groups are gathered and bound together by the rite. The creation of this familial bond is the intent and potential of the ritual. Achieving the ideal is something toward which the movement continues to struggle.

The question of gender roles naturally arises within a discussion of family. What roles do men and women play in this Asatru superfamily? Asatru valorizes women as wives and mothers. Women are the strong core that holds the family and household together. But women also have a more liminal form of power that moves them beyond these important but traditional roles. They are connected to magic, as those who can feel and see into the Wyrd. It is to women as workers of magic that we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

ASATRU AS MAGICAL RELIGION

“Modern English has very few words to describe magical practice.”¹

Contemporary Paganism and magic tend to be closely related in the popular imagination, summoning up images of witches riding brooms and casting spells. Popular culture, such as the Harry Potter books and the numerous television shows and movies with occult themes, reinforces this perception. Although these representations in popular culture misconstrue magic’s real nature, the association of magic with Paganism is accurate. Magic, sometimes written as “magick” by practitioners to avoid confusion with stage magic, has an important role in the Pagan worldview. As Graham Harvey states, “Not all Pagans engage in magic, but a significant number do.”² Wicca, for instance, is a magical religion in which all initiated participants are considered priestesses and priests whose practice consists almost entirely of magical work. Asatru, however, is not based on initiation into magical secrets and the role of magic is much more ambiguous and disputed. While magic is an element in contemporary Pagan religions, Asatru demonstrates that its role and place should not be assumed. What then is this phenomenon of magic?

Defining Magic

In the study of religion, defining magic has proven to be an on-going and

¹Diana Paxson, field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012.

²Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1997), 87.

notoriously difficult endeavor. A variety of descriptions and explanations of magic appear in the literature. Yet they seem to represent three types of definitions: essentialist, which seek to define the fundamental nature of magic; functional, which seek to describe what magic does; and family resemblance definitions, which identify magical phenomena according to a set of characteristics.³

Sir James Frazer, scholar and author of *The Golden Bough*, and occult practitioner Aleister Crowley authored two of the most important essentialist definitions. Frazer defined magic as a system that manipulates impersonal natural forces to accomplish an end. Magic “assumes that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency Underlying the whole system is a faith . . . in the order and uniformity of nature.”⁴ According to Frazer, magic is essentially distinct from religion:

As religion assumes the world to be directed by conscious agents who may be turned from their purpose by persuasion, it stands in fundamental antagonism to magic . . . which take[s] for granted that the course of nature is determined, not by the passions or caprice of personal beings, but by the operation of immutable laws acting mechanically.⁵

Magic, in Frazer’s eyes, was essentially a flawed science based on a misunderstanding of natural law. It posited that nature operated according to the laws of similarity and contagion. The law of similarity suggested that “like produces like,” that a ritual action would produce a similar cosmic action.⁶ The law of contagion held that objects that have been in contact remain psychically connected after they are separated. As Frazer states, “Things which have once been conjoined must remain ever afterwards,

³Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 20.

⁴James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 49.

⁵Ibid., 51

⁶Ibid., 12.

even when quite dis-severed from each other, in such a sympathetic relation that whatever is done to the one must similarly affect the other.”⁷ Frazer’s essentialism has been influential in scholarly thinking about magic. He insightfully and usefully distinguished between cosmologies of two ideal types: the magical world system that functions according to mechanistic laws, and the religious world system that operates according to relational dynamics of personal beings. Yet his view ends up being too reductive. His distinction between magic and religion, for instance, artificially separates these two phenomena which frequently appear together in cultural combinations that should be considered complementary instead of incongruent.⁸

Crowley’s Romantic essentialism focused on personal will rather than natural law. He defined magic as “‘The Science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity with Will.’”⁹ For Crowley, magic is a system or technique used to amplify personal will and release it into the world. This understanding has been very influential among contemporary Pagan practitioners. It is fundamental, for instance, to the common magical practice of raising and releasing a cone of power. As Margo Adler describes it, “The ‘cone of power’ is really the combined wills of the group, intensified through ritual and meditative techniques, focused on an end collectively agreed upon When it has been raised, it is focused and directed with the mind and shot towards its destination.”¹⁰ The “Will” is simply the power of the mind focused and concentrated. Mind, properly

⁷Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 37

⁸Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 66.

⁹Sarah M. Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 13. Joyce Higginbotham and River Higginbotham, *Paganism: An Introduction to Earth-Centered Religions* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2006), 163-64.

¹⁰Margo Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 106.

disciplined, can control and manipulate matter, a conception of magic rooted in nineteenth century Romantic anthropology and American New Thought.¹¹ More contemporary versions of this definition move beyond notions of willful Romantic individualism to draw on democratic and populist images of will. For instance, Starhawk, the popular author, eco-feminist, and Pagan priestess, has advocated an understanding of magic focused on non-hierarchical power and “the actions of many consciousnesses voluntarily working together.”¹²

Modern practitioners frequently bring these two definitions together. They reject Frazer’s critique that magic misapprehends the laws of nature and instead argue that the universe is interconnected in ways that are not seen, that there *are* forces of nature and types of natural connections between objects as yet undescribed by science.¹³ Two explanations are given for this conclusion: either there are esoteric forces of which modern science is simply ignorant, subtle energies that cannot be discovered through scientific means; or these cosmic forces are beginning to be dimly apprehended in the new science of quantum physics in which the boundaries between matter and energy are observed to break down. However it is explained, magical practitioners believe that if one can manipulate those connections through the exercise of one’s will then “like a lever, a

¹¹Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 112.

¹²Higginbotham and Higginbotham, *Paganism*, 164. Also Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, 123 -24.

¹³See Helen A. Berger, *A Community of Witches: Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 19. Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 118-19. According to Luhrmann, these forces may be “rather badly defined,” but it serves us to note that while metaphoric descriptions of esoteric realities often lack a scientific precision, this does not preclude their usefulness. The runes and tarot pictures symbolically represent these forces, which are also described as psychic energy or elemental energies of earth, sky, water and fire. In the Asatru context, these energies are described as Wyrd and Orlog and metaphorically depicted as layers in a well, or the warp and weft of a weaving.

small magical spell can shift the world.”¹⁴

In distinction to these essentialist attempts to define magic, Michael York’s description exemplifies a functional definition, stating not what magic is, only what it does. For York, magic shortcuts natural law. Science, he writes, “maintains that any specific value or aspect of a system is always preserved. If there is a give, there must be a corresponding take,” a law of physics known as the conservation of energy.¹⁵ Magic, however, seeks a violation of this equality of exchange, the law of energy conservation. The magician attempts to transgress the law by “substituting something of lower value for the obtainment of something of greater worth.”¹⁶ The ritual action taken by the magician is a small act intended to produce a result much greater in the world. Magical practice is present when the law of equal exchange is bypassed or at least thought to be bypassed.

Helen Berger and Sarah Pike take a more psychological approach that defines magic as functioning primarily as a type of self-transformative experience. Pagans contend that magic has a “direct effect on the world” and is “efficacious in solving a wide variety of problems.”¹⁷ However magic most clearly works to alter or transform the practitioner’s identity: “Magic is seen, at least in part, as a process of awakening one’s own psychological mechanisms.”¹⁸ Drawing on Giddens’s critique of modernity, Berger argues that once the modern individual is dis-embedded from traditional identity structures, self-identity becomes a narrative that must be shaped, altered, and redefined

¹⁴Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, 118.

¹⁵Michael York, *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 68.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Berger, *Community of Witches*, 18-19.

¹⁸Ibid., 34.

within the rapidly changing circumstances of modern life.¹⁹ Magic becomes a technique by which a type of self, a new magical self, is defined and maintained.

Sarah Pike's understanding of magic is quite similar, focusing on the functionality of identity creation. She writes that "the explanations that Neopagans give for the concept of magic almost always include 'change' and 'transformation.'"²⁰ Magic can be anything that involves "consciously separating oneself from the world of the everyday and moving into a realm where possibilities are open for physical or psychological transformation."²¹ She describes fire dancing at Neopagan festivals as magical events with "the potential to create powerful experiences, to transport participants to 'higher states of consciousness,'" which "liberate participants from the 'selves' they bring with them."²² In this magical space, participants are empowered to try on new types of self, reshape and reform their identities in alternative configurations, beyond the limited and limiting roles given to them by modern society. These functional definitions are quite useful in understanding the magical experience. However, they leave the boundaries of the phenomenon wide open: almost anything "transformative" could be considered magical.

Perhaps a better approach would involve a descriptive definition that looks more comprehensively at elements of magical phenomena. This "family resemblance model" defines objects by comparing them to a given set of criteria. For instance, in biology a mammal is defined according to a set of characteristics that includes being a vertebrate, being warm-blooded, having hair, and producing milk. Animals meeting all these criteria are classified as mammals. A family resemblance or polythetic definition

¹⁹Berger, *Community of Witches*, 28.

²⁰Pike, *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves*, 13.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., 185-87.

looks for combinations of related characteristics rather than a single essentialist or functionalist trait. The positive identification of a phenomenon must demonstrate the presence of all or most of the elements. For instance, Adrian Ivakhiv draws on this model when he writes:

Whatever definition [of magic] one favors, it is clear that magic has something to do with *imagination* (a word that shares etymological roots with ‘magic’), with *patterns* (of images, symbols, correspondences between the human, natural, and macrocosmic worlds), and with some sort of *efficacy*.²³

Ivakhiv’s characteristic of imagination incorporates the ideas of Will and Mind, and his mention of patterns or correspondences turns on the idea of an esoterically interconnected cosmos. In addition to the traits of self-exploration and transformation, we should add the quality of altered states of consciousness. Magic utilizes shifts in the participants’ state of mind, usually consciously induced, in order to become receptive or open to the esoteric interconnections that are purported to exist in the world beyond normal human perception.²⁴ These shifts of consciousness are produced through ritual, staging, repetitive or rhythmic actions, environmental cues, and conditioning. While not all occasions of ritual, altered awareness, and projections of will are magical, in combination they may indeed indicate a magical experience.

The Tension of Disconnection

Why are magical practices finding such a ready audience among contemporary Pagans? In her study of magic in England, *Persuasions of the Witch’s Craft*, Tanya Luhrmann drew attention to the apparent disconnect between the rational, technological world of modernity and the occult world of magic. She asked, what “allows people to

²³ Adrian Ivakhiv “The Resurgence of Magical Religion as a Response to the Crisis of Modernity: A Postmodern Depth Psychological Perspective,” in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 244.

²⁴ Higginbotham and Higginbotham, *Paganism*, 165-66. Nora Ford, telephone interview by author, 3 January 2013.

accept outlandish, apparently irrational beliefs,” and “Why do people find magic persuasive . . . in the face of constant failure?”²⁵ Implicit in these questions is the assumption that the modern worldview of scientific rationalism has made magic superfluous and in need of justification. But this presumption misses the fact that Pagans do not spend much time justifying magical practice in the face of the modern scientific, rationalist worldview. Rather than giving credence to it and evaluating their own practice against it, Pagans tend to critique modern rationalism and find it lacking. A perspective that attributes reality only to those phenomena that can be seen and measured inadequately accounts for human experience of the world.

There is a strong sense among Heathens, and Pagans more generally, that modernity, both in its scientific and Christian forms, cuts off modern people from a deep spiritual connection with the world that the ancestors experienced. Diana Paxson recalls attending a Christian communion service during college and feeling an energy or power in the ritual that was different from her previous experiences with religion:

What I was always looking for was a spiritual path that would allow me to make contact with the divine and . . . I didn't get that very often in Christianity . . . The chaplain at . . . college was a man of great spirituality and when he did the communion service, you could feel the energy. And I went “Okay *that's* what I want. I want that energy.”²⁶

This sense of loss and searching pervades the Pagan worldview: contemporary Pagans seek the energy of which Paxson spoke. This perspective takes a very circumspect approach towards modernity. A “mechanical philosophy” dominates modern Western civilization and has stripped away our experience of the world as “alive, animate, and interconnected,” leaving modern people with a disenchanted world.²⁷ Pagans believe that it is possible to have a deeper experience of the world and the sacred than is ordinarily

²⁵Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 7-8.

²⁶Paxson, interview by author, Pawhuska, OK, June 2011.

²⁷Berger, *A Community of Witches*, 23.

found in modern life. And they believe there is more to know about the world and the self than what modern science and religion have described. They seek that power and energy by looking toward a past when that connection still existed in human society. Pagan and magical traditions are new religions that seek to reconstruct “older, once-enchanted cosmologies” in part as a response to this perceived modern disconnection from the world.

Adrian Ivakhiv argues that magic constituted the traditional context of human life, stating that “in traditional societies, myth, storytelling, and ritual activities . . . served to maintain a sustainable relationship between the different structural elements of the cosmos: human society and the gods, conscious ego and unconscious underworld.”²⁸ This worldview interpreted the cosmos as alive with beings, forces, relationships, and magical correspondences that were vitalizing for humans and their societies. While a boundary existed between civilization and wilderness, the known and the unknown, magical religion kept the unknown “within the reaches of the society itself,” and capable of being accessed at significant moments. The quasi-religious figures who inhabited the margins of human society, the “shamans, sorcerors, witches, and the like” as well as community rituals such as rites of passage, served to bridge this boundary. They functioned to bring people into temporary but often significant and meaningful contact with larger natural and supernatural forces around them.²⁹

However, through the process of modernization, this function was “shifted out beyond the society’s margins,” and contact with these forces and beings was increasingly seen as illegitimate.³⁰ Modern Western society no longer tolerated these traditional practices it now considered occult. The marginalizing of magical practice occurred

²⁸Ivakhiv, “The Resurgence of Magical Religion,” 240.

²⁹Ibid., 239.

³⁰Ibid.

through social and legal pressure of the expanding Christian state, as well as the social upheaval caused by modern technicalization and the development of the industrial economy. Ivakhiv's explanation reflects the thesis of modern dis-enchantment that is presented quite persuasively by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber argues that the rationalist, technical ethos necessitated by a true capitalist economy was created by a collusion of economic and religious forces in "the great historical process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic from the world."³¹ As a result of this historical process, Ivakhiv finds that modern people find themselves dis-embedded or disconnected from the traditional context that brought meaning to people's lives by connecting them to the natural world:

This is the dilemma in which contemporary Euro-American society finds itself: as a culture, we have lost the sense of sacredness in our relationship with the world about us. The world we live in is a disenchanted one, made up of discrete, disconnected (or at least, not *meaningfully* connected) objects.³²

From the Pagan perspective, this situation of disconnection is a sign of a "maladapted or 'diseased'" society.³³ It surfaces, among other ways, in the psychological angst of modern individuals who "don't know what it is we should do or what our rightful place amidst it all is meant to be."³⁴ It is manifested in the need for connection that is seen in Diana Paxson's desire to experience spiritual power. Caught in the tension of desiring a deeper connection to the world but unable to find it in modern society, Pagans look back to the enchanted, magical cosmologies of pre-Christian, pre-scientific cultures. Magical religions such as contemporary Paganism and Heathenry arise to fill the gap, to find the elements of connection again and re-embed modern people back into

³¹Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2001), 61.

³²Ivakhiv, "The Resurgence of Magical Religion," 242.

³³*Ibid.*, 241.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 242.

fuller ways of knowing and interacting with the world around them.

The Varieties of Heathen Magic

Pointing to the root of magical practice in contemporary American Asatru can be difficult and the decisive history of modern Heathen magic has yet to be written. Magic has been a part of Norse and Germanic culture for centuries, including the Pagan folk magic of prehistory, and the ceremonial, alchemical, and occult magic of the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Runic and ceremonial magic mingled with Germanic racial mysticism and fascist politics in Germany during the early decades of the twentieth century. For example, Guido von List developed an occult system of runes after experiencing a spiritual epiphany in which the lost secrets of the runes were revealed to him. His system consisted of eighteen runes adapted from the Futharks, the historical runic alphabets of northern Europe. List considered his runes to represent the esoteric proto-runes from which the various Futharks were derived.³⁵ He called them Armanen runes, a name he coined to refer to a supposed ancient Germanic priesthood dedicated to the god Wodan (Odin) that once thrived in an ancient Aryan Heathen world. According to List, these Armanen runes expressed the lost wisdom of this ancient priesthood.³⁶ List's runic magic utilized these runes in vocal incantations, hand gestures (*mudras*), and bodily positions sometimes referred to as runic yoga, in order to access esoteric power. In addition to being used by the Nazi SS, the Armanen runic system was quite influential among occultists at the time and several organizations and societies sprang up around the system. However, World War Two dramatically interrupted the development of these trends.

³⁵The runic alphabets are known as Futharks, an acrostic of the first six rune names. For a detailed scholarly account of the historical runic alphabets, see R. I. Page, *Reading the Past: Runes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 14-22.

³⁶Matthias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 23.

While this history is known among Heathens, it is unclear how directly it has influenced contemporary Heathen conceptions and practice of magic. Matthias Gardell clearly traces the influence of pre-war racial and political ideals into the contemporary Odinist world through Alexander Mills, Else Christensen, and others.³⁷ Yet the secrets of occult practice are more difficult to transfer, often depending on face to face transmission and attracting a much smaller audience of interested recipients. Edred Thorsson states that a German magician named Karl Spiesberger revived the Armanen system in the post-World War Two period, stripping it of racist elements and providing the basis for modern Germanic magic.³⁸ It is certainly the case that esoteric occult societies of Germanic inspiration were active in post-war Europe. In fact, Heimgest Holley, the current leader of the Odinic Rite had his magical beginnings in such a group in Britain and this magical focus was influential within the Odinic Rite. According to Heimgest, “I would say that esoteric practices play quite an essential role in Odinic Rite practice and progress.”³⁹

These European esoteric groups may have had links to the Rune Gild, an international initiatory magical lodge created in the 1980s by Edred Thorsson, who still leads the organization. Thorsson states that members of both the Odinic Rite and the Asatru Assembly were involved in the Rune Guild, as were members of The Troth which Thorsson himself founded.⁴⁰ Through these personal connections and the popular books on rune magic published by Thorsson, the Rune Gild has had a significant influence on the magical understanding of runes within Asatru. Since the work of the Rune Gild took von List’s Armanen system as its starting point, the occult ideas of pre-World War Two

³⁷Ibid., 165-90.

³⁸Edred Thorsson, *Futhark: A Handbook of Rune Magic* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1984),

³⁹Heimgest, telephone interview by author, 19 May 2011.

⁴⁰Thorsson, *Futhark*, 18.

Europe have maintained a long-term presence in the America cultic milieu.

European folk magic has also influenced the practice of magic in Asatru. Folk magic is the simpler, less esoteric magic of the kitchen and garden.⁴¹ It draws on the properties of plants, moon signs, astrology, and seasons to align human life with the powers and rhythms of nature. Many of these practices are representative of fertility magic used as part of the agricultural cycle among folk populations. An important portion of folk magic is given to herbalism, which is really a type of healing magic using plants, psychic energy, and simple spell-work. This type of folk magic would have been practiced in homes and farmsteads to produce remedies for the ailments faced by humans and livestock. Herbalism and other folk magic practices were carried along in families, cultural traditions, and popular sources such as almanacs. They found an important niche in the somewhat isolated folk cultures of America, such as the Pennsylvania German culture where they were preserved more systematically as the practice of Braucherie. Though it has not been widely practiced in American Asatru, herbal magic is slowly becoming more prominent as knowledgeable people in the religion teach traditional medicinal uses for plants.⁴²

While American Asatru may have been influenced by all these sources, the most enduring lineage of magical practice can be traced back to the early development of The Troth in the late 1980s. The Troth founders and many of its early members such as Edred Thorsson, Kveldulf Gundarsson, Freyja Aswynn, and Diana Paxson all contributed substantially to the development of modern Heathen magic, often collaborating and referencing each other's work. Much of the contemporary understanding and practice of magic among American Heathens derives from original work on Germanic and Norse

⁴¹Harvey, *Listening People*, 102.

⁴²This practice is being revived in Urglaawe, Pennsylvania German Heathenry, for instance. Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012.

lore by these authors themselves, combined with substantial inspiration and experience in the Wiccan magical worldview developed by Crowley, Gardner, and others.

Edred Thorsson is the preeminent Asatru magician. His book on rune magic, *Futhark*, was published in 1984 and created the foundation for further development of magic in the movement.⁴³ In it, he laid out a system for esoteric use of the runes focusing on galdr, the chanting of runes; runic stances, body postures that imitate the rune staves or shape; and ritual, all substantially set within a Norse context and worldview. This book caught the attention of other magically oriented Asatruar. Diana Paxson, who went on to write her own highly influential book of rune magic, mentions that Thorsson's *Futhark* "had impressed me because he had managed to present a spiritual system based on the northern material that had some scholarly backing and a knowledge of [ceremonial magic]."⁴⁴ Another important book on contemporary Heathen magic is Kveldulf Gundersson's, *Teutonic Magic*. Drawing heavily on Thorsson, he focused on the runes as the core of Heathen magic, developed rituals, and advised about the specifics of magical practice. The material is a synthesis of Gundersson's own considerable reading in Norse and Germanic Paganism and modern ceremonial magic. Somewhat eclectic in style, it draws together Anglo-Saxon rune poems, Norse mythology, Neopagan path-working (a type of meditation that involves visualizing an interactive scene), and Gerald Gardner's proclivity for skyclad (nude) ritual. While skyclad ritual and public nudity of any sort has been practically eliminated from contemporary Heathen practice, Gundersson's runic interpretations, his magical system and pathworkings have profoundly influenced a generation of Heathen magic workers.

Despite the magical environment of the early Troth organization, many people

⁴³See Diana Paxson, *Essential Asatru: Walking the Path of Norse Paganism* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 120.

⁴⁴Paxson, interview.

were taken off-guard by the first presentation of seidh magic at Trothmoot, as Diana Paxson describes it. Seidh (pronounced SAYth or SEEth), is a type of Norse magic akin to shamanic practice, which utilizes induced trance states of consciousness to achieve various ends such as weather-making, spells of protection or harm, healing, and success in hunting or battle.⁴⁵ Paxson's specialty, however, is oracular seidh, a form of magic in which a seer or more often a seeress goes into trance to receive visions and confer with ancestors, spirits, and gods.⁴⁶ She recalls the first seidh event with The Troth:

I brought a lot of my kindred to the second Trothmoot and we did seidh. Nobody in the Heathen community had ever seen anybody do anything like that. That was serious 'woo.' And poor Laurel, who was the person I had as seeress at that one, is a very dramatic personality, a very powerful and very good seeress and the poor thing, the next day nobody would talk to her. They all kind of edged around her. So that made quite a splash.⁴⁷

From that first introduction, seidh has grown to become an important, though contested, form of Heathen magic and still regarded suspiciously in many Heathen circles. The reaction experienced by Laurel in the quote above is replicated more broadly in the Asatru movement. As one seidh worker remarked, "The fact that there are many women who are interested in it and want to do it, I don't think we'll ever be accepted in the larger Heathen community."⁴⁸

At its current stage, magic in Asatru involves a growing number and depth of practices. The two most widely practiced are rune casting, in which runes are used in the practice of divination; and oracular seidh, in which a medium or seeress uses trance states of consciousness to obtain answers to questions. Many Heathens will cast runes daily as

⁴⁵Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 123. Seidh is written in various ways, often seidr or seiðr.

⁴⁶"Seeress" is a term commonly used for a woman who practices the oracular magic known as seidh. Other terms include volva, seidkona, and spakona. For male practitioners, terms include seer, and spamadhr or seidmadhr.

⁴⁷Paxson, interview.

⁴⁸Anonymous seidh worker, interview by author.

part of a regular spiritual practice to seek guidance about their lives. There are even several Heathen produced rune-casting apps available for smart phones. Oracular seidh is usually practiced only occasionally, at special moments or in formal settings. Spae is a related word associated with “far-seeing” and divination practice, the ability to read the direction of events though not necessarily “predict” the future.⁴⁹ Galdr is the vocalization of runes, often sung in long low chant-like intonations by Heathens as a means to access specific types of spiritual power, open or close a ritual, or as an aid to meditation. Inscribing runes to create magical talismans is also a common practice that frequently incorporates “bind-runes,” special combinations of runes which create magical formulas aimed at achieving a specific end.

Is Asatru a Magical Religion?

Asatru, unlike Wicca, is not an initiatory magical religion. There are magical specialists in Asatru, such as the seidh workers, volvas, and rune casters who are discussed in this chapter. However, the majority of Asatru adherents are laypeople who participate primarily in the exoteric aspects of the religion: its ethical, cultural, and ritual elements. Diana Paxson is a very magically oriented Heathen and an Elder in The Troth, one of the most magic-friendly of the Asatru groups. She has been a central figure in developing the uniquely Heathen magical practice of seidh. Yet, she writes that “magical workings are not central to [H]eathenry in the same way that they are to Wicca,” a revealing statement from someone so deeply involved with Pagan magic of all sorts.⁵⁰ Similarly, in a popular Heathen podcast, the hosts Dave and Sandra introduced the subject of magic in Asatru in this way:

Dave: “What we are putting forth . . . is that Asatru is first a religion.

⁴⁹Diana Paxson, *The Way of the Oracle: Recovering the Practices of the Past to Find Answers for Today* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2012), 13.

⁵⁰Paxson, *Essential Asatru*, 117.

Sandra: “Yeah, a religion, folks. That, as much as this may scare people, means dogma, rules, ideals. So, there’s an emphasis on tradition, what our ancestors did, what people in our family have done, and trying to stick to those things or at least try and keep the spirit if not the letter of those sorts of teachings. There’s an emphasis on self-improvement, on improving the world around us, and most importantly . . . on ethics and morals.

Dave: These are the big concepts. We are dealing with spirituality first. We are dealing with what it means to have a connection with the divine So in other words [magical practice] is like salt: you can add it to things to make things better.⁵¹

A person’s first religious act as a Wiccan would likely be casting a spell, but Asatru adherents can be officially and thoroughly Heathen without ever participating in any practice of a magical nature. In fact, an attitude of reservation toward magic dominates the movement: magic is often deliberately downplayed. Mark Stinson, a Heathen leader in the Midwest, treats magic as an extraneous practice in Asatru, writing that “a majority of our Heathen Ancestors weren’t involved in Seidhr/Spae work.” He reasons that a reconstructed religion ought to resemble the antecedent, and therefore magic should remain a minority practice in contemporary Asatru because only “a small minority were involved in these specialized ‘magical’ areas of our faith.”⁵² Stinson calls himself a “blue collar Heathen” who has little interest in esoteric pursuits. Continuing Dave and Sandy’s food imagery, he states that magic ought to be like “gravy,” added only after the “core knowledge and beliefs” have been mastered.⁵³

Stinson’s comment about blue collar Heathenry reflects the fact that first-generation Heathens convert from various backgrounds, bringing different religious orientations and preconceived attitudes about magic with them. Those who emphasize Norse magic often come into Heathenry from a background steeped in magical practice,

⁵¹Dave Carron and Sandra Carron, “Asatru 101: Religion vs. Magic” *Ravencast: The Asatru Podcast* [online]; accessed 14 January 2013; available from <http://ravencast.podbean.com/2007/10/29/asatru-101-religion-vs-magic/>; Internet.

⁵²Mark Stinson, *Heathen Gods: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Folkway of our People* (Liberty, MO: Jotun’s Bane Kindred, 2009), 15.

⁵³Ibid.

such as involvement in Wicca or ceremonial magic. Background is often determinative for interest in magic, indicates Lorrie Wood, who notes that the core group of magical Heathens came from “a very magically aware population of ex-Wiccans as opposed to a less magically conscious population of former Protestants.”⁵⁴ For these Heathens, magic often came first, and Asatru later became a comfortable context in which to situate their practice.

The distinction between magical or non-magical orientations provides us with another axis upon which to categorize Heathen practice: an exoteric to esoteric spectrum, in addition to those of race and reconstruction.

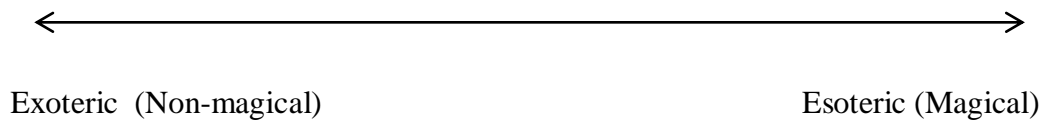


Figure 7. Spectrum of orientations toward magic

These distinctions appear primarily among Heathens at the level of personality and individual practice. Due to various circumstances, some individuals are more drawn toward magic than others.⁵⁵ Differences appear among kindreds as well: magically

⁵⁴Lorrie Wood, interview by author, San Francisco, CA, 21 November 2011.

⁵⁵Scholars have suggested various reasons to explain why people join NRMs. However, the question of why people join specifically magical religions seems to have received less attention. Luhrmann suggests that a certain personality type is attracted to magic and clearly rejects deprivation theory as a suitable explanation. She proposes a theory of ideological drift in which adherents slowly adopt a magical persona due to repeated successful experiences with the practice. See Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, 99-100. Shelley Rabinovitch suggests that social connections through hobbies and interest groups, such as health, ecology, or feminist groups, are contexts through which people become linked to magical religion. Her position reflects Dawson's finding that NRM recruitment occurs first of all through "pre-existing social networks and interpersonal bonds." See Shelley TSivia Rabinovitch, "Spells of Transformation: Categorizing Modern Neo-Pagan Witches," in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 76-77. Lorne L. Dawson, "Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?" in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 199. Helen Berger and Douglas Ezzy point to the role of mass media in creating a positive cultural orientation towards magic. See Helen A. Berger, and Douglas Ezzy, *Teenage Witches: Magical Youth and the Search for the Self* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 85. Gerhard Mayer and René

oriented Heathens will often associate in magically oriented kindreds. For instance, Hrafnar, a long-running kindred on the West coast led by Diana Paxson and Lorrie Wood, provides substantial magical fare such as training in seidh, runework, and folk magic, as well as offering the more exoteric study of lore, crafts, and other aspects of Germanic culture. Similarly, the Well of Wisdom kindred in Lexington, Kentucky was established around a couple of members who practiced rune-readings and oracular seidh magic as a primary focus. This group held regular seidh events, and training in shamanic technique and rune-casting, in addition to the study of lore and social events.

On a larger scale, Moots and Things can also be classified according to their magical or non-magical focus. On one hand, at the annual meeting of The Troth, magic is clearly visible. In 2012, Trothmoot workshops included such topics as rune magic, seidh, and magical amulets. In addition, a session of oracular seidh is always prominently featured on one night of the Moot and many rune workers and seers are available to do personal readings.⁵⁶ As one Troth member put it, “You can’t swing a dead cat at Trothmoot without hitting a seeress.”⁵⁷ At other events, such as East Coast Thing held in Pennsylvania and Lightning Across the Plains held in Kansas, magical practice is much harder to find. Workshops rarely feature magical topics and magical performances of oracular seidh are nonexistent. While magically oriented Heathens attend these gatherings, their own magical practice usually takes a backseat during the event to the cultural and ritual exotericism on the official agenda.

Opinions on the subject of magic can be rather strong. For instance,

Gründer provide an excellent comparison of conversion narratives in an Asatru context. See Gerhard Mayer and René Gründer, "Coming Home or Drifting Away: Magical Practice in the Twenty-First Century-Ways of Adopting Heterodox Beliefs and Religious Worldviews," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (2010).

⁵⁶Field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012.

⁵⁷Nora Ford, interview by author, 3 January 2013.

disagreements about the nature of runes occasionally arise with both sides attempting to be true to what they find in the historical record. Disagreements such as this take place because of the reconstructionist nature of Asatru and the authoritative role of the historical record or “lore.”⁵⁸ As we saw above in Stinson’s comment, the reconstructive question revolves around the historical usage of runes by the elder Heathens. Did they use runes in a magical way, and if so, what specific practices were involved? Some Heathens argue intensely that the runes were simply an alphabet for practical use. Tanya finds this to be a common attitude, “There’s many logical thinking Heathens who just don’t think magic is real . . . I’ve met several of them on the East Coast . . . Rune magic isn’t legitimate because runes are just an alphabet and it’s used for an alphabet and it’s not magical, so don’t magic it!”⁵⁹ Heathens commonly use runes for special types of writing. Many kindred banners display English words written in the runic alphabet and runes are often incorporated into Heathen tattoos.

However, other Heathens argue that the historical record clearly demonstrates the frequent magical use of runes. Some believe that the runes were *primarily* a sacred alphabet used for magical purposes. Paxson compares the runes to the Hebrew alphabet in this regard:

As a sacred alphabet, runes are much more like Hebrew letters, each having a meaning in itself that transcends its function as a representation of sound . . . Each rune has a name of its own and serves as a focus for a constellation of meanings, associations, and symbols.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Paxson emphasizes the historical evidence for other magical uses of the

⁵⁸The term “lore” is commonly used in Asatru to indicate a group of authoritative or important texts including the Poetic and Prose Eddas, the Icelandic Sagas, the myths and legends of Norse culture. While scholarly works are not consulted with the same authority, the academic sources concerning ancient Norse and Germanic cultures are seen as important sources of supplementary information.

⁵⁹Tanya Peterson, interview with author, McLouth, KS, September, 2011.

⁶⁰Diana Paxson, *Taking Up the Runes: A Complete Guide to Using Runes in Spells, Rituals, Divination, and Magic* (Boston: Redwheel/Weiser, 2005), 2.

runes, such as in divination, spell-casting, charm-making, and rituals of healing.⁶¹ Vital to Paxson's interpretation is the mythological history of the runes. Runes have both an "earthly" or exoteric history discovered through archaeology and linguistic studies for instance, and additionally an esoteric history attested to in Norse mythology. An adherent's perspective on the nature of the runes is largely determined by which of these histories is given the most weight.

In the mythological account, the runes are not created by humans as an alphabet, but discovered by the god Odin. Odin is the god who searches unceasingly for knowledge and wisdom and in this pursuit is given to acts of great self-sacrifice, such as plucking out his own eye for a drink from the Well of Wisdom. In a story told in the *Havamal*, the wisdom book of ancient Norse Paganism, Odin hangs himself upon the World Tree for nine nights, longing for occult knowledge:

I ween that I hung on the windy tree,
Hung there for nights full nine;
With the spear I was wounded and offered I was
To Othin [Odin], myself to myself,
On the tree that none may ever know
What root beneath it runs
None made me happy with loaf or horn
And there below I looked;
I took up the runes, shrieking I took them
And forthwith back I fell . . .
Then began I to thrive, and wisdom to get.⁶²

Heathens magical and non-magical alike are deeply moved by this mythological event, which exemplifies the struggle of both gods and humans in wresting order and knowledge from the chaotic wildness. The story describes the discovery of the runes through ecstatic and esoteric religious practices involving fasting and physical trial, and presents them as sources of esoteric knowledge that give wisdom to the one who

⁶¹Paxson, *Taking Up the Runes*, 2-3.

⁶²Henry Adams Bellows, trans., *The Poetic Edda: The Mythological Poems* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 60-61.

masters them. Fittingly, Paxson's primer of rune magic, *Taking Up the Runes*, culminates with a runic initiation ritual inspired by Odin's ordeal on the World Tree, in which adherents meditate upon each rune while bound to a tree during the course of an entire night.⁶³

Yet in this telling, the runes did not originate even with Odin, but were only discovered when he was able to look "below" into the depth of cosmic mystery. The runes, therefore, pre-existed Odin's ecstatic experience and represent for magical Heathens the primordial energies of the cosmos.⁶⁴ Thorsson describes them as "ideographs expressing a process and flow of force and energy . . . related to the self, to the planet, and ultimately to the multiverse."⁶⁵ Yet, in the animate cosmology of Asatru the runes are not "forces" in a purely mechanistic sense. They are living and conscious energies that express the shape of the Wyrd (the energetic force of the cumulative past that continually gives rise to the present) and potentialities for future events to those who can rightly interpret them. Lorrie Wood frames this understanding with a twenty-first century metaphor when she compares the runes to "Hypertext Transfer Protocol," the layers of rules and mechanisms that govern and facilitate the flow of information on the Worldwide Web.⁶⁶ Through the runes, the coded and ordered expression of Wyrd can be read and comprehended.

Paxson further indicates the living quality of the runes in her directions for consecrating a set of homemade rune stones. Runes are inscribed on small tiles, which are then blessed or consecrated before being used for divination. Yet Paxson's ritual of

⁶³Paxson, *Taking Up the Runes*, 404-08.

⁶⁴Gundersson, *Teutonic Magic*, 23-24.

⁶⁵Thorsson, *Futhark*, 2-3.

⁶⁶Lorrie Wood, "The Well and the Web" [online]; accessed 15 February 2012; available from <http://www.hrafnar.org/articles/lwood/well-and-web/>; Internet.

consecration is closer to an act of awakening or enlivening than to a “blessing.” Her prayer of blessing invokes the creation story of Norse myth, in which the gods bestow breath or soul, sense, movement, and health to an ash and an elm tree, creating the first humans.⁶⁷ In Paxson’s blessing ritual, the rune worker stands in the place of the gods, saying, “With *Önd* [breath] I awaken you, with *Odhr* [sense] I inspire you, with *Lá* [shape] and *Læti* [movement] and *Litr* [health] I enliven you.”⁶⁸ Thus the runes are symbolically created as living beings. The tiles are “awakened” not simply as ideographs but as conduits of living spiritual energy, with each rune embodying a specific personality.

The runes have a cherished place in Asatru as a uniquely northern European alphabet associated closely with the history of ancient Paganism. Yet at the same time, they exemplify the esoteric mysteries of the Norse Pagan religion. The modern Asatru movement attempts to hold both of these sources of inspiration in balance: resisting a drift toward eclectic magical practice unmoored from historical accuracy, while avoiding the disenchanted rationalism of modernity. Yet magic has not simply been a response to the problem of disenchantment of the modern worldview. More specifically it is an important context through which women have addressed their own experience of disconnection and made a place for themselves in contemporary Asatru.

Magic and Women’s Roles

If a symptom of modernity has been the dis-embedding of people from a holistic context, then this disconnection has particularly altered women’s roles in terms of marriage and family. According to Susan Palmer’s study of women’s roles in NRMs,

⁶⁷Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 18.

⁶⁸Paxson, *Taking Up the Runes*, 26.

“Women’s conversion to unconventional religions can be interpreted as a response to ‘rolelessness’ resulting from dramatic upheavals in the structure of society.”⁶⁹ The modern woman, dis-embedded from the structure of traditional marriage and family, faces several areas of tension: the fragility of the modern marriage relationship, the weakening of the parent/child bond due to work and school schedules, and the economic vulnerability of divorce and single-parenting. The modern woman feels “insecure as a wife . . . undervalued as a mother, and ‘stressed out’ as a worker-wife-mother-housekeeper.”⁷⁰ Pagan and Heathen women further note that women’s bodies, roles, and work have been disenchanting and secularized, stripped of their traditional religious contexts. For instance, they argue that in traditional pre-Christian European cultures, the female menstrual cycle was positively associated with fertility, magic, and women’s power.⁷¹ Yet in the context of modernity, society has devalued the menstrual cycle as messy and unclean. Women are socialized to resent their period as an annoyance, and drug companies have developed new birth control pills that seek to lessen the frequency of women’s periods or eliminate them all together.⁷² For Pagans, this modern re-interpretation disconnects women from the spiritual aspects of their bodies. It excises the deeper religious significance of the menstrual cycle as a unique connection of female

⁶⁹Susan J. Palmer, *Moon Sisters, Krishna Mothers, Rajneesh Lovers: Women's Roles in New Religions* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994), xiii.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷¹Paxson, *Taking up the Runes*, 25; Eowyn, "Attracting Women to the Rite – Some Considerations" [online]; accessed 18 January 2013; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/main/attracting-women-to-the-rite-some-considerations/>; Internet.

⁷²The contraceptive pill Lybrel is designed to eliminate a woman’s period and has been somewhat controversial. See Stephanie Saul, “The Pill that Eliminates the Period Gets Mixed Reviews,” *The New York Times*, 20 April 2007 [online]; accessed 4 February 2013; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/20/health/20period.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>; Internet. Interestingly, Karen Houppert argues in a New York Times opinion article that the pharmaceutical war against the period is connected to the technicalization of work in modern society. See Karen Houppert, “The Final Period,” *The New York Times*, 17 July 2007[online]; accessed 4 February 2013; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/17/opinion/17houppert.html>; Internet.

bodies to the divine.

Modernization has also disconnected modern women from traditional “women’s work.” This trend is clearly driven by the logic of global capital that has changed the way American women live and is now filling Chinese and Mexican factories with young women “dis-embedded” from their own traditional contexts. The dissociation of women with home and domestic work has been interpreted by some as freeing and liberating for women, and by others as bewildering and damaging.⁷³ Heathen women suggest that one result of this process was the dis-enchantment of traditional women’s work, as activities such as cooking, housekeeping, clothing the family, spinning and weaving, became removed from domestic life or reduced to “chores.”

However, many of these activities were traditionally embedded in magico-religious contexts. Domestic chores were valorized with religious significance and served as important means by which women exercised religious and social power. For instance, Michael Enright observes that domestic weaving was long associated with women’s magic. Women worked a kind of protective magic as they made clothing for their families: “spells were being worked into the fabric. Actually this category of magic appears to have been very nearly routine.”⁷⁴ Similarly, Kari Tauring writes that the tools of women’s daily work, “spindles, looms, runes, churns” had magico-religious functions: “There are many examples in the lore about women creating magical clothing, imbued with protection through chants to the rhythm of the spinning or weaving . . . Churning, spinning and stitching spells and charms abound in folk songs.”⁷⁵ Through these activities, women’s minds, bodies, and work were sacralized, women found a way to

⁷³Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 218; Kari Tauring, interview by author, Pawhuska, KS, June 2011.

⁷⁴Michael J. Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup: Ritual, Prophecy and Lordship in the European Warband from La Tene to the Viking Age* (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1996), 118.

⁷⁵Kari C. Tauring, *Volva Stav Manual* (Minneapolis, MN: Kari C. Tauring, 2010), 22.

connect with the supernatural and exercised a religious function in their families and communities.

During the period of Christian conversion in Northern Europe, the magic associated with this work became quickly forbidden by laws designed to eliminate Pagan and magical practice from the culture. Tauring writes, “It was so prominent a magic that early Christian laws directly forbade this fusion of spiritual and mundane tasks.”⁷⁶ As authorities outlawed women’s “kitchen magic,” these domestic activities lost their religious context, resulting over time in their disenchantment and secularization. Once modernity reached its peak in the twentieth century, women’s work had been redefined as a mundane and undesirable array of activities that were no longer fulfilling or meaningful, religiously or personally. While cognizant of the benefits and freedoms that modernity affords to women, many Heathens feel that those benefits came with too high a cost and look back into history with longing. Eowyn of the Odinic Rite brings this out, “For in the alienation of our folk from their natural organic religion, the feminine has been deliberately disempowered.”⁷⁷ In order for McDonalds’ fast food and cheap clothing from Bangladesh to appear acceptable to a culture, women’s work must first be dis-embedded from the religious meaningfulness and power it had in traditional contexts. As Tauring states, “When everything is coming wrapped in plastic from Wal-mart you’re in big trouble. Big trouble. There’s no connection and we need to start having a connection again.”⁷⁸

Vivianne Crowley writes that women take three main routes into Paganism:

⁷⁶Tauring, *Volva Stav*, 22; Also see Enright, *Lady with a Mead Cup*, 115-16; Eowyn, “Attracting Women to the Rite;” and Vivianne Crowley, “Women and Power in Modern Paganism,” in *Women as Teachers and Disciples in Traditional and New Religions*, ed. Elizabeth Puttick and Peter B. Clarke (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 130

⁷⁷Eowyn, “Attracting Women to the Rite.”

⁷⁸Tauring, interview.

feminism, ecological awareness, and “a desire for occult power or knowledge: the way of the witch.”⁷⁹ From the perspective of many contemporary Asatru women, the answer to this tension is found in re-embedding their lives in a magical context. By looking back to older models of femininity, models in which women were empowered by magical roles, these contemporary Heathens are developing new ways of being women that seek to repair the sense of disconnection they experience in their own lives. Writing specifically about Asatru, Crowley states that “the followers of the Norse Gods for example, worship a strongly patriarchal group of deities. However, even in these groups the role of the seeress—the *volva* or *seidkona* (a priestess practitioner of magic and divination)—is of growing importance.”⁸⁰ While Crowley sees the coexistence of a patriarchal pantheon and the rise of the *volva* (volva) in Asatru as a discrepancy, these two phenomena are closely related.

Gender Essentialism in Asatru

Gender roles in Asatru exhibit the characteristics of the Sex Complementarity model discussed by Susan Palmer. In this model, men and women are considered equal but different, “endowed with different spiritual qualities” that are both needed for spiritual fulfillment.⁸¹ Both genders are empowered as equal partners in work and marriage, and the collaboration of men and women in practical and religious pursuits is

⁷⁹Crowley, “Women and Power,” 126.

⁸⁰Ibid., 127. Jenny Jochens also makes a strong case for the patriarchal nature of the Old Norse pantheon. Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 49-83.

⁸¹Palmer, *Moon Sisters*, 10. Palmer’s model of Sex Complementarity interprets marriage as “uniting two halves of the same soul to form one, complete androgynous being” and often envisions a “dual or androgynous godhead” that sanctions this social structure. These additional characteristics are clearly not part of the Asatru worldview. However, I would argue that polytheism, with its emphasis on male and female divine power and its distribution of divine authority and responsibility among a family of gods is a suitable theological context for the Asatru understanding of gender roles and marriage as a partnership between equals.

valued. The gender complementarity in Asatru has two components: biological essentialism and role differentiation. Masculinity and femininity are strongly held ideals in Asatru life. Heathens see these distinct male and female natures as positive and valuable and manifested in different but compatible social roles. Men are often looked to as chieftains of kindreds while women act as caretakers of the kindred or family. The traditional garb sometimes worn by Heathens in ritual contexts emphasizes gender difference, not androgyny. Men are often cast into bold, rugged, take-charge roles modeled on the ideal Viking male. Women are associated with ideals of care-taking, motherliness, and emotional and intuitive attributes. As Elizabeth Puttick notes, these qualities do not preclude women from leadership. In Asatru, women embody qualities that are “positively feminine and beneficial for authority” such as “practicality, intuition, tenderness, body-affirmation, caring, healing, devotion, forgiveness, holism, social engagement and social mysticism.”⁸² Eowyn describes this view of gender complementarity,

It is the dynamic polar tension of male/female that is the fundamental principle of life in the world of action. Now when I speak of women's essential nature, I mean the Divine feminine as epitomised by our goddesses, not specific human defined roles. Men and women are complementary to one another in nature: they should not be at loggerheads, as is promoted by many feminist groups. Odinism is accepting of the feminine virtues in all their forms and I think this is what women find empowering. It does not seek to demonise or limit aspects of womanhood Who would argue that both lions and lionesses are powerful creatures?⁸³

Despite the gender-bending proclivities of some of the gods, the Norse

⁸²Elizabeth Puttick, “Women in New Religious Movements,” in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 241. Norse culture contained a broad understanding of social possibilities for women. The characteristic feminine qualities mentioned here are enhanced by other visions of the feminine, such as images of the warrior woman, valkyrie, and shield maiden. See Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996) for a full discussion of feminine images and roles in the Norse literature. While this rich panoply of female images informs the ways in which contemporary Asatru women understand themselves, the image of magical women has been particularly important.

⁸³Eowyn, email to author, 6 June 2011.

pantheon exhibits this same gender complementarity. The patriarchal quality observed by some modern interpreters is actually the exaggerated gender essentialism of the deities. The warlike qualities of the main gods, their salience in the mythology, and their popularity in the movement cause those qualities to be highly visible, appearing patriarchal. However, in contemporary Asatru there is no accompanying doctrine of male superiority, female subordination or submissiveness, female impurity or sexual deviancy, all of which Puttick identifies as aspects of patriarchy.⁸⁴ Looking at gender roles in the Icelandic Sagas, Heathens remark on the equality of the husband and wife in the household and the power and authority of women who helped manage the farming estates. This sense of equality is important to many Heathens. For instance, during his Asatru marriage ceremony, Jason Van Tatenhove, an entrepreneur and small business owner, gifted his wife with the keys to his business, symbolizing the equality and partnership of their relationship. As Jason said, if he was not able to run the business, he fully trusted his wife to run it in his place.⁸⁵ Heathens often attribute the historical development of gender discrimination and anti-female bias in Germanic and Norse society to the influence of Christianity, whose theology is interpreted as particularly discriminatory against women.

While both these qualities, gender essentialism and role differentiation, form the basic understanding of gender throughout Asatru, individuals and groups incline more towards one side or the other much like mainstream American culture. As might be expected, the inclusivist/universalist end of the Asatru spectrum leans toward gender equality and makes room for gender ambiguity of the Lesbian/Gay/Transgendered variety. The folkish side of Asatru tends to emphasize gender essentialism and more

⁸⁴Puttick, "Women in NRMS," 238-39. Jenny Jochens argues that these patriarchal qualities are apparent in the mythology. However, contemporary Asatru tends to interpret these characteristics in a more benign manner, more complementary than oppositional in nature.

⁸⁵Jason Van Tatenhove, telephone interview by author, 22 October 2011.

structured and traditional gender roles.

Magic actually draws on gender essentialism to empower, not subordinate women. It draws on the qualities of femininity that gender complementarity valorizes: women's receptive, relational, caring, and therapeutic nature, to create a niche of autonomy and innovation for women. Paxson's book on oracular magic, *The Way of the Oracle*, originally had the working title of "Seeing for the People," emphasizing the community function of oracular seidh. The seeress performs her magic out of caring for the community, presenting seidh magic as a type of women's ministry associated with the ideology of women as caretakers and maintainers of relationships, "weavers of frith."⁸⁶ Seidh workers frequently describe their motivations as a service to the community.⁸⁷ Kari Tauring invokes feminine qualities when she draws on the emotional intuitiveness of women in healing trauma. At the same time, the magical role expands the reach of those female qualities beyond the limits of the nuclear family and the authority of a husband or male leader. By transcending these potentially male dominated hierarchies, the magical role avoids the oppressive consequences of patriarchy such as "rigid control of sexuality, work and worship by husbands and elders, loss of status and opportunities for direct spiritual advancement, and a high incidence of wife and child abuse."⁸⁸

By almost everyone's reckoning, Asatru began primarily as a religion of men, and men continue to participate at a high rate.⁸⁹ This fact is interesting because research

⁸⁶Frith, often translated "peace," is an ethical term in contemporary Asatru referring to the bond of loyalty between intimate kin and close allies. For more on women's role as "frith-weaver" see Winifred Hodge, "On the Meaning of Frith" [online]; accessed 22 January 2013; available from <http://www.friggasweb.org/frith.html>; Internet.

⁸⁷Diana Paxson, Tanya Peterson, Lorrie Wood, and Nora Ford, interviews by author.

⁸⁸Puttick, "Women in NRMs," 238.

⁸⁹Jeffrey Kaplan, "The Reconstruction of the Asatru and Odinist Traditions," in *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed., James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 199, 227 n11. Also Eowyn, email to author. Diana Paxson, interview by author.

data suggests that male participation in the practice of religion has been declining in the modern period.⁹⁰ Polls indicate that the “tendency toward higher religiosity among women has manifested over seven decades of scientific polling, and church membership figures indicate that it probably existed for many decades prior to the advent of survey research in the mid-1930s.”⁹¹ Similarly to mainstream religious groups, many NRMs may also have a majority of female adherents.⁹² So while men remain very prominent in Asatru, it may not be surprising that women’s participation has increased. However, to account for the growth of women in the movement, magic must be considered as an important factor. Magic has been a significant means by which women have found a conversion path into Asatru and have made a contribution to the movement. The women who have developed the magical aspects of Asatru have utilized the ideology of gender complementarity and gender essentialism to create a specifically feminine sacred role in the movement. At the same time, magic addresses the dis-embedded quality of women’s lives, resacralizing women’s minds, bodies, and work and forming a means by which Asatru women connect with the divine.

Central to this vision of re-embedding women’s lives into a magico-religious context is the historical figure of the volva: particularly a female seer who briefly appears in *The Saga of Eric the Red*.⁹³ In Asatru, she is the tantalizing image of a real historical woman who held the “sacred office of womanhood.”⁹⁴ Magical women in Asatru are

⁹⁰Tony Walter and Grace Davie, “The Religiosity of Women in the Modern West,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 49 (1998): 641-43.

⁹¹George H. Gallup, Jr., “Why Are Women More Religious?” [online]; accessed 17 January 2013; available from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/7432/why-women-more-religious.aspx>; Internet.

⁹²Lorne L. Dawson, “Who Joins New Religious Movements and Why: Twenty Years of Research and What Have We Learned?,” in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 122-23.

⁹³Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans., *The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965). And Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*, 115-16.

⁹⁴Kari Tauring, email to author, 19 January 2013.

captivated by this figure, who surfaces in almost every discussion of seidh. She was the last of the volvas, part of a band of women who had slowly disappeared within a culture in which the old Pagan ways were giving way to Christianity. In the saga, she is summoned to a farmstead community devastated by a lingering winter. She arrives dressed in finery and is served a feast of rich meats including various animal hearts. Only one person in the gathering, a young Christian girl, knows the old witching songs that can draw the spirits to the place of prophecy where the volva will speak with them. After she sings, the volva is able to hear from the spirits who assure her that the winter will soon give way to spring. She then answers the questions of all the community members who have gathered to seek her knowledge. From the few clues provided in this and other texts, contemporary Asatru women try to tease out the intricacies of her life, history, and magical practice.⁹⁵ The work of several, such as Diana Paxson and Kari Tauring, has led to the development of systems of seidh magic for the contemporary Asatru movement.

Two Variations of Seidh Magic

We will briefly examine two variations of seidh magic: the oracular seidh of Diana Paxson and the volva stav of Kari Tauring. Both examples of seidh involve trance states of consciousness and psychic journeying, though the details of their methods vary considerably. However, the most important differences are in their motivations and outcomes. In oracular seidh, the seeress searches for knowledge in order to answer the specific questions presented by her querents. The discourse of seidh is suffused with notions of asking, seeing, and knowing. This motivation frames seidh as a type of alternative epistemology. In the practice of volva stav on the other hand, the volva seeks to repair the damaged emotions and psyches of those who are hurting. The discourse of volva stav revolves around health, wholeness, and emotional growth. This motivation

⁹⁵Tauring, *Volva Stav*, 7; Diana Paxson, field notes taken by author, Milford, PA, June 2012.

casts volva stav as a type of healing magic.

Oracular Seidh: Seeing, Getting Answers

Oracular seidh has developed in contemporary Asatru as a *de facto* type of woman's magic. Most seidh workers point out that both males and females can be effective and that there are no "rules" or "theology" that would limit the practice to women. Yet, it is primarily women who have developed and maintained this type of magic.⁹⁶ And while no theological prohibition exists for men's involvement, the earlier discussion of gender essentialism may imply the existence of cultural standards of masculinity in Asatru that would inhibit men from making this a regular practice.

While there are numerous independent practitioners of oracular seidh, the practice is significantly the result of innovative and pioneering work done by Diana Paxson. In this sense, seidh could be seen as a woman-founded NRM in and of itself.⁹⁷ Paxson has been the intellectual source, primary author, and organizer of this movement that has influenced probably hundreds of people to one degree or another. And she ought to be better recognized among Neopagans and scholars for her contributions to the Neopagan movement. After years of practicing ceremonial magic, Paxson became interested in Michael Harner's "core shamanism" movement.⁹⁸ While attending one of Harner's workshops, she had an experience during trance-work in which she encountered the god Odin, who invited her to learn seidh magic. This event led her to begin

⁹⁶Paxson, interview. Paxson acknowledges that straight men can do seidh and points out that in the historical record, men were often involved with seidh. However, she states that in the contemporary Asatru movement "it is true that the people who have continued and made it a part of their permanent practice have pretty much all been women or gay men."

⁹⁷Elizabeth Puttick, *Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality, and Spiritual Power* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 185.

⁹⁸The core shamanism movement was inspired by Michael Harner's *The Way of the Shaman* (New York: Harper One, 1990). Drawing on field work with indigenous shamans, Harner identified principles of shamanic practice from which he extrapolated a trans-cultural shamanic method. Many Neopagans, including Diana Paxson, have learned the method in workshops held throughout the U.S.

researching the historical practice of seidh in Norse culture as well as oracular practice in other ancient Pagan religions. Through repeated experiments and testing with her kindred Hrafnar, she fleshed out a uniquely Asatru context and technique for practicing oracular magic. While continuing to practice and teach her “Hrafnar method” of seidh, she has since gone on to develop a trans-cultural method of oracular practice that she believes can be successfully adapted to almost any religious system.⁹⁹

To watch a seidh performance is to be impressed by it as a women’s moment, an impression that has held true almost every time I have observed the practice. In seidh, women take center stage and assume roles of authority. A “high seat,” the chair from which the oracle presides in her trance state, is the focal point. In formal settings, it can take the appearance of a throne, a tall stately wooden chair often draped in furs. The seeresses are gathered before the assembly, each carrying a staff as the sign of her authority. They often don elaborate “robes of office,” ritual garb such as Norse apron dresses luxuriantly decorated with strings of amber and other accessories. While there may be men involved, they take secondary supporting roles as warders and assistants who facilitate the gifts of the women.

The seidh workers use various means to produce or enter a trance state. Paxson’s method utilizes drumming and singing as cues to assist the seeress in entering the trance state, techniques commonly associated with core shamanism. Along with the singing and drumming, Paxson leads the entire audience in a visualization exercise in which she takes them on a journey through the Norse cosmos from Midgard, down along the trunk of the World Tree and into the underworld, the realm in which the dead reside. Once there, Paxson directs the audience members to visualize themselves seated outside the gates of the underworld, while the seeress herself goes in to speak with the spirits.

⁹⁹Diana L. Paxson, *The Way of the Oracle* (Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 2012).

Alternatively, the visualization will involve journeying to the Well of Wyrd into which the seeress will peer, seeing and interpreting the Wyrd, the cumulative past which actively spins out the present. Once this shamanic journeying is complete, the audience begins to ask questions of the seeress in an orderly and formal process supervised by the warders. One at a time, individuals stand or come forward and ask their questions, often requesting the seeress to address a particular ancestor or Norse god. Questions are often of a practical nature: people ask about moving, relationships, their work, or guidance along their personal spiritual path, seeking information that will allow them to make productive life choices and solve problems.¹⁰⁰

The entire process is interpreted as a pursuit of knowledge and information. Oracular seidr has similarities to shamanic practice and clearly draws on significant aspects of the core shamanism movement.¹⁰¹ However, Paxson has recently taken a new direction by framing the practice within the tradition of Pagan oracles, such as the famous oracle of Apollo at Delphi in ancient Greece. The oracle assumes the trance state in order to gain hidden information and knowledge and impart it to the gathered community. In this sense, oracular seidr exhibits epistemological implications concerning what we can know and how we can know it. E. O. Wilson, an evolutionary biologist, points out that human beings are epistemically challenged by having only a “narrow channel of human cognition,” which limits our ability to sense and know most of the world around us. He writes:

Our sensory world, what we can learn unaided about reality external to our bodies, is pitifully small. Our vision is limited to a tiny segment of the electromagnetic spectrum We can see only a tiny bit in the middle of the whole, which we refer

¹⁰⁰Field notes taken by author at various heathen events. Paxson has carried out personal research regarding the questions asked during seidr sessions by recording a number of sessions and categorizing the types of questions asked. See Paxson, *Way of the Oracle*, 61-73.

¹⁰¹Paxson, *Way of the Oracle*, xii – xiii. See also Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-shamanism in North European Paganism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 19-23.

to as the ‘visual spectrum’ Of sound frequencies all around us we hear only a few. Bats orient with the echoes of ultrasound, at a frequency too high for our ears, and elephants communicate with grumbings at frequencies too low.¹⁰²

He goes on to write about the highly sensitive capacities of some animals to sense electrical impulses and magnetic fields, or to taste and smell acutely. “We are idiots compared with rattlesnakes and bloodhounds,” he states, “forced to stumble through our chemically challenged lives in a chemosensory biosphere.”¹⁰³

His description of our limited physical epistemic range parallels the critique of our spiritual epistemic ability offered by seidh magic. For Diana Paxson and other seidh workers, our understanding of the world and our place in it is constrained by our incredibly limited perception of the spiritual world. As Paxson points out, the oracle is specifically one who “sees” what others cannot.¹⁰⁴ While we exist in “ordinary” states of consciousness, we are cut off from sensing and making use of a whole range of spiritual information that exists around us.¹⁰⁵ Our limited epistemic range prevents us from accessing and understanding it. This epistemic problem is complicated by the insistence of modern rationality that reality consists of only that which can be verified. Seidh magic provides a method to enhance our ordinarily limited abilities and re-embed practitioners in a more epistemically holistic reality. The seeress, “sees” with enhanced sensory ability beyond the confines of ordinary consciousness to gain additional data. As Winifred relates, “Spae-working is another, different route to knowledge . . . I also seek to acquire, interpret and use other forms of knowledge, outside of the domain of science, using very different tools.”¹⁰⁶ Just like the biologist uses a microscope or an astronomer a telescope,

¹⁰²E. O. Wilson, “On the Origin of the Arts: Sociobiologist E. O. Wilson on the Evolution of Culture,” *Harvard Magazine* 114 (2012): 32.

¹⁰³Wilson, “On the Origin of the Arts,” 33.

¹⁰⁴Paxson, *Way of the Oracle*, 5.

¹⁰⁵Diana L. Paxson, *Trance-Portation: Learning to Navigate the Inner World* (San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser Books, 2008), 5.

¹⁰⁶Quoted in Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic*, 29.

the seidh worker is a spiritual scientist peering into an unknown or unavailable aspect of reality with the magico-religious technology of trance in order to extract information which is useful for living.

Volva Stav: Healing the Soul

Kari Tauring refers to her method of seidh magic as Volva Stav. The volva is the staff carrying woman who sees into the Wyrd, and the stav is the wooden staff itself, the emblem of her religious office. Michael Enright makes the case that the staff-carrying woman was an important religious figure in northern Europe, finding a “common denominator linking women, staffs and magic over a very broad cross-cultural context lasting more than a thousand years.”¹⁰⁷ He interprets the staff as symbolizing a weaving beam, the top beam on a warp weighted loom from which the weaving was hung. Weaving was a powerful cultural symbol of women’s magic in Norse culture and carried connotations of the weaving of Wyrd, thus associating the staff-carrying woman with prophetic and divination abilities. He writes,

Peoples of Germanic culture always associated such looms with the warp and woof of fate and the women who worked them were often associated with magic. Weaving implements like distaffs, spindles and whorls were thereby associated with prophecy and prophetesses . . . and such women are often described as carrying them. A weaving beam is therefore an appropriate symbol of divine prophetic talent.¹⁰⁸

For Tauring, the volva was a vital part of the pre-Christian Norse culture, a religious specialist who maintained the health of the community through her activities of story-telling, singing, magic, and healing. In order to reconstruct a healthy Asatru belief system and religious practice, Tauring believes that the office and practice of the volva must also be reconstructed and restored. She has given herself fully to this work of

¹⁰⁷Enright, *Lady with the Mead Cup*, 116.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 111-12.

learning the Norse folk songs, dances, and magical practices associated with runes and *seidh* and passing these on to the women whom she personally trains.

Although Tauring begins her *Volva Training Manual* with a nod to gender inclusivity, she specifically refers to volva work as “women’s magic.”¹⁰⁹ She situates magic within the experience of the female body. The staver is rooted with the earth, itself female, visualizing her legs and her root chakra of the perineum connected to the natural energy of Mother Jorth. Meanwhile with her staff, she taps out a rhythm, particularly the *pols* or pulse rhythm, which mimics the rhythm of the heart, “a magical rhythm that wakens the Nordic soul in a deep way.”¹¹⁰ This rhythm focuses the staver’s awareness in her body, synchronized with the energy of the earth. Stavers feel the energy rising within them and collecting in the pelvic girdle, the natural cauldron of the woman’s body, as Tauring calls it. The magic grows there, the place of mystery formed by the woman’s hips, where growing life is cradled in the womb. Pagan traditions frequently observe correspondences between the power of female fertility and the natural rhythms of the earth, and associate the female body with magical potential.¹¹¹ As one Pagan writer puts it, “Bodily experience is the very essence of feminist spirituality and is seen as the locus of women’s power,” a sentiment clearly echoed in Tauring’s understanding of magic.¹¹² She observes that the magical experience of the female body is heightened in the group setting. She remarks, “Magic happens in a circle of stavers. A weave and tapestry of sound and rhythm develops. It is organic and changes with the energy of the group.”¹¹³

¹⁰⁹Tauring, *Volva Stav*, 18

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 33.

¹¹¹Puttick, *Women in New Religions*, 226-27.

¹¹²Susan Greenwood, “Feminist Witchcraft: A Transformatory Politics,” in *Practising Feminism: Identity, Difference, Power*, ed. Nickie Charles and Felicia Hughes-Freeland (New York: Routledge, 1996), 114.

¹¹³Tauring, *Volva Stav*, 7.

In Tauring's method, the work of the volva in the modern age revolves primarily around healing. Healing work centers on the emotions, which Tauring says are the "point of power" and the "carriers of memory."¹¹⁴ By her rhythmic staving, the volva induces a trance state that Tauring refers to as "seidr consciousness." Yngona Desmond defines seidr consciousness as the "puncturing of [ordinary] consciousness to look out upon the multiverse and enter the stream of Wyrð's Web."¹¹⁵ Within the trance state, the volva is able to follow the strands of emotional orlog into a person's inner life to reveal the origin of emotional hurt and trauma:

As Völva, we seek to repair and heal broken lines of orlag [orlog] in order to co-create the future through our choice making To stav into the moment of trauma and sing healing runes into that point changes the emotional body's response to the trauma. Through this process we can create functional and healed orlag for the future.¹¹⁶

For Tauring, many of the problems faced by modern people originate in unresolved trauma experienced by their ancestors. This historical trauma is encoded in their orlog and manifested in the present in terms of psychological and social dysfunction, a phenomenon she calls "inherited cultural grief."¹¹⁷ The volva obtains access to these ancestral memories, allowing the grief to be expressed, healing and repairing the threads of orlog and freeing the hurting person to overcome inherited patterns of debilitating behavior.

Her emphasis on well-being and physical and emotional health places Tauring within the well-over one hundred year tradition of American healing religion, of which Mesmer's animal magnetism, homeopathy, and chiropractic have all played a part. In this

¹¹⁴Tauring, interview by author. *Idem.*, *Volva Stav*, 33.

¹¹⁵Yngona Desmond, *Voluspa: Seidr as Wyrð Consciousness* (Book Surge, 2005), 55, 104.

¹¹⁶Tauring, *Volva Stav*, 21

¹¹⁷Tauring, email to author, 27 May 2011. Also Kari Tauring, "Healing Inherited Cultural Grief" [online]; accessed 20 January 2013; available from <http://www.karitauring.com/teach-inheritedgrief.html>; Internet.

tradition, which Catherine Albanese calls physical religion, “acts of caring and curing constituted the central ritual enterprise for believers” with a healed or whole individual as the religious goal.¹¹⁸ In the physical religion that Albanese describes, “Healing works as sacred manifestation, and healers work as religious officiants.”¹¹⁹ As in the New Thought movement, the power of the mind to “alter the physical pattern” is on display in Tauring’s work. However, her strong emphasis on embodiment avoids the idealism inherent in those earlier healing movements. In reconstructing the volva role for contemporary Asatru, Tauring has situated this healing tradition within the Norse magical worldview. This context provides a coherence missing in other forms of Neopagan and New Age healing. Starhawk, the popular author, ecofeminist, and priestess in the Goddess movement, whom Albanese calls a “late twentieth-century mental healer,” can only talk somewhat vaguely about manipulating “energy” through magic.¹²⁰ Tauring’s work, however, is fortified with concepts such as seidr consciousness, Wyrd, and orlog, which give her magical vocabulary a specificity and lineage that others lack. Her model shows us what is possible when a tradition such as healing religion borrows or becomes situated within the reconstructed context of an ancient Pagan worldview.

Conclusion

Although magic, and seidh magic in particular, remain contested areas of Asatru practice, they have been important to a number of women within the movement. While gender essentialism may exercise a limiting function on women in many ways, Asatru women have drawn on “feminine qualities” to create a sub-movement of magical practice. This sub-movement has been a protected sphere for women to exercise a degree

¹¹⁸Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 123.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 121.

¹²⁰Ibid., 183-84.

of creativity, innovation, and autonomy that may be slower to develop in the broader Asatru movement. While women have also been active in developing and leading Asatru ritual, the almost exclusively female contribution to seidh magic sets it apart in the Asatru milieu. By capitalizing on gender essentialist understandings of feminine nature, women have created for themselves an empowering role in the movement. But more importantly, the practice of seidh provides contemporary female adherents a way to address the disconnections: from their own bodies, families, and theology, which they may have experienced as a result of modernity.

Another dislocation experienced as a part of modern society is the dis-embedding of modern people from close interaction with nature. From the perspective of the environmental movement, this distance has resulted in the misuse of nature by industrial societies and a growing ecological crisis. Many scholars and writers have seen an earth-centered dimension in contemporary Paganism, and have described it as a particularly ecological religion. The next chapter will discuss Asatru as an earth-centered religion that seeks to re-embed adherents into a deeper experience of nature.

CHAPTER 7

ASATRU AS NATURE RELIGION

Pagan religions contain characteristics of nature or earth-based religion almost by definition. Catherine Albanese, in her ground-breaking book *Nature Religion in America*, defined nature religion quite broadly as religion that takes nature as its symbolic center. Religion, according to Albanese, consists of a system of symbols that orient people in the world, including their beliefs, rituals, and patterns of everyday life. She writes that what people “believe and do is generated by the kind of ‘center beyond’ that Mircea Eliade has called the sacred,” expressed by the “symbolic center and the cluster of beliefs, behaviors, and values that encircles it.”¹ Nature religion enshrines nature as the central orienting symbol of the sacred around which religious practice is structured. Many observers understand contemporary Paganism in just this way, defining it as “a spirituality in which Nature—the Earth and the body—is central and celebrated.”² This close connection with nature makes contemporary Paganism perhaps the most obvious manifestation of nature religion in modern America.

There are a number of ways in which Paganism exhibits elements of nature religion, and one can see the influence of nature in almost every aspect of Pagan life. As Albanese writes, “Nature provides a language to express cosmology and belief; it forms the basis for understanding and practicing a way of life; it supplies materials for ritual

¹Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 7.

²Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1997), 126.

symbolization; it draws together a community.”³ Heathenry shares many of these characteristics including the important Pagan worldview characteristics of animism and pantheism, the elements of corpospirituality that see nature infused with divinity. Paganism approaches nature as the matrix in which the sacred is revealed and experienced, which means that Pagans define nature and the earth as more than the visible reality that meets the eyes. There exist corresponding “invisible worlds” that are coterminous with the visible world, accessed in and through the visible world.⁴ In Heathenry, Midgard, the physical visible world, acts as a hub or nexus for these invisible worlds, which consist of the eight other dimensions of the World Tree and the esoteric energies that can be manipulated through the runes. Additionally, Pagan and Heathen spirituality is quite “this-worldly.” Adherents seek to align themselves with these earthly realities instead of pursuing transcendent spiritual goals beyond the world.⁵ For Heathens, this-worldly goals include building one’s Luck and Orlog, raising strong families, doing noble deeds that build Worth, and winning a good reputation within the community. These are all indications of a life well-lived, blessed, and fulfilled.

In addition, the calendars, the deities, and the symbolism of Pagan religions are all influenced by the central symbol of nature. Pagan religious calendars are often aligned with the seasonal changes or the cycles of heavenly bodies. For instance, the Wiccan sabbats are held according to the waxing and waning of the moon, seeing in them the expression of the Goddess, the divine feminine. In Asatru, the major holidays are solar-based, fitting for a religion that developed in a northern climate where the longest and shortest days are dramatically different. The Mid-Summer festival celebrates the summer solstice; while the Yule season recognizes the winter solstice and New Year. Ostara is

³Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 155-56.

⁴Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 147, 153.

⁵Ibid., 143.

celebrated as a major holiday around the spring equinox. All these holidays invest religious significance in the cycle of nature itself. Other important holidays are agriculturally oriented, sanctifying the human interaction with nature. Charming of the Plow celebrates the return to agricultural work in early spring and preparation for the planting season. Winter Nights is a harvest festival held in late October. The earth-based calendar aligns religious observance to the changes in nature and the seasons, demonstrating that Asatru is structured around the sacrality of nature. Since few Asatruar live in agricultural communities or pursue agricultural professions, however, these earth-based holidays frequently take on the intonations of modern suburban life.

Pagan deities often represent elemental and natural forces. Writing specifically of Greek gods but applicable also to the Northern pantheon, Jennifer Larson states, “All the Greek gods were connected in one way or another with natural phenomena, so in some sense all are nature deities.”⁶ Many Heathens are wary of the idea that the gods are “just” personifications of natural phenomena, preferring to see them as removed from nature.⁷ Yet many of the Norse gods, even important ones like Thor, retain characteristics of nature deities in contemporary Asatru practice. For instance, Heathens strongly associate Thor with thunderstorms. In a contemporary prayer for Thor, practitioners invoke him as the storm god: “Thor, we hear your might in the booming crash of the thunder, and see your power in the blazing bolt of lightning.”⁸ When a thunderstorm began brewing during a Thor blot at East Coast Thing in 2007, it was not seen as an interruption as much as an indication of Thor’s favor. One participant reported it as a

⁶Jennifer Larson, “Land Full of Gods: Nature Deities in Greek Religion,” in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. Daniel Ogden (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2007), 58.

⁷Chas S. Clifton, *Her Hidden Children: The Rise of Wiccan and Paganism in America* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2006), 57.

⁸Steve Wilson, “Thor Blot” [online]; accessed 8 January 2013; available from <http://home.earthlink.net/~jordsvin/Blots/Thor%20Blot.htm>; Internet.

good omen that, “as he was raising his sacrifice and making the sign of the Hammer, the most brilliant streak of lightning raced across the sky directly above us.”⁹

When Heathens look for significant sacred places, they often look to the natural world, an orientation that is fundamental to Paganism. The most basic manifestation of this instinct may be the fact that Heathens and other Pagans frequently meet and hold rituals outdoors, drawn towards nature as the context in which one is closest to the sacred.¹⁰ Heathen blots are commonly held outdoors and any natural space is suitable for a sacred ritual even during inclement weather such as a thunderstorm or a cold Yule night. Most Heathen kindreds will have some local outdoor space set aside for ritual use. That said, the instinct to find the sacred in nature is balanced by the special significance Heathens give to the indoors. Perhaps because of the severe northern climate in which Norse religion developed, indoor space was vital to human survival and experienced as a place of warmth, comfort, and blessing. The ability to “come in from the cold” was truly a divine blessing. The space of human habitation, especially the hall where the local community gathered, was regarded as a sacred microcosm. Thus at times, such as during the sumbel ritual, Heathen religiosity is symbolized by leaving the wild and going into the innangard, the cultivated protected space of human culture.

As mentioned earlier, sacred geography, or the lack of it, is a problem for contemporary American Heathens (see “Sacred Space,” chap. 4). However, they look for significant aspects of landscape as indications of sanctity and spiritual power. In doing so, they distinguish between places of more or less spiritual power. Not all outdoor spaces are equal. Diana Paxson underscores this when she compares old world sacred

⁹Rick of Raven Kindred North, “East Coast Thing 2007” [online]; accessed 8 January 2013; available from <http://rick-of-rkn.livejournal.com/19493.html>; Internet.

¹⁰Sarah M. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 32.

sites in Europe to the temporary sacred spaces of American Asatru:

When I have done [magic and ritual workings] in Europe . . . if you go to a spot that is already a European sacred place, the energy levels are there waiting to be tapped and you get ‘whoosh’ [indicating a rush of spiritual energy]. And if you are used to taking any old piece of ground in the US and making it your sacred space and raising your energy and so forth, you get more than you anticipate.¹¹

These distinctions are made even in the American context: significant landscape features indicate the presence of potential sacred and powerful space. In Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania German Heathen kindred identified a local mountain, Hexenkopf, as a sacred place.¹² When Jotun’s Bane Kindred in the Midwest was seeking a location for ritual, they choose a clearing beneath the largest oak tree in the local Pagan campground and named the tree *Forn Halr*, the Old Man.¹³ The significant presence of the Rocky Mountains represents spiritual power for the Fimbul Winter Kindred located in Colorado. This exemplifies the Pagan notion that the visible and invisible are linked: “In traditional polytheistic cultures, aesthetic appreciation of nature is inseparable from awareness of the sacred in the landscape; special beauty means that the spot is the abode of a god or gods.”¹⁴ We should note that beauty is not the only category of aesthetic appeal, but that any exceptional feature of the landscape might indicate to the Pagan observer that spiritual power is present.

Some observers of the Pagan movement have argued that Paganism should be considered a nature religion because it exhibits an ecological consciousness. Harvey comments that Paganism, “is fundamentally ‘Green’ in its philosophy and its practice.”¹⁵

¹¹Diana Paxson, interview by author, Pawhuska, OK, June, 2011.

¹²Robert L Schreiwer, *A Brief Introduction to Urglaawe* (Bristol, PA: Die Urglaawisch Sippschaft vum Distelfink), 11.

¹³Mark Stinson, *Heathen Gods: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Folkway of our People* (Liberty, MO: Jotun’s Bane Kindred, 2009), 152.

¹⁴Larson, “Land Full of Gods,” 58.

¹⁵Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 126.

For others, “seeing Nature as an expression of divinity means that Pagans naturally have an ecological awareness of the globe.”¹⁶ However, this connection is questionable and does not appear to hold up in reality.¹⁷ Albanese clearly dispels the notion that nature religion must be “environmental” or “ecological” religion. She shows that this sort of “green” religion is only one particularly modern version of several denominations of nature religion. Very few Asatruar exhibit a clear connection with an ecological version of nature religion. As Stinson relates,

Heathenry has no central organized dogma, no central authority, and thus there is a wide variety of beliefs on many topics. One such topic is environmentalism . . . Some Heathens are hard core environmentalists, some Heathens aren't, and every degree in between exists as well.¹⁸

As Stinson points out, there is no Heathen environmental agenda, no organized form of environmental Heathenry, and only a few Heathens I have met give any indication of ecological consciousness.

One exception to the lack of organized environmentalism among Heathens is the Teal Party, which originates with the Hrafnar Kindred led by Paxson and Wood. The Teal Party bases its environmentalism on a “new view of Ragnarok” which interprets the story in an ecological vein. Paxson interprets the mythological descriptions of cataclysmic destruction as an environmental collapse driven by global warming.¹⁹ She describes the giants, the *Jotunar* of Norse myth, as the “personified forces of nature” and sees Ragnarok, the apocalyptic end-time battle, as the balance of nature coming unglued, resulting in worldwide environmental crisis. Current indices of global warming foretell

¹⁶Dennis D. Carpenter, “Emergent Nature Spirituality: An Examination of the Major Spiritual Contours of the Contemporary Pagan Worldview,” in *Magic Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, ed. James R. Lewis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 63.

¹⁷Clifton, *Her Hidden Children*, 56-57.

¹⁸Mark Stinson, email to author, 26 July 2011.

¹⁹Diana Paxson and Lorrie Wood, “The Teal Party: A New View on Ragnarok” [online]; accessed 8 January 2013; available at <http://www.hrafnar.org/about-us/teal-party/>; Internet.

the end, giving rise to the Teal Party's alternative name "Gjallarhorn Alliance," which references the horn sounded by the god Heimdall at the outbreak of Ragnarok. For Paxson, living an environmentally conscious "green" life is to "stand by my gods" in the fight to delay the onset of Ragnarok's ecological crisis. The Teal Party advocates simple green lifestyle adjustments such as buying locally grown food, shopping with reusable bags, and voting for environmentally conscious legislators. However, the movement has little traction in producing an ecological awareness in the wider Heathen community.

Denominations of Nature Religion in Asatru

Catherine Albanese made a significant contribution to the study of nature religion by identifying several varieties or denominations of nature religion that developed in American history. For Albanese, nature is a multivocal symbol; accordingly, nature religion is not a monolithic phenomenon but one that takes on a number of identifiable manifestations in history. She explains that "adherence to nature as a central religious symbol could lead to different—though related—injunctions for living."²⁰ Her history of American nature religion begins with the early indigenous inhabitants, whose immersion in nature fostered a worldview of animism, pantheism, and shamanism. This traditional nature religion, found in native beliefs and practices, "encourage[d] the pursuit of harmony . . . the proper attunement of human society to nature."²¹ This harmony describes the type of relationship with nature to which Pagans and Heathens aspire, though in reality several other strands of nature religion are found within Asatru.²²

²⁰Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 12.

²¹Ibid.

²²Prudence Jones, "The European Native Tradition," in *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World*, ed. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Robert, and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1998), 77. Jones argues that an authentic native nature tradition is "already contained in the existing cultural framework" of Europe and European Paganism. While her thesis of a continuity of nature religion is questionable, it signifies the desire of Heathens to reconnect to that traditional indigenous

Albanese argues that the Transcendentalist movement was a turning point in American nature religion. Turning away from the fear of nature found among the Puritans and the use of nature as a political symbol so apparent in the early history of the American republic, the Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau found in nature a transformative personal experience. Thoreau's hierophanies of nature revealed on one hand a deeply physical experience of nature, a spiritual paganism that celebrated the wild itself; and on the other, a higher sacred purity, nature's "alluring beauty pointing beyond itself to spirit."²³ The first type of experience developed into John Muir's and Aldo Leopold's deep ecology, which saw the wild itself as sacred and urged conservation and preservation of wild places. The second type, an idealist experience of nature, saw in nature the power of Mind to gain mastery over the physical. This emphasis gradually took shape in American history as the New Thought movement and the religion of healing.²⁴

Heathenry originated neither as a religious attempt to connect with nature nor out of a religious experience of nature. However, it inherited and incorporated two centuries of American nature religion. These denominations of nature religion are like strands woven through the Heathen experience. Heathens seek to reconstruct a traditionalist indigenous experience of nature. While their Pagan sources certainly were immersed in such an experience, it is questionable whether it can be reclaimed from the context of modern middle-class American lifestyles any easier than Thoreau and others who sought to find it. The advantage that Heathens have over Thoreau and Muir is their avid connection to an indigenous European culture and the descriptions in texts and

relationship with the natural world.

²³ Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 93, 96. Ibid., 88, in which Albanese discusses Thoreau's hierophany.

²⁴ Ibid., 107, 123.

archaeology that give them something toward which to aim and a pattern that might be revitalized.

The desire of Heathens to reconstruct an indigenous relationship with nature is intertwined with other strands of nature religion. Heathens draw together these symbols and practices as a response against the modern experience of alienation from nature. Modernity tends to remove nature symbols from daily experience or reduce their meaning to nostalgic attachment to an idealized past. There is a sense of distance, separation from nature, the “dis-embedding” from traditional contexts that Giddens discusses.²⁵ Nature is reduced to a consumable resource or a picturesque view. Modern interaction with nature is institutionalized and mediated by various technical systems such as modern medicine, scientific agriculture, the global food industry, or the National Park System. In Heathenry, the elements of nature religion function as counter-structural forces as adherents react against the alienation inherent in modern life and seek to “re-embed” their lives by “going back” to a deeper connection with nature. Whatever Heathens are, they are neither merely consumers nor spectators of nature. While Asatru’s symbolic center may consist of more than a focus on nature, it contains significant elements of nature religion. The following sections will briefly examine instances in which Asatru exhibits characteristics of the varieties of nature religion, including traditionalist expressions, experiences of hierophany in nature, and apocalyptic nature religion.

Elements of Traditionalist Nature Religion in Asatru

Several traditionalist elements of nature religion in Asatru have already been discussed, including animism and pantheism that conceive of the world in plural, personal, and relational ways; and shamanism that seeks knowledge and healing through

²⁵Peter Beyer, “Globalisation and the Religion of Nature,” in *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World*, ed. Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts, and Geoffrey Samuel (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1998), 15

attunement with nature.²⁶ In addition, the theme of attunement with nature can be found in Asatru practice both in concrete symbols and the symbolism of ritual. For instance, the sun wheel is a concrete symbol used throughout Asatru, consisting of a circle with two internal crossbars. It is an ancient symbol associated with the sun's movement, fertility, and power, and often found on rune stones and petroglyphs in Northern Europe.²⁷



Figure 8. Sun wheel

At East Coast Thing 2012, ritual leaders fashioned sun wheels from straw and set them up on poles during the land-taking ceremony, a ritual done to sacralize the campground for the weekend. The wheels were placed at the four corners of the camp while participants scattered birdseed as an offering to the land spirits. The sun wheel also figured prominently in a ritual for the god Thor performed in Kansas on the fall equinox. The ritual was held in the morning just as the sun was rising. A wooden sun wheel was brought around the circle of participants, each of whom said a prayer or meditated over the wheel for a few moments before passing it on. In the ritual held in 2011, the priest ceremonially placed the wreath on the altar in the camp's central *vé*, or sacred place. In the 2012 Thor ritual, the wreath was placed on the central fire and burned as an offering for the god.

²⁶Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 20, 30-32.

²⁷Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (New York: Penguin, 1964), 82. *Idem.*, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 166.

What does the sun wheel mean to contemporary Heathens? For our purposes, we should note primarily that it is not a Nike “swoosh” or some other symbol of modernity. It is an ancient symbol that connects contemporary Heathens to the power of life in nature. The sun wheel situates this religious significance not in a god or an anthropomorphism of the sun, but in the sun itself: the direct experience of sacred nature. The sun wheel is not the only, nor even the main symbol in Asatru. It exists side by side with a host of other symbols: nature symbols such as the raven, anthropomorphic images of the gods, and cultural symbols such as the drinking horn. Perhaps the most important is the war-like symbol of Mjolnir, Thor’s hammer, found ubiquitously in contemporary Asatru and frequently worn on a necklace by adherents as a symbol of their faith. However, while including symbolism from a variety of sources, Asatru does make use of important symbols drawn from a traditionalist type of nature religion.

Ritual action is also symbolic. One of the most important and frequent ritual actions in Asatru is that of gifting, or making offerings to the land spirits. As already mentioned, large Heathen events, Moots and Things, are generally opened with a ceremony focused on appeasing the land spirits by offering gifts, such as the birdseed at East Coast Thing or the (much less environmentally friendly) Skittles thrown into the woods at Lightning Across the Plains. Giving gifts to land spirits (whether the nymphs of ancient Greece or the land-spirits of Iceland) was a ubiquitous practice in ancient Pagan religion.²⁸ In contemporary Asatru, this act of ritual gifting is an expression of animism, a belief in the reality of nature spirits within the sacred landscape, arising from the relational cosmos as understood within traditional nature religion. By engaging in this activity, Heathens reject modern dis-enchanted understandings of land and nature and envision a landscape alive with spiritual beings, re-embedding their awareness in a

²⁸Larson, “Land full of Gods,” 61-62; Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson, *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1993), 113,117

pattern reminiscent of their ancestors.

Hierophanies of Nature

Hierophany is a variety of religious experience which involves the appearance or manifestation of the sacred to an observer. The term may have been coined by Mircea Eliade, who writes,

Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany* . . . that *something sacred shows itself to us*.²⁹

Eliade distinguishes between the manifestation of the sacred and the object in or through which the sacred is revealed: “The sacred tree, the sacred stone . . . are worshipped precisely because . . . they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*.”³⁰ This clarification helps us to understand the function of Pagan idolatry as well as the hierophany or manifestation of the sacred *in* nature, such as the awareness of a land spirit in a tree or a rock, or Thor in a lightning bolt. This experience is a type of nature religion, like the idealism of the Puritans and Transcendentalists, in which nature points beyond itself to another ultimately transcendent reality.

But the sacred can be manifested not only in nature but *as* nature. Though the former type of experience is more frequent, hierophanies of this latter sort are attested to in several varieties of nature religion. Traditional indigenous nature religion had its vision quests and Norse Paganism had the magical practice of *útiseta*, “sitting out” in a wild place or on a grave mound in order to obtain wisdom or insight into a problem.³¹ The

²⁹Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 11.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 12.

³¹Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic: Ecstasy and Neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 60-62.

goal of both practices seems to have been the gaining of special knowledge through an encounter with the sacred cosmos itself. Similarly, Albanese finds John Muir approaching this experience during a stay in the sequoia groves of Yosemite in 1870. Muir experienced something of a mystical union with the sequoia trees in an ecstatic “eucharist” experience he described as drinking “Sequoia wine, Sequoia blood,” during which the great tree itself rapturously appeared to him as a sacred entity, Lord Sequoia.³² Here, the tree stands not as a symbol for a further transcendent sacred reality, but as sacred in itself. Albanese writes that for Muir “nature religion meant nature *worship*.”³³ While clearly not a traditional indigenous experience, Muir’s immersion in wilderness and his ecological sensibility merged to elevate his awareness into this peak experience of sacred nature. Thus American nature religion of several varieties carries the hierophany as a key element.

Heathens also experience hierophanies of nature. William Bainbridge, the Steersman and leader of The Troth from 1995-99, described a mountain hike in Arizona as an experience of nature worship.³⁴ His hike was framed by religious ritual: Bainbridge poured a libation at the mountain’s foot before starting out and at the peak, he prayed to *Erda/Jord*, the earth goddess. But it is the mountain itself that beguiled. The mountain was at once a metaphor for life and the “Germanic soul.” He felt a personal connection to it as an “old friend, and the divine giver of gifts.” But the ecstatic moment of the experience came when a break in the clouds suddenly opened upon the mountain panorama. The clouds surrounding him appeared as the swirling mists of Wyrð and when they parted, he saw the “snowy crags of three mighty peaks . . . ancient, brave, and

³²Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 100.

³³*Ibid.*, 101.

³⁴William Bainbridge, “Forest Asatru” in *Our Troth*, ed. Kveldulf Gundarsson (North Charleston, SC: BookSurge Publishing, 2007), 2:9-14.

indomitable giants in formation . . . symbols of earth's grandeur, suddenly revealed in terrible majesty.”³⁵

The feeling of oneness or communion with nature apparent in Bainbridge's account is a familiar theme of nature spirituality. Tanya had this experience during an outdoor ritual for the land spirits. Although she had performed rituals in the same space several times before, on this particular occasion she remembered being overwhelmed with a sense of the absolute beauty of the area. She suddenly felt the presence of the land spirits, experiencing the earth as alive, conscious, and communicating to her in waves of emotion. She described the feeling as excitement, that the spirits were “thrilled that we were there.” At the same time, she felt a great sadness “because so few people ever experience it, appreciate the land in this way.”³⁶ In some sense, Tanya's experience of the numinous in nature recalls Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum*.³⁷ She felt the living earth as a majestic, welcoming presence. Yet she also felt terribly distraught in the presence of the hierophany of the earth mourning the alienation of her children.

This theme is recalled by Jason Van Tatenhove who, like Bainbridge, also sought out the mountains as the source of religious experience. Jason, a gothi or Heathen priest in Colorado, planned a Thor ritual for the Yule season. His kindred waited for a winter storm to blow in, then drove up into the mountains to hold a ritual in the midst of the weather, perhaps an example of religious fervor overriding practical sense. They went ahead with the plan but once in the mountains the snow-covered roads proved too much and their vehicles ran off the road. Stuck in the fury of the alpine storm, they performed a short ritual but were then forced to hike out to find help. Jason recalled that the surprising, almost overwhelming power of nature in the mountain blizzard was something

³⁵Bainbridge, “Forest Asatru,” 12.

³⁶Tanya Peterson, field notes taken by author, McLouth, KS, September 2012.

³⁷Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 12-13.

for which even these Colorado residents were unprepared. It tested them and forced them to the limits of their endurance.³⁸ Here also we see the *mysterium tremendum* of the human encounter with living nature revealed in the storm's potentially deadly power. Nature is the divine being that awes and terrifies the human, an experience which Otto describes as creature-feeling: "It is the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures."³⁹

Are these experiences particularly Heathen, other than the fact that contemporary Heathens are experiencing them? In each, there appears a clear Asatru frame of reference such as specifically Asatru ritual forms, creatures such as Jotuns, land spirits, and Thor's storm. But the experiences themselves do not emerge from Asatru theology. They arise from carrying an Asatru worldview into the context of nature: the ideology of Asatru is overlaid upon the visceral experience of nature itself. The values and beliefs of Asatru shape and provide context for the experiences, but the experiences themselves represent the intuitive worship of nature. Asatru has incorporated and adapted a strand of nature religion that involves the direct and visceral experience of the holy in the natural landscape. Asatru nature worshipers re-embed themselves in a close relationship with the world that transcends modern ways of appropriating nature.

Apocalyptic Nature Religion

Nature religion has occasionally syncretized with some form of millennial hope or expectation. Albanese mentions several examples from American history, which often involved envisioning the renewal of the natural world and the blossoming of human

³⁸Jason Van Tatenhove, field notes taken by author, McLouth, KS, September 2012.

³⁹Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 10.

health.⁴⁰ However the modern period of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has introduced a new theme into nature religion: that of ecological collapse. Some denominations of nature religion see a coming apocalyptic event, not in the return of a saving deity, but in a looming environmental crisis. A majority of Americans now have a general awareness, even fear, of environmental crisis, driven by issues such as global warming, pollution, and oil spills.⁴¹ New religious and political movements, such as Earth First!, are in part responsible for this change in awareness and attitude among mainstream Americans, since the ecology movement has been driven for the most part by groups at the social margins of American society.

NRMs have dealt with this tension of modern life in several ways, one of which has been a turn towards apocalyptic nature religion. These groups have addressed the environmental issue in a religious framework by interpreting ecological themes through a religious lens and proposing religious solutions for how humans are to live under the threat of the growing crisis.⁴² Within Norse Paganism, the Odinic Rite (OR) has adapted this particular variety of nature religion by developing a robust apocalyptic religious interpretation of Ragnarok as a cataclysmic ecological crisis. While this may appear reminiscent of Paxson's "new view" of Ragnarok mentioned earlier, the OR's retelling is more complex as well as much more revolutionary and oppositional in its approach. In comparison, Paxson's version represents a mainstream narrative while the OR's interpretation is deeply influenced by apocalyptic religious forms.

⁴⁰ Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 124, 127-28, 132.

⁴¹ Jeffrey M. Jones, "In U.S., Concerns About Global Warming Stable at Lower Levels" [online]; accessed 11 January 2013; available from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/146606/Concerns-Global-Warming-Stable-Lower-Levels.aspx>; Internet. *Idem.*, "Oil Spill Alters Views on Environmental Protection" [online]; accessed 11 January 2013; available from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/137882/Oil-Spill-Alters-Views-Environmental-Protection.aspx>; Internet.

⁴² Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 159-61. Albanese's example is that of Sun Bear, a Native American who leads the New Age Bear Tribe movement. He warns of an approaching "earth cleansing," a time of cataclysmic changes in the environment in which Mother Earth will heal herself of human-caused damage.

The OR is a religious organization within the broader movement of Asatru and best understood as a sect of Asatru that diverges from mainstream expressions in several ways.⁴³ These divergences include its pronounced folkish or racist outlook as mentioned earlier, as well as its esoteric inclination. The OR emphasizes spiritual evolution towards higher states of awareness, culminating in what it calls Odinic Consciousness. Nature religion appears as a distinctive influence in OR beliefs such as “holographic ecology,” which is essentially the idea of esoteric correspondences between the human body and the earth, each with its own chakras through which energy is exchanged.⁴⁴ Belief in ley lines and the practice of geomancy also figure prominently.⁴⁵ In addition, the OR is also the only Asatru group to have a leadership position specifically for environmental issues, the Environmental Affairs Officer, who is actively shaping the movement as an Odinist nature religion.⁴⁶

The Story of Ragnarok

In 2008, an article entitled “Midgarth 911” appeared in the Odinic Rite Bulletin, the OR’s periodical, with the opening line, “Midgarth is in a state of emergency

⁴³Rodney Stark, “Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model,” in *Cults and New Religious Movements: A Reader*, ed. Lorne Dawson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 261. Stark defines a sect simply as “a religious movement in a state of high tension with its sociocultural environment.”

⁴⁴Eowyn, “Radical Detoxification: Reclaiming the Wild Soul” [online]; accessed 24 May 2011; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/Guardians/radical-detoxification-reclaiming-the-wild-soul/>; Internet.

⁴⁵Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth*, 148-50, 153-56. Ley lines are thought to be corridors or channels across the earth connecting sacred sites and geographical features. Esoteric earth energies circulate through these channels like arteries and veins for Mother Earth. Geomancy here refers to practices arising from the belief that human and environmental health are maintained by aligning human life with the natural flow of those earth energies.

⁴⁶Eowyn, “The Role of OR Environmental Concerns Officer” [online]; accessed 8 September 2011; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/Guardians/the-role-of-or-environmental-concerns-officer/>; Internet. Heimgest, telephone interview by author, 19 May 2011.

—a global Ragnarok.”⁴⁷ The author explained that a great environmental conspiracy “threatens the very soul-path and evolution of our folk” through the wanton destruction of the environment. This dire warning invokes Ragnarok, the great cataclysmic battle of Norse mythology, as an image of environmental crisis. The OR re-tells the Ragnarok myth as a contemporary environmental apocalypse, utilizing imminent environmental catastrophe as both social critique and a resource for resistance to cultural hegemony. The account of Ragnarok derives primarily from the *Voluspa*, a section of the *Poetic Edda* in which the god Odin summons a prophetess from the dead to foretell the events of the end of the age. Thus Ragnarok, foreseen in the vision of the prophetess, is an apocalypse in both the original sense of revelation as well as in the more popular sense of a cataclysmic end of the world.⁴⁸

The story unfolds in this way: Loki, often presented as the trickster god of Norse myth, has schemed to carry out the murder of Balder, Odin the All-Father’s son and the most beautiful and beloved of the gods. For this crime, he is perpetually bound as are two of his progeny: a great sea serpent, Jormungand, who encircles the world at the bottom of the ocean and a terrible wolf, Fenris, whose great mouth has been muzzled. The giants of fire and ice are safely contained in their homelands by the vigilance of the gods. Thus, for a while the forces of chaos are subdued and the order of the cosmos is tenuously maintained.

However, a series of events unfolds that destroys this order and unleashes the forces of chaos. Fenriswolf and the world serpent break their bonds and the cosmos roils

⁴⁷Eowyn, “Midgarth 911 (US) and 999 (UK)” [online]; accessed 8September 2011; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/Guardians/midgarth-911-us-and-999-uk/>; Internet. Midgarth is a term used in Norse cosmology for the physical realm of humanity, the earth, which existed between the heavenly realms such as Asgard, and the underworld.

⁴⁸Catherine Wessinger, “Millennialism With and Without Mayhem,” in *Millenium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50.

under their attack. Loki escapes his imprisonment and attacks the gods, bringing with him the dead from the underworld. The frost giants sail in on a cosmic ship, and the fire giants ride across the Bifrost Bridge invading Asgard, the home of the gods. Snorri Sturluson, the thirteenth-century compiler of Norse myth, describes the cataclysm in classic apocalyptic language: “The sun grows black, the earth sinks into the sea. The bright stars vanish from the heavens. Steam surges up and the fire rages. Heat reaches high against heaven itself.”⁴⁹ Heimdall, the guardian of the gods, sounds a warning blast on his horn and the gods rush into battle with their armies of the valiant slain. In the ensuing clash the majority of gods are killed while vanquishing their enemies. The cosmos itself is saved but only at great cost. In the aftermath, a few young gods survive along with two humans who live to repopulate an empty devastated world.

The Ragnarok story is an example of catastrophic millennialism in Catherine Wessinger’s terminology or apocalyptic in the tragic mode to use Stephen O’Leary’s: narratives in which the world becomes so corrupt and evil that a divine entity must step in, destroy the evil world and usher in a Golden Age. It shares with these narratives the element of a catastrophic violent end to history. Yet Ragnarok deviates from this outline in at least two important ways. First, the end is not anticipated or welcomed as a rescue or salvation from evil. The world order as maintained by the Asgardian gods is portrayed as something good and worth saving. Destruction looms threateningly while the gods of Asgard and their followers strive to postpone the cataclysm by searching for knowledge, watching for its signs, and preparing an army to fight for the survival of the world. Second, the idea of the Golden Age is downplayed. While evil is overcome, the battle is hardly a triumphant victory and the story is haunted by a profound sense of loss. The cosmos does survive, yet it is greatly diminished; and while a Golden Age may arise, it

⁴⁹Snorri Sturluson, *The Prose Edda*, trans. Jesse L. Byock (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 75.

comes only at a great loss of good.

Chem-Trailing

“It is no longer just the beautiful Frigga that spins our clouds but an ugly usurper,” warns an OR member referring to the environmental threat of chemtrails.⁵⁰ The chemtrails conspiracy theory, which began to circulate widely in the 1990’s, draws attention to the suspected use of chemical spraying by governmental and military agents for weather manipulation, mass inoculation, and behavior control of human populations. Proponents of the theory suggest that chemtrailing jets fly in grid patterns over targeted areas releasing chemical spray that slowly spreads to form a hazy canopy in the sky. As an OR author puts it, “Daily—and on a global level—our skies are being criss-crossed by polluting chemtrails—deliberately laid tracks containing a host of noxious substances, which spread to create thin veils of chemsmog and obliterating previously blue skies.”⁵¹ The OR sees chemtrails as part of a purposeful and sustained assault on the environment.

Particularly egregious is chemtrail fallout, a noxious airborne soup of metals, chemicals, and viruses that slowly builds up a toxic residue in living bodies and the earth itself. These toxins are thought to cause widespread physical illness such as asthma, respiratory failure, bird kills, and ultimately the narcotization of unsuspecting populations and the flattening of the weather cycle. The toxic fallout weakens and interferes with the vital energies that enliven the earth and her creatures. These effects have serious religious repercussions for Odinists. Chemtrail fallout deadens the human ability to evolve into higher states of conscious, “occluding both the physical and spiritual light from our beings.”⁵² It also destroys the vitalizing connection between humans and the earth by

⁵⁰Eowyn, “Midgarth 911.” Frigga is the queen of the Norse deities, wife to Odin and associated with home and weaving.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Eowyn, “Radical Detoxification,” and “Midgarth 911”

“destroying the template of the sacred cyclical—the regenerative rhythm of life inherent in the seasonal cycle.”⁵³ By stunting the potential for spiritual evolution, destroying the productivity of the earth and the connection to her subtle energies, these evil conspirators carry out an insidious high-tech chemical doomsday which will result in death for Mother Jorth and her folk.⁵⁴ Expressing her outrage at the destructive practice of chemtrailing and accentuating the religious dimension of its effects, an Odinist writer laments, “How dare they mess with our souls? How dare they?”⁵⁵

Ecological Ragnarok

Stephen O’Leary writes that the “essential claim of apocalyptic argument can be reduced to the statement: “The world is coming to an end.”⁵⁶ Odinists would agree, rewording the phrase in their own mythological terms as “Ragnarok is near.” Confronted with the monstrous evil of chemtrailing and the looming threat of environmental collapse, they see the careful balance of nature teetering on the verge of chaos. The OR frames these new threats within the old story of Ragnarok in such a way as to bring meaning to this bewildering new reality and to provide new strategies of response. As O’Leary writes, apocalypse is a rhetorical form by which communities develop “symbolic resources that enable societies to define and address the problem of evil.”⁵⁷ Thus, the re-telling of the story serves as a modern theodicy in which the great evils of the contemporary age are explained and resolved from the Odinist perspective.

⁵³Eowyn, “Midgarth 911.”

⁵⁴Eowyn, “Midgarth 911.” Many Asatruar refer to the Earth in anthropomorphic terms as a Norse earth goddess, Jorth or Jord, from the Old Norse, *jorð*. Also, *erda* in Old High German and *eorthe* in Old English from which our modern English “earth” derives.

⁵⁵Eowyn, “Radical Detoxification.”

⁵⁶Stephen O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 77.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 6.

The proposition, “Ragnarok is near” generates a couple of predictable questions, such as “When?” and “How do you know?” Both questions point towards the apocalyptic themes of time and authority. For Odinists, both themes are addressed in what O’Leary calls the “apocalyptic jeremiad,” a list of woes that catalogs the evils of the age. By drawing attention to the ominous events occurring around them, the authors of the jeremiad “find comfort in the very act of naming and lamenting a list of present-day evils that serves as evidence of history’s degeneration into iniquity.”⁵⁸ In the case of the OR, the environmental jeremiad serves as a warning of history’s incipient interruption by evil, like Heimdall sounding the *Gjallarhorn* to warn of Ragnarok. For instance, here an Odinic writer compiles the symptoms of environmental degradation as the evidence for the coming apocalypse:

Mother Jorth, the Earth, our home, is also facing and fighting a mighty battle. The children of Loki, are ravishing Mother Jorth. The deluded and power-crazed are pillaging the world’s resources. We see the world being polluted and poisoned, raped by big business, abused by those that have no love for Mother Jorth, no respect or understanding for our home, our great Mother. No understanding that we are part of nature, not its owners.⁵⁹

Another Odinist continues the rhetorical pattern:

Devastating planetary change is indeed happening on an unprecedented scale; flora and fauna alike are dying; soils are being depleted; deserts are expanding; sea levels are rising whilst ice caps are melting; coral reefs are bleached skeletons of their former glory and radiation levels have risen phenomenally.⁶⁰

In a personal communication with me the writer poignantly captures both themes of time and authority: “But one only has to look up at the sky to see that chemtrails are a reality and their poisons are being sprayed on us on a daily basis.”⁶¹

⁵⁸O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 81.

⁵⁹Asrad, “Ragnarok” [online]; accessed Dec 17, 2011; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/main/ragnarok/>; Internet.

⁶⁰Eowyn, “Midgarth 911.”

⁶¹Eowyn, email to author, 28 September 2011.

In addition, the jeremiad alters the perception of time and identity within the NRM. In modern society, value is given to the immediate and short-term, to what is “trending” in the present. Crises hold the attention of the modern public only while they are happening, and are soon forgotten once their immediacy wears off. In this context, the jeremiad functions as a radical rhetorical device that preserves the past and offers a counter-cultural and cumulative view of history. In this way, it replicates the Germanic notion of gnomonic time in which the present is formed by past conditions and fully understood only within the context of past events. The jeremiad catalogs and remembers past evils, asserting them into the present as part of living experience and contemporary identity. These environmental crises are invested with interpretive unity as signs or evidence of the coming apocalypse. Ragnarok is happening now, it has already begun, and the evidence is all around us if we can awaken to see it. By dovetailing the Ragnarok myth with the chemtrail controversy, a twenty-first century nature religion is born.

The Topos of Evil

A further apocalyptic feature of Odinist nature religion is its clear division of the world into oppositional camps of good and evil, stark moral categories that are out of character for most polytheistic religious systems. While most Asatruar see Loki as a trickster god whose escapades bring both harm and benefit, the OR completely rejects that interpretation. Loki is a figure of chaos, illusion, and negativity who must be opposed at all costs.⁶² By interpreting Loki as solely malevolent, the OR emphatically differentiates the forces of order from the agents of chaos, the Loki-ites, a feature of apocalyptic religion that Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins call “exemplary dualism.”⁶³

⁶²Heimgest, “May Loki Be Bound” [online]; accessed 8 September 2011; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/main/may-loki-be-bound/>; Internet.

⁶³Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, “Religious Totalism, Exemplary Dualism, and the Waco Tragedy,” in *Millenium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 267.

Exemplary dualism exists when “contemporary sociopolitical or socioreligious forces are transmogrified into absolute contrast categories embodying moral, eschatological, and cosmic polarities upon which hinge the millennial destiny of humankind.”⁶⁴ Enemies are radically devalued, while the group portrays itself as “an enclave of truth, purity, and virtue in a corrupt, evil, and doomed world.”⁶⁵

Thus, the OR invests itself with a sacred role of eschatological importance. It is the Holy Nation of Odin, a vanguard preparing fit individuals to resist Ragnarok, allied with the gods as they watch and prepare. Here we see the apocalyptic narrative serving not only to demonize contemporary political and social figures but also to legitimize the OR itself as the select entity which arises to hold the forces of chaos at bay.⁶⁶ The OR positions itself in opposition to the Loki-ites as the only group with the knowledge and resources for effective resistance.

So who is the Enemy in this environmental Ragnarok? On one hand, the rhetoric draws them into focus. They are Monsanto and McDonalds, the technocrats and industrialists whose power structures the economy and society. This personification raises a class issue, with the clear implication that the true and holy people, the Holy Nation Odin, stand outside those structures of power. The resources of the OR are not those of economic and political power. But deeper forces of evil also conspire behind these names: the Loki-ites are mysterious agents of chaos who hide behind a mask of rhetorical ambiguity. The mythological term obscures the true source of evil as a vague ideation behind the anonymous high altitude aircraft that sail silently overhead spewing their toxic chemical stew. The Loki-ites are a secret global cabal controlling high-tech

⁶⁴Anthony and Robbins, “Religious Totalism,” 267.

⁶⁵Ibid., 268.

⁶⁶O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 56. O’Leary writes, “Eschatological narrative can be used to legitimate as well as subvert political authority.”

military and industrial resources. They have specifically designed and carried out chemtrailing to disrupt the natural esoteric connection between humans and Mother Jorth.⁶⁷ Most importantly, they represent a malignant and chaotic spiritual force.

Behind this depiction, one can read the subtext of powerlessness. The authors appeal to an audience that feels victimized and manipulated, which experiences financial, social, and health concerns, yet can do little to substantially change its situation.⁶⁸ The enemy is a “faceless abuser” which is “manipulating us like obedient marionettes . . . controlling the power sources and manipulating the weather, environments, and our health to maintain their domination.”⁶⁹ While other apocalyptic narratives personify the demonic Enemy concretely, here the Other remains mythic and vague, an ambiguity that serves several important functions. First, the dynamic of powerlessness is emphasized by the rhetorical distance between the audience and the mythic enemy. Second, by conceptualizing the Other in the role of the mythic Loki, the Enemy is defined within the parameters of the Ragnarok story and its ultimate demise is assured; this is the function of theodicy. Knowing that Loki and his agents will be destroyed brings cognitive resolution to a situation that is otherwise confusing and overwhelming. Additionally, within the program of resistance, the Other’s ambiguous identity prevents the audience’s outrage from being directed toward a particular concrete enemy with inconsequential results. Instead, the OR harnesses the energy of its audience within the movement while legitimizing itself as the eschatological agent of resistance.

⁶⁷Eowyn, “Holographic Ecology: Nemesis of the Loki-ites” [online]; accessed 8 September 2011; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/Guardians/holographic-ecology-nemesis-of-the-loki-ites/>; Internet.

⁶⁸Heimgest, telephone interview by author, 19 May 2011.

⁶⁹Eowyn, “Midgarth 911.”

Myths of Resistance

The re-telling of Ragnarok is neither quietist or passive but functions to contest and negate dominant cultural values and ideals, a type of symbolic or ideological resistance to perceived cultural hegemony. In this sense, resorting to apocalyptic ideology is not an escape into fantasy, an opiate for the masses, but a “mobilizing myth” that counters the modern “dis-embedding” from a traditional context in nature and calls its audience to action.⁷⁰ James C. Scott argues that the confluence of apocalyptic discourse with contemporary events creates the “social soil” for acts of resistance.⁷¹ This is certainly the case with the OR, though the group advocates neither for violent revolt nor the forms of everyday material resistance described by Scott such as pilfering, sabotage, foot-dragging, and gossip. Instead, the OR encourages “eco-magick” as a form of symbolic resistance, which re-envisions or “re-souls” the world as a sacred cosmos.⁷² Eco-Magick consists of rituals and meditations designed by the OR as “powerful tools for helping to effect change—both within the self and the apparent outer circumstances” that function within a strategy of resistance. These practices can be used to “combat the forces that threaten” the interests of the OR, thus unraveling the Loki-ite agenda. They also function to “strengthen our folk link to Mother Jorth,” by bringing the community of the OR into closer living connection with the earth and her cycles.⁷³ In this way, the OR’s eco-magick functions both as a type of earth healing practice associated with nature religion and a strategy of cultural and spiritual resistance against the dominant society.⁷⁴

⁷⁰Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 217-18. Also, James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 330-33.

⁷¹Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 332-33.

⁷²Eowyn, “Temporary Temples” [online]; accessed 17 October 2012; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/Guardians/temporary-temples/>; Internet.

⁷³Eowyn, “The Role of OR Environmental Concerns Officer.”

⁷⁴Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 159, 195-96. Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking*

Within the apocalyptic consciousness of the OR, eco-magick can be described as an act of resistance in three ways. First, it arises from a context of limited social power. The domain of magic remains an available course of action to marginalized communities. Second, eco-magick returns a form of power to ordinary people. Within the esoteric view of the world, the problem is defined as primarily spiritual in nature. This understanding of the threat legitimates magic as an important and effective form of response: a religious response to a spiritual threat. Eco-magick purports to free its practitioners from the toxic deadening effects of chemtrailing and to strengthen the community to survive environmental destruction for the benefit of future generations. The OR thereby supplies its disenfranchised audience with a form of alternative knowledge that empowers them to strike against the Loki-ite system and its plot for ecological destruction.

Third, armed with this alternative discourse on the nature of power, the Odinist adherent is not reduced to meaninglessness by the situation but is able to confront evil with an efficacious response. As O’Leary describes, “Although some react to the tragedy of apocalypse by becoming passive spectators, others may find that the prediction of the world’s End offers not only a cathartic conclusion, but also a role for believers to play in the cosmic drama.”⁷⁵ As agents of resistance who strike back against the forces of chaos, Odinists take on a role in their own myth cycle by embodying the virtues portrayed by the gods and heroes of Ragnarok.⁷⁶ O’Leary provides an insightful perspective on the Odinist

Earth, 156.

⁷⁵O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 178.

⁷⁶Anthony and Robbins, “Religious Totalism,” 270-71. It is important to note that this movement does not recommend or resort to violent action, which it sees as ultimately futile and destructive. As Anthony and Robbins point out in their study of apocalyptic strategies, while “apocalyptic totalist movements may feel compelled to reinforce and reify their systems of symbolic meaning by actively confronting evil . . . there may be other modes of confrontation, such as Pentecostal prayer warrior mystiques, that allow the group actively to contend with evil without violence while sustaining the rigid boundaries of the totalist self.” Eco-magick serves as a similar non-violent form of resistance.

response when he writes,

Tragic resignation does not abandon the struggle, but finds nobility in its continuation in the face of impossible odds. The . . . stance . . . makes narrative and emotional sense once it is seen as an enactment of the martial virtues of the tragic hero, which include ‘courage, loyalty, duty, honor, pride, indomitable will, unquestioning obedience, [and] uncompromising dedication.’”⁷⁷

Thus the OR and its members together become heroic players in the apocalyptic event. The struggle against the Loki-ites and the imminent environmental Ragnarok embodies the very virtues displayed by the tragic heroes of the Norse sagas. By awakening to the reality of environmental Ragnarok and responding through eco-magick, Odinists adopt the type of heroic and ethically noble life depicted in these legendary sagas as an act of resistance against the corrupting forces of the present age. Thus environmentally aware Odinists are in historical continuity with the indomitable will of their legendary forebears and mythological heroes in a life enhanced by myth and saga. They act as heroes struggling against the forces of chaos and a world spiraling out of control toward environmental Ragnarok.

Yet, eco-magick may best be explained by the influence of nature religion in the worldview of the OR. Eco-magick draws together strands of nature religion which emphasize the vitalizing relationship between humans and the earth, and the role of Mind to create a healing attunement with nature. For these Odinists, matter and spirit are not that different: matter is simply “frozen light,” spiritual energy vibrating at a different frequency.⁷⁸ The mind, focused and directed by ritual acts, can interact with and manipulate these energies, healing both the individual and the Earth itself. This understanding is combined with a pantheistic understanding of the cosmos and an awareness of modern environmental crisis. In this context of syncretic nature religion, eco-magick becomes an effective response to the conditions of modern life.

⁷⁷O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, 179.

⁷⁸Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 151.

Conclusion

While Asatru should not be considered solely a nature religion, it does incorporate many significant aspects of nature religion into its way of experiencing and interacting with the world. It should be clear that nature religion is more apparent in some forms of Asatru than others and an important part of the argument presented here is that Odinism should be seen as a form of esoteric nature religion. But the themes and varieties of nature show up throughout the movement. In this way, Asatru seems to partake of the very “nature” of nature religion itself, which Albanese describes as “unorganized and unacknowledged,” something that “slips between the cracks of the usual interpretive grids.”⁷⁹ Nature religion rarely shows up “as itself” but exists as ideas and practices embedded within other religious and social forms. Asatru has clearly inherited the symbolic system of nature religion and is putting it to use in the reconstruction of the new religion of Asatru. In this way, we can see Asatru as a deeply American religion that continues to shape and be shaped by the tension of American attempts to understand and relate to nature.

The preceding chapters have discussed ways in which Asatru is responding to tensions within modern society by providing solutions adapted from its Norse-oriented worldview. In this light, we see Asatru as a religion deeply shaped by its context in American society and culture. Yet a further question remains: What can we learn about religion in America from studying Asatru? In the next and final chapter, we will address this question and look at what Asatru as a movement can teach us about the future of American religion.

⁷⁹ Albanese, *Nature Religion in America*, 199.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: A NEW RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS?

In the concluding chapter of his book, *Comprehending Cults*, Lorne Dawson discusses the relationship between New Religious Movements (NRMs) and modern society. He contrasts two perspectives regarding this relationship, suggesting either that NRMs are primarily reactions against modernity, responses to the tension of modern society; or that they are modern social movements that incorporate and reflect characteristics of modernity. He asks, “Are most NRMs just reactions to modernity, or do they represent some intrinsic adaptation of religious forms to the modern social world?”¹ He proposes that a new religious consciousness is emerging, a fourth Great Awakening consisting of new religions adapted to the conditions of modernity. These new religions are not anti-modern in the sense that they reject modern social changes, but represent transformations of religious expression into the modes of modernity.

Modernity is marked by characteristics of individualism, weakened or flexible social connections, the value of personal experience, and globalized consumer choices. Rather than rejecting modernity, the new religious consciousness enfolds itself in the characteristics of modern life and adapts religious expression to these aspects of modernity. Dawson identifies six features that characterize these new religious adaptations: a pronounced individualism, a focus on personal religious experience, charismatic rather than routinized authority, tolerance towards other traditions and syncretic borrowing from a diversity of sources, holistic theologies that reject dualistic

¹Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 188.

distinctions, and greater organizational openness.² In addition, religious life in modernity shifts away from close ties to specific social institutions and toward cultural forms that can be appropriated within any number of contexts. James Beckford writes that in light of the new spiritual consciousness, religion should be seen more “as a cultural resource . . . than as a social institution.”³

In many ways, this thesis makes sense in regard to Asatru. The movement is broader than any one social institution. It consists of a set of ideas, attitudes, symbols, and ritual forms that are appropriated and enacted in various ways by groups and individuals. Nor are these uses always specifically religious. The symbol set appropriated Asatru also shows up in politics, pop culture, social identity, and entertainment. In this way, Asatru could be indentified as a type of global culture. One effect of globalization is the unmooring of religious ideas and forms from their traditional place within specific religious organizations. This has occurred in Asatru, as historical European ideas and identities have flowed into the American context.

Furthermore, Asatru has adapted to many of the conditions of modern life. Its SPIN structure reflects the “greater organization openness” of Dawson’s characteristics and is suited to a modern world characterized by hyper-individualism and non-joining behaviors. Asatru has a profound presence on the internet, representing the modern dislocation of identity from place. Although strict Reconstructionist forms of Asatru resist syncretic borrowing from other traditions, Asatru is not a totalist religion. It avoids aggressive proselytizing behavior and is tolerant of some forms of religious pluralism. The hard polytheism of Asatru distinguishes it from the “holistic” theologies that define the divine as “cosmic energy.” However, it does for the most part avoid dualism,

²Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 183-85.

³James A. Beckford, “Religion, Modernity and Post-modernity,” in *Religion: Contemporary Issues*, ed. Bryan Wilson (London: Bellew, 1992), 23.

communicates a holistic worldview in which the boundaries between spirit and matter are negligible, and has a world-affirming orientation. These are all characteristics of Asatru that reflect the new religious consciousness.

Similarly, Asatru embraces the values of individualism and personal religious experience. For many scholars, these features represent the ideological core of the new religious consciousness. Modern religious expression emphasizes “what the religious involvement can do for the individual and only secondarily on its broader implications or benefits for society or the group.”⁴ The values of joining and belonging are superseded by that of self-transformation. There has been much written about the place of the individual in new religions and the rise of a new religious consciousness that values individual experience over communal belonging. Carol Susack writes that the contemporary religious landscape is characterized by a “shift from understanding the self as part of a community to valuing the self as an individual Self-transformation ha[s] become the fundamental religious process for many Westerners.”⁵ In many ways, Asatru exemplifies these tendencies. The transformation of individual identity is paramount, whether that is through an experience of the deep past and the ancestors, by adopting the identity of a magical woman, or in a hierophany of nature. Heathens are looking for this transformative personal experience.

Yet at the same time, individualism is not an uncontested value in Asatru. The movement places a strong emphasis on belonging and connecting, on the value of the group, and pictures itself as family. Mark Stinson enunciated this idea at the large Heathen gathering, *Lightning Across the Plains*:

Our ancestors knew that the individual was only a small piece of something, so small that it was nothing. In our culture the individual is everything. There is a

⁴Dawson, *Comprehending Cults*, 183.

⁵Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 10-11.

reason people are so sad, so stressed out. We are meant to be part of a community, part of something bigger than ourselves.⁶

A tension runs throughout the movement between libertarian individual autonomy and responsibility to the quasi-familial group. The tension is found in the social structure of the movement as well as its ethical concepts. While individual autonomy is asserted, Asatru avoids the intense inward-looking spirituality of the NRMs influenced by the East. In contrast to the meditative, inner search for the divine found in those religions, the Asatru *sumbel* is an example of a profoundly outward-focused practice. The *sumbel* focuses the attention of the adherent beyond the self onto others, and ritualizes the behaviors of attentive listening, agreeing with and affirming others, and empathic connectedness. The sacred is located outside of the self and experienced in a group identity, in the community bond.

While Asatru should not be seen as merely a reaction against modernity, it has been significantly shaped in response to the tensions of modern life. This study demonstrates convincingly that Asatru functions quite self-consciously as a critique of modernity. The preceding chapters have examined numerous ways in which Asatru observes the limitations, short-comings, and oppressive structures of modernity. In response, the movement draws on its ancient northern European sources to create innovative roles and experiences which re-embed its adherents into a more holistic context. Asatru seems to reflect aspects of both types of NRMs, embodying aspects of modernity while at the same time offering a critique of modernity's limitations. Are the two perspectives on NRMs, either as anti-modern or as adapted to modernity, an example of a false dilemma, which may be not as mutually exclusive as they first seem? Can NRMs critique modernity while at the same time adapting to it in certain ways? This seems to be the case with Asatru. While Asatru expresses the conditions of modernity in

⁶Field notes taken by author, McLouth, KS, September 2012.

many ways, it simultaneously remains critical of modernity's limitations.

However, one aspect of Asatru clearly at odds with Dawson's description of the new religious consciousness is the movement's strong ethno-centric identity. Asatru is representative of a renewed interest in ancestral, ethnic identities: "Efforts to revive traditional, indigenous, or native religions are occurring around the world; modern European-based Paganism is but one variant of a much larger phenomenon."⁷ The features of these ethnic NRMs are quite different from those of the new religious consciousness. The new ethnic faiths are local in their focus, specific in their theologies, and resistant to syncretic borrowing. They attempt to deeply embed adherents into one specific cultural experience and may at times express somewhat of a fundamentalist approach. They are past-oriented and nativist, focused on that to which an individual organically belongs, in spectacular contrast to the eclectic, universal, syncretic, and progressive faiths of the new religious consciousness.

In one sense, the new ethnic faiths represent a particularly modern phenomenon. Ethnic identities have become mobile, migrating through global social and economic networks that have been facilitated by the Internet. Identifying as an Asatru adherent no longer requires living on an isolated farmstead in Iceland, or even having a Scandinavian genealogy. These identities have become dis-embedded from their traditional contexts and made available to a global audience. Similarly, as a result of the conditions of American modernity, close ties to one particular ethnicity have often been considerably loosened or lost almost completely. This modern condition of "rootlessness" gives some people the particularly American freedom to pick and choose an ethnic identity that suits them emotionally and socially.

⁷Michael F. Strmiska, "Comparative Perspectives," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael F. Strmiska (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 2.

However, the result of such a religious choice is an ideology that is often decidedly at odds with modernity. The new ethnic faiths are ambivalent about modern identity and look for the transformation of modern society into something with a more human scale, organized around characteristics of a more organic nature rather than national identity or citizenship, more environmental and rooted, more enchanted and magical than scientific and rational. Asatru may be the most successful of these new ethnic faiths in America, though they exist more prevalently in Europe. These faiths are both modern and anti-modern, innovative and reactionary, global and local at the same time. They express the desire of modern people for a more deeply embedded, intimate experience, one in which identity, religion, culture, epistemology, and health are all closely bound together. Two possibilities seem to exist for these new ethnic faiths in America. As this study of Asatru has shown, one tendency is to mainstream and become part of the American religious milieu, a process that a critical mass of Asatu adherents are beginning to accept. The other tendency is to move further from the mainstream, remaining a shadowy, contested, and embattled religion on the margins of American society. Whether new ethnic faiths, such as Asatru, will become a vital part of the American religious milieu is yet to be seen. But if the growth and evolution of Asatru are any indication, they may garner a small but growing share of religious adherents.

APPENDIX 1

ASATRU GLOSSARY

Aesir. The Aesir are one of two families of gods in Norse mythology. The family was headed by the god Odin and goddess Frigga and often associated with mind and culture.

Ásatrú. A modern term that literally means “troth of the Aesir,” or faith of the gods. It is a widely used term indicating the New Religious Movement of Norse Germanic Paganism. The term is also commonly used as a denominational-like marker to distinguish more mainstream forms of the religion from more radical Odinist forms. It can also refer specifically to those who follow the gods of the Aesir family, in contrast to Vanatru who are practitioners associated with the Vanir family of gods. Also written, Asatru, pronounced Ahsatru.

Asatruar. A plural form indicating those who follow the Asatru religion, more than one Asatru adherent.

Asperging. A ritual action in which a priest sprinkles participants with sanctified liquid. A leafy branch is dipped into the liquid, which is then flicked causing the liquid to spray over the participants. The action is symbolic of receiving the blessing of the gods.

Blót. An Asatru ritual of sacrifice in which the participants give offerings, often of mead, to a deity who in turn blesses the worshipers. Also written without the diacritical marks as blot, pronounced Bloat.

Disir. Female ancestors and family spirits. These female spirits guard and guide the family, offering advice, help, and protection. The disir are venerated through ritual actions, and are thought to communicate during meditation and dreams. Male ancestral spirits are referred to as “alfar,” but are less prominent than disir in contemporary Asatru.

Folk. A distinct ethnic/cultural group. In contemporary Asatru, “folk” or “The Folk” is a complex term used to indicate all those who worship the Heathen gods, the “community of faith.” Adherents will often hail “The Folk” during blot and sumbel. The phrase indicates a sense of unity among adherents. The Folk are one people. Several layers of meaning are at work here. It clearly refers to the gathered community at any ritual as well as the greater religious community of contemporary Asatru consisting of all those who have “awoken” to the old gods. This community

also has a significant temporal aspect. The Folk are those to whom an Asatru adherent is connected through orlog, the ancestral lineage that stretches into the past, as well as the children who will be born into this ongoing lineage. Culturally, the Folk are those who share a worldview that has defined the Germanic people. In this sense it defines a people group, an ethnicity bound by language, culture, history, and religion. The Odinic Rite uses the term “folk organism” to indicate that the “ethno-biological” group has a unity and consciousness on a meta-level.

Folk Soul. The folk soul is a concept that was enunciated during the period of Romantic and nationalistic revivals in Europe during the 1800s. It referred to a type of personality, ideology, way of life carried by people of a common race or ethnicity. In modern Asatru it is described as “a collective unconsciousness created over millennia composed of habits, tendencies, ancestral memory, language, cultural affinities, religion passed along by genetic code.”¹ It is a “way of being” unique to every ethnicity. Each people group or “folk” has a natural connection with a specific culture or “folkway” that they should follow, and a set of ancestral gods whom they should worship. This folkway can be awakened or activated in a person’s life “by performing the rituals and ceremonies developed by the ancestors in times immemorial.”² The Folk Soul is a concept associated with Folkish Asatru.

Folkish. An orientation within the Asatru movement that conceptualizes the religion as an ethnic movement, specifically a religion for those of biological northern European descent. Folkish Asatruar believe that Asatru is the indigenous religion of northern Europe and that its archetypes and structures are embedded in the subconscious of those with northern European ancestry. For this reason, Asatru can only be fully and authentically practiced by those biologically related to ancient northern European cultures.

Frith. Frith is an ethical term describing the condition of peace and concord among trusted intimates.

Galdr. A category of magic utilizing spoken words. Galdr can include any sort of verbal incantation, often poetic in nature. Descriptions of ancient Norse poetic forms include a galdr metre which was thought to have magical effects. In contemporary Asatru, galder often involves chanting the names of the runes or the names of gods.

Gefrain. Reputation, one’s reputation and standing within the Asatru community. Asatruar strive to build up a good reputation by consistently doing good and notable deeds that are recognized and valued by the community. It is closely related to Worth, a Heathen moral concept indicating the degree of someone’s trustworthiness and moral uprightness.

¹Kari Taurang, email to author, 27 May 2011.

²Matthias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 208.

Gothi/Gythja. A Heathen priest or clergy. These terms: gothi, pronounced GOthee and gythja, pronounced GITHya, are derived from Old Norse and refer to a male Heathen priest and a female Heathen priestess respectively. The terms are commonly employed in place of the word “priest” or “priestess” that characterize Christian and Neopagan discourse. Heathen clergy often function in a multiplicity of roles including those of ritual leader, spiritual counselor, magic worker, event organizer, and kindred leader. In more developed kindreds, the gothi/gythja operates in a more specialized ministerial role with other leadership positions distributed to other members.

Hamingja. Luck, a metaphysical force that enables a life to be lived with a degree of success and well-being. Luck is thought to be created or built up from the good and noble deeds of one’s ancestors and inherited through the family line.

Heathen. A term that is used to signify all those who follow the Northern gods, a person who practices contemporary Norse/Germanic Paganism. It functions as an umbrella term that includes all the different subsets of Paganism that take their inspiration from northern European sources. Within the modern Asatru movement, the term carries none of the derogatory implications often associated with it in the broader culture. In this study, it is used almost synonymously with “Asatru.”

Heathenry. A term indicating the family of religions associated with contemporary Norse/Germanic Paganism, the collection of sects that make up Norse/Germanic reconstructionist religion. The term arose during the early Christian era in northern Europe to distinguish Christian converts from those who continued to practice the old religion. It is now widely used by Asatruar to refer positively to their own religious practice. Also, Heathenism, the Northern Way.

Innangard. Literally meaning “within the fence,” innangard refers to the space within boundary fence of the Icelandic farmstead. It is the space claimed and cultivated by human intention. It came to be used as an ethical term equivalent to “the good,” referring to the space of human civilization and order maintained by law and culture. In Asatru it often refers to the trusted relationships that form the social boundaries of a kindred or other Asatru group.

Jarnsaxa Scale. A spectrum developed within the Asatru movement that describes attitudes toward race often found among Asatru adherents.

Kindred. A small local group of Asatru practitioners who meet together on a regular basis for ritual, religious study, and fellowship. Most kindreds consist of unrelated individuals drawn together by shared religious interests and proximity. Some kindreds consist of an individual nuclear family, a form of organization that is often referred to as a “hearth.” Kindreds are often “oathed,” meaning that the members make binding promises to support each other.

Mead. An alcoholic drink made by fermenting honey in water. Often called “honey wine,” the drink is one of the oldest known forms of alcoholic beverages. In Norse

mythology, mead is associated with wisdom and poetic inspiration. A giant brewed a magical mead of inspiration and hid it in his mountain fortress. The god Odin desired this wisdom and was able to infiltrate the fortress and steal the mead with the aid of the giant's daughter. Odin escaped from the fortress in the form of an eagle, but was chased by the giant. In his hurry, Odin sprayed some of the mead over Midgard, giving the gift of poetry to humankind. The drink is ubiquitous in the modern Asatru movement, used ceremonially in rituals and consumed in great quantities socially. Mead is home-brewed by many Asatruar who refine their own special recipes and share bottles with each other. Asatru gatherings frequently include mead-tasting competitions.

Midgard. Literally, the middle enclosure or Middle Earth. Midgard is the physical world and the realm of human beings, one of the nine worlds of the Norse cosmology. Also written Midgarth.

Moot. An Asatru gathering for the purpose of socializing and building relationships, specifically a gathering broader than a single kindred. Asatru kindreds frequently host “pubmoots” which are gatherings in public places, often a bar or restaurant for the purpose of outreach and networking.

Multiplex. A cosmology consisting of numerous worlds or dimensions both physical and spiritual. The Asatru multiplex is composed of nine connected worlds in which all beings including the gods reside.

Oath. A binding promise made before the gods and other witnesses. The words spoken in an oath are thought to go into the Well of Wyrð, influencing the Wyrð of all those who make and witness the oath. Failure to fulfill an oath requires some sort of recompense to those witnesses, an agreed upon payment known as shild, (also shyld).

Oath-ring. A ring, usually four or five inches in diameter, used for formal oathing. Many kindreds and Asatru organizations have an oath ring, often worn around the arm of the chieftain or gothi/gythia. The ring symbolizes the collective Wyrð of the kindred. Oaths made while grasping this ring are binding on the individual as well as the kindred or group who witnesses them.

Odinic Consciousness. A term used specifically by the Odinic Rite to indicate the evolution towards higher states of spiritual awareness in which a person has transcended internal conflict and reached a type of cosmic consciousness.

Orlog. Literally meaning “primal” or “natural” law, orlog is understood to be the accumulated actions of the past associated with each specific individual. It refers to the personalities, traditions, deeds, and values of one's ancestral line, inherited by the individual and shaping his/her life. Orlog is often visualized as layers laid down in the Well of Wyrð, or a thread spun of wool on a drop spindle. Also, Örlog.

Ragnarok. The doom of the gods, the apocalyptic battle of Norse mythology fought

between the gods and giants. In the battle, the giants attempt to destroy the order of the cosmos and reduce the universe to chaos. While the gods vanquish their enemies and save the cosmos from destruction, most of the gods are killed in the process.

Runes. The letters of the pre-Christian, pre-Roman alphabets of northern Europe, developed for writing indigenous dialects. The runes were in use until they were supplanted by Latin in the Christian era and are well attested in archaeological finds. Several runic alphabets, or Futharks (the name consists of the first six letters of the runic alphabet), were developed in different areas of northern Europe and evolved over time. Runes were used for standard writing tasks as well as magical purposes.

Seidh. A term referring to the practice of Norse/Germanic magic, pronounced “Sayth” or “Seeth.” Colloquially, it is often used to indicate the oracular, shamanic magic in which mediums interpret visions received within trance states of consciousness to discover answers for querents. Also written, “seidr,” or seiðr. The magic worker is often called a seidkona if female, or a seidmadhr if male.

Soul complex. A soul made up of many parts. In Asatru the human soul is understood to be composed of at least twelve integrated aspects including both physical and spiritual components. These components include: Hugn, thought or mood; Munr, memory or desire; Míðr, physical strength; Mágn, spiritual strength; Móðr, temperament and personality; Aldr, the “store of life” or “staying power”; Ond, life-breath; Óðr, divine inspiration; Lích, physical body; Hamingja, Luck; Orlog, the ancestral past; Hamr, the astral body underlying the physical form; and Fylgja, the guardian spirit.

Sumbel. An Asatru drinking ritual in which a horn of sanctified mead or other beverage is passed among the participants while each makes short speeches venerating gods, ancestors, and friends. Also, symbol.

Thing. A gathering specifically for purposes of decision-making and resolving disputes through a quasi-democratic process of discussion, compromise, debate, and judicial rulings.

Tribe. In modern Asatru, the term refers to a small group of co-religionists focused on religious pursuits. It is similar to a kindred, but consists specifically of several nuclear families involving parents and children, modeled on the extended family or tribal organization of ancient Norse society. This emphasis on family contrasts with the kindred model of organization which often consists of unrelated individuals.

Universalist. An orientation in Asatru that believes the contemporary religion is *about* the historical Norse/Germanic ethnicity but not strictly *for* people of that ethnicity alone. Universalist groups will receive any serious seeker regardless of ethnic identity or ancestral heritage. Universalists often argue that the gods can call whomever they wish. They frequently point to the practice of adoption among ancient northern European tribes to show that ancient Norse culture was neither xenophobic nor racially exclusive. The openness of Norse tribal society to the

inclusion of outsiders serves as evidence legitimating the Universalist position.

Utangard. Literally *utangard* means “outside the fence.” It referred to that which was beyond the boundary fence of the farmstead, the wild, beyond the sphere of human civilization, tribal law, and society. It serves as an ethical concept in Asatru for those outside of the faith or kindred, unknown and therefore not to be fully trusted.

Vanir. The Vanir is one of the two families of gods in Norse mythology. The best known deities of this family were Frey and Freyja. The family was often associated with the chthonic aspects of earth, agriculture, and fertility.

Volva. A volva is a seeress, a woman with magical, shamanic, or oracular powers. Through self-induced trance states, she is able to see into the spirit world, the Wyrð, and convey hidden knowledge to those who need it. In ancient Norse culture, she was both revered and feared for her abilities. The role is being revived in the contemporary Asatru movement.

Wyrð. Wyrð is the web of all actions that gives rise to present conditions. It is similar to the concept of Fate, but without a sense of inescapable destiny. Wyrð determines the conditions of the present, but beings are capable of free action within those conditions. Wyrð continually evolves as circumstances change and actions are performed. It can be altered by the deeds one performs and the words one speaks.

Well of Wyrð. This well is one of three wells or springs in Norse mythology that water the roots of the World Tree. The Well of Wyrð is understood to contain the past actions of all beings. The water, dew, and detritus that fall from the tree, symbolic of the actions of all beings, accumulate like layers in this well. It holds the Wyrð, the living past which continues to influence and give shape to the present. The Norns, the mythological personifications of Time, stood at this Well.

World Tree. A cosmological metaphor for the structure of the universe. The World Tree supported and contained all the worlds or realms of beings, including the physical realm of humanity and the spiritual realms of the gods. See Yggdrasil.

Yggdrasil. The World Tree in Norse mythology, envisioned as a great ash or yew tree in which the Nine Worlds of Norse cosmology are located.

APPENDIX 2

THE NINE WORLDS OF NORSE COSMOLOGY

Norse myth envisions a complex cosmos consisting of nine realms or worlds, sometimes described as the “multiplex” by contemporary practitioners. These nine worlds represent different spiritual realities that are inhabited by various beings, both spiritual and physical. Although this complexity may give the impression of a disjointed and fractured cosmological vision, the opposite is actually the case. Rather than understanding these worlds as isolated localities, the worldview emphasizes the connections between the nine dimensions as important aspects of the cosmos. Comparing this Norse multiplex to the Christian cosmology, there is no sense of a impassable separation between worlds such as that perceived between the rich man and the beggar Lazarus in Jesus’ parable: “between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence” (Luke 16:26, KJV). Instead, beings more or less freely travel among the Nine Worlds. The gods fare forth upon various vehicles to move among the worlds, such as Odin’s eight-legged horse Sleipnir or Freyja’s falcon cloak. Travel across worlds is also possible for physical beings, including humans whose complex natures allow certain aspects of the soul to move independently of the body, “astral projections” that can travel between dimensions in trance states. This human potential for soul travel is an important conceptual underpinning for the modern practice of seidh in Asatru.

In addition, the cosmology avoids any clear connection between morality and these various worlds. While there is a tripartite division of the upper, middle, and lower worlds, these divisions of the cosmos do not correspond to moral distinctions of good and

evil. Thus no division of the cosmos exists between a morally evil Hell and a morally good Heaven. In the pagan understanding, any being might be potentially useful and helpful at certain times or conversely troublesome and dangerous at others. While in the mythology the giants were often portrayed as terribly dangerous, the gods had relationships and even marriages with them at times. And while the gods were the guardians of order, they were not thought of in moral terms as embodying the Good or representing perfect moral qualities.

Two visions of the cosmos are found in the mythology. The first mythological vision describes how the primordial giant, Ymir, was killed by the god Odin and his two brothers. Using the body parts of the slain giant, the gods construct the cosmos: the dome of the sky from his skull, the mountains from piles of his bones, and the ocean from his blood. This story is somewhat reminiscent of the cosmogony described in the *Rig Veda* in which the universe is constructed from the body parts of Purusha, a giant slain as a sacrifice by the gods.¹ Another similar story is found in the *Enuma Elish*, a work of ancient Babylonian mythology, in which the universe is formed from the slain body of Tiamat, a primordial goddess.² In the contemporary Asatru movement however, this cosmological image receives little attention.

The second mythology account, which envisions the cosmos as a great World Tree, is quite important in the worldview of the movement. This account describes a massive tree, called Yggdrasil that grows from Ginnungagap, the chaotic potentiality that preceded the ordered cosmos. This tree is the source of life and vitality in the cosmos.

¹The account of Purusha appears in the *Rig Veda*, Book 10, Hymn 90. See Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans., *Rig Veda* [online]; accessed 21 February 2013; available from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10090.htm>; Internet.

²Tablets Four and Five of the *Enuma Elish* contain the account of Marduk's battle with Tiamat and the creation of the world from her body. See L.W. King, trans., *Enuma Elish: Epic of Creation* [online]; accessed 21 February 2013; available from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/ane/enuma.htm>; Internet.

The nine worlds are located along the tree, resting in its branches and entwined in its roots. The World Tree image depicts the integrated and organic cosmology that characterized Norse mythology. The universe is one organism, connected and coherent. The life processes of the Tree represent forces operating on a cosmic scale, of which humans play only a small and peripheral part.

An important implication of the World Tree image in Heathen and Pagan cosmology is the idea that the cosmology can be mapped out and illustratively represented. Cosmological maps, often represented as World Trees, are found in numerous societies from ancient Pagan to contemporary Buddhist cultures. The Tree graphically indicates the organic and integrated understanding of cosmology apparent in these Pagan ideologies. The Norse version of the World Tree, known as Yggdrasil, features prominently in the mythology. The tree represents not only the structure of the cosmos, but the theology of Heathen spirituality. Rather than approaching the spiritual world through concepts, the Heathen worldview tends to understand it geographically and relationally. The Tree serves as a map for this approach to spiritual work through practices such as meditation and shamanic journeying.

The Nine Worlds consist of Asgard, the home of the Aesir family of deities; Vanaheim, the home of the Vanir family of deities, Ljossalfheim and Svartalfheim, the homes of the elves and dwarves; Midgard, the physical realm of humans; Jotunheim, the home of the giants, who are often understood as elemental beings; Muspelheim, the primordial realm of fire; Niflheim, the primordial realm of ice; and Hel, the underworld, the realm of the dead.

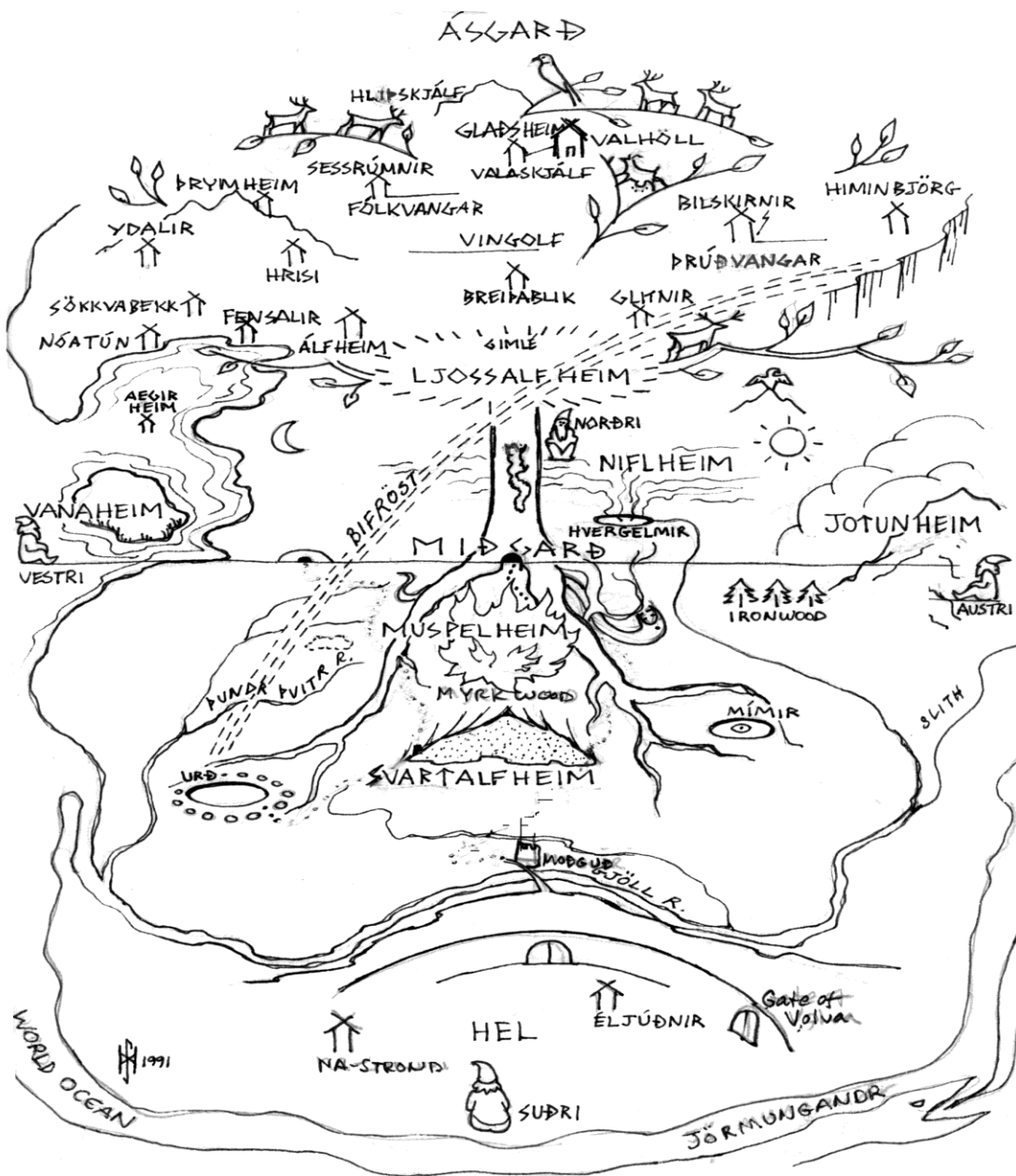


Figure A1. Yggdrasil and the Norse cosmology
Illustration by Diana Paxson, used by permission

APPENDIX 3

THE JARNSAXA SCALE

The issue of race has been controversial in American Asatru. Asatru has often been considered to espouse a racist ideology by those outside the movement. Within the movement, attitudes regarding race have been a polarizing issue. A racist fringe of the movement uses Norse symbols, rituals, and myth to legitimize and enunciate a radical ideology of racism and apocalyptic violence. However, the majority of Asatru adherents have sought to distance themselves from racism while maintaining a connection to the history, culture, and religion of Northern Europe. These dual motivations have led adherents to do the ideological work of carefully describing a spectrum of attitudes and positions regarding race. The most widely-known of such attempts in the movement is called the Jarnsaxa Scale after the Heathen name of its creator.¹

The Jarnsaxa scale describes a spectrum of six positions on race and its connection to Asatru. These positions range from a universalist attitude that sees race and ethnicity as irrelevant for identifying as Asatru, to a deeply racial position that includes a moral evaluation of race in which Northern European ancestry is held to be morally good and superior to other races and ethnicities. The scale allows Asatru adherents to identify their own feelings about race and Asatru. In addition it provides a means for adherents to identify who should or should not be understood as “real” Asatruar. The scale can be used by someone from any position to describe a range of acceptability for inclusion, thus

¹Asatru adherents often create or adopt new Heathen names as part of their identification with the Asatru religion. These names are usually derived from Old Norse and carry religious and cultural weight, often connecting the bearer to a Norse deity, figure from the sagas, or aspects of Norse myth.

functioning as a sort of denominational boundary or even a statement of faith. Because of the importance of this scale and its role in the movement, it is reprinted below.

The Jarnsaxa Scale

Jarnsaxa Scale—The Jarnsaxa Scale is an informal scale of racial and cultural tolerances in Ásatrú written by Kriselda Jarnsaxa (known as Jarnsaxa Thorskona when the scale was originally written).²

What Is It?

As in all organized religions, there are issues in Ásatrú where not all of the practitioners are of one mind. Sadly, one of the most contentious issues in Ásatrú revolves around how open the religion is to people who are not of Northern European/Teutonic racial and/or cultural heritage. Not surprisingly, this is an issue that is very emotionally charged, and it is often difficult to conduct civil discussions on the various positions that are held. To try and remove some of the overt emotionalism that often accompanies this topic, and to try to help clarify what the range of viewpoints are, I have created a fairly basic scale that provides summaries of the most common viewpoints I have encountered or been otherwise made aware of The descriptions are written from the perspective of one who holds that viewpoint. It should be noted that at the furthest ends of the scale, the beliefs held may come across as more extreme, and I have tried to indicate this without belittling the holder of the viewpoint or the holder itself. I have also tried to eliminate as much inflammatory language as possible, and to avoid implying any judgments or personal feelings I may have about any particular viewpoint.

²Kriselda Grey, “The ‘Jarnsaxa’ Scale” [online]; accessed 25 January 2012; available from <http://lyssandri.livejournal.com/313325.html>; Internet.

Validity of Included Viewpoints

Inclusion of a viewpoint on this scale does not mean that it is in any way generally accepted as a "valid" viewpoint by the Ásatrú community in general, only that there are people who call themselves Ásatrú and hold that particular viewpoint.

The Scale

1. Ásatrú is an open religion which anyone can join. There are, however, certain things that must be done in certain ways, certain points of theology that must be strictly adhered to and certain beliefs that must be held. Anyone who doesn't agree with all of these points simply isn't Tru and can be deemed "traitors" to the Gods. One of these points that everyone must agree to is that Ásatrú is open to people of all races, and those who believe otherwise are not welcome and should be actively denounced so that there is no confusion of their beliefs with those of real Ásatrúar. I will only worship alongside those who follow the same beliefs.
2. Anyone who wants to become Ásatrú can, regardless of racial or cultural history. Individuals have the freedom to choose any religion to follow, and I will defend and uphold that right. All are welcome to my Kindred and I will worship alongside any Tru man or woman.
3. As the ties to the Aesir and Vanir are often ties to our ancestors (racial, cultural or ethnic), it is more unusual for those of non-Northern European heritage to be Ásatrú, but it is not impossible. I accept that the Gods and Goddesses will call to them whomever they choose and will worship alongside any Tru man or woman.
4. Only those of Northern European background can truly follow the path of Ásatrú. This does not imply that people of other races are in any way "less" than those of Teutonic heritage, only that they are different. All races and ethnic groups are equal in freedom to make a life of worth, and the theologies and pantheons that are connected to a non-Northern European heritage are every bit as valid and important as Ásatrú. By the same token, all non-Teutonic ethnic paths are just as closed to me as Ásatrú is to others. I feel it is of greatest value to follow the path of your cultural and ethnic background, as these forces have had a great impact on who you are. Because I acknowledge and respect the validity of the various paths, however, I am willing worship with those who respect our Gods but are not of our path or ethnic group, and will certainly worship with any Tru man or woman.
5. Only those of Northern European heritage can be Ásatrú, and Northern European races should separate from all other races. This does not imply that people of other races are in any way "less" than those of Teutonic heritage, only that they are different and that we have an obligation to keep the Northern European blood pure in honor of our Gods. There may even be merit in allying with other races who also value the separation of

racial and ethnic groups and religious paths. I will only worship alongside those who are also of Teutonic heritage.

6. Only those of Northern European heritage can be Ásatrú and the European races and ethnic groups are superior to all other races and ethnic groups. Aryans are the only true humans, and as such have an obligation to keep the racial and ethnic blood pure. If the only way to achieve this is to rid the world of the lesser races, then so be it. Only true Aryans can worship the Aesir and Vanir.

APPENDIX 4

THE NINE NOBLE VIRTUES

The Nine Noble Virtues are a set of principles describing the type of moral character toward which Asatru adherents should strive. Three versions of the Nine Noble Virtues (NNV) are presented here. The Odinic Rite codified the original list of the virtues in the early 1970s. Since that time, the virtues have been widely accepted throughout the Asatru community as a comprehensive statement of the ethical priorities of Asatru. While some Asatru feel that the NNV is outdated and too simplistic, these virtues continue to be influential in Asatru thinking and identity. The Odinic Rite presents them in this single word format without elaboration, although commentaries of the meaning of the virtues can be found in many other sources. The NNV of the Odinic Rite include: Courage, Truth, Honor, Fidelity, Discipline, Hospitality, Self Reliance, Industriousness, and Perseverance.¹

The Asatru Folk Assembly altered the NNV for their own organization, notably including the category of ancestry as a way to emphasize the group's folkish understanding of Asatru. The comparative presentation contrasts the life-affirming values of Asatru with what the movement sees as the the life-negating values of Christianity. While an easy but superficial comparison can be made to the Ten Commandments of Christianity, Asatruar do not interpret these as commandments. They are virtues, ideals of action that shape a noble and good life. The NNV of the Asatru Folk Assembly are as

¹Odinic Rite, "The Nine Noble Viftues" [online]; accessed 21 February 2013; available from <http://www.odinic-rite.org/main/the-nine-noble-virtues-and-charges-of-the-odinic-rite/>; Internet.

follows:

Strength is better than weakness. Courage is better than meekness. Joy is better than guilt. Honor is better than dishonor. Freedom is better than slavery. Kinship is better than alienation. Realism is better than dogmatism. Vigor is better than lethargy. Ancestry is better than universalism.²

The following is an annotated list which expands the virtues from nine to twelve. This summary of the virtues appears in Mark Stinson's book *Heathen Gods*.

Industriousness: Be productively engaged in life. Avoid laziness. Strive to accomplish good things. Justice: Let equity and fairness be your hallmark. Treat others in accordance with what they deserve, and give each person a chance to show his or her best. Courage: Fear is natural, but it can be overcome. Train yourself to do the things you fear, both physically and morally. Generosity: An open hand and an open heart bring happiness to you and to others. The miserly are never happy. Hospitality: In ancient times, travelers were greeted with food, drink, and a warm place by the fire. See that your guests never want. Moderation: Enjoy all good things, but do not overindulge. No one admires a glutton or a person who cannot control his or her appetites. Community: Cooperate with kin and friends, do your fair share, and remember your responsibilities to others. Individuality: Although we belong to a community, we are also individuals with distinct personalities and clearly-defined rights. Respect the individuality of others, and insist on the same in return. Truth: Be honest and straightforward in all your dealings. Avoid deceit and deception. Steadfastness: Learn to persist, to endure in the face of adversity without discouragement. Do not be blown about by every changing wind. Loyalty: Be steadfast in your commitment to others and to yourself. Have a true heart. Wisdom: Learn from your experiences. Grow in the understanding of the world, and of the human heart. Comprehend as much of the universe as you can in the years available to you.³

²Stephen McNallen, *The Values of Asatru* (Payson, AZ: World Tree Publications, 2003), 20 [online]; accessed 21 February 2013; available from <http://worldtreepublications.org/pdfs/valasatru.pdf>; Internet. The AFA is now promoting a set of nine ethical principles that are slightly different from this list of virtues and reflects the evolution of McNallen's ethical thinking. See "AFA Statement of Ethics" [online]; accessed 21 February 2013; available from <http://www.runestone.org/about-the-afa/afa-statement-of-ethics.html>; Internet.

³Mark Stinson, *Heathen Gods: A Collection of Essays Concerning the Folkway of our People* (Liberty, MO: Jotun's Bane Kindred, 2009), 11.

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ABSTRACT

ÁSATRÚ IN AMERICA: A NEW AMERICAN RELIGION

Jefferson Forrest Calico, Ph.D.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013
Chair: Dr. James D. Chancellor

Contemporary Paganism has been a growing segment of American religiosity for over forty years and is composed of a variety of groups, practices, and ideologies. Ásatrú (Asatru), a movement which seeks to revive the practice of pre-Christian Norse religion, remains one of the least studied of these Pagan movements despite its growing prominence in the Pagan community. Mainstream America also has remained largely unfamiliar with Asatru, which is often overshadowed by the more widely recognized form of Paganism known as Wicca.

In addition, Asatru has often been associated with far right or fascist political views and racist ideology, developing a reputation as a movement in high tension with American culture and values. Because of the distrust and skepticism accompanying that reputation, Asatru has been seen through a reductionistic lens as a religious front for racism. For the most part, academic interest in Asatru has focused on exploring the connection with racism and evaluating the role of racist ideology within the movement, while its more religious aspects have been overlooked.

Scholars have recognized that new religions offer alternative solutions to social problems arising from modernity. By disembedding individuals from traditional social contexts, modernity creates social and psychological tensions requiring new modes of identity creation. Using this paradigm, Asatru can be approached as a movement providing creative religious solutions to the tensions experienced by people living in

modern America. This study addresses several areas of tension and solutions including the family, women's roles, and the environment.

Asatru provides an opportunity to study a new religion in the process of transformation as parts of the movement shift toward lower tension with American culture and a more accepted place in the American religious milieu. Asatru is in the process of emerging as a viable and complex religion that achieves a degree of cultural continuity by reinvigorating certain American values within its own religious solutions to contemporary tensions. In this light, Asatru can be seen as a new American religion that incorporates and adapts important cultural values while at the same time challenging scholarly assumptions about new religions.

VITA

Jefferson Forrest Calico

EDUCATIONAL

Diploma, Beechwood High School, Ft. Mitchell, Kentucky, 1989

B.A., Transylvania University, 1993

M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005

ACADEMIC

Academic Assistant, Garrett Fellow, Dr. James D. Chancellor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010-2012

Adjunct Faculty, Somerset Community College, Somerset, Kentucky, 2005-2012

ORGANIZATIONAL

The Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion

The American Academy of Religion