

## Neo-Paganism in Iceland: The Living Memory of the Sacred

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アイスランドの宗教組織アウザトゥルは最も古く北欧島嶼に入植し国を築いた人々のキリスト教に先立つ異教的慣習にその源を求めることができる。本論はアイスランドの文化を背景にこのアウザトゥルを描き出し、その組織・活動に特有な側面を幾つか分析し、宗教復興運動としてみたアウザトゥルの意義を考えてみようとするものである。本論はアイスランドでの実地調査、アウザトゥル信者に行なったインタビュー、北欧古代の文献と伝説とを資料とした。

The Icelandic Ásatrú society is a religious organization which traces its origins to the pre-Christian Pagan or Heathen religious traditions of the earliest settlers of the Nordic island-state. The purpose of this paper is to describe Ásatrú within the Icelandic cultural context, analyze some particular aspects of the group and its activities, and discuss the significance of Ásatrú as a religious revival movement. The article draws on fieldwork in Iceland, interviews with members of Ásatrú and research into Old Norse texts and folklore.

The scholarly enterprise known as comparative religion is a complicated, ambiguous undertaking for many reasons, not the least of which is the cultural and historical background out of which this field of study first emerged. The comparative study of religion developed as an academic discipline in the Christian-dominated cultural area of Europe and North America (the West), and is in many ways something of a stepchild of Christian theology. It is therefore unsurprising that the study of religion has often betrayed a Christian bias, with the Christian form of religion often seen as the norm against which other religions were compared. In the nineteenth century, scholars in any number of different fields found it entirely natural to view human history as a one-way street inevitably leading to the triumph of what they felt to be the most sublime and philosophically superior religion, Christianity. This was the position taken by Hegel in his *Philosophy of History* no less than the early anthropologist Edward B. Tylor in his work *Primitive Culture*.<sup>2</sup>

The long and hard-fought history of Christian theology and philosophy has given us our contemporary situation in which many university departments of religion are often closely allied if not in fact merged with departments of philosophy. This predisposes the study of religion toward a concentration upon religions that possess highly refined philosophical traditions, and parallel traditions of asceticism and monasticism, such as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, and puts religions of lesser or less obvious philosophical refinement at a distinct disadvantage. These lesser religions are often investigated by scholars in other human sciences such as history or anthropology, resulting in a bifurcation of the field of religious studies that is regrettable.

The same problem of the heavy weight of Christian heritage applies to the most essential comparative issue of all: the question of what this thing called religion actually is. Most contemporary dictionaries provide, to their credit, multiple definitions of the term religion, but the first one offered is usually something to do with the worship or adoration of God or a Supreme Being. Giving this definition pride of place immediately privileges Christian-like monotheistic

religions, and casts a shadow of doubt on religions of polytheism, conveniently ignoring the fact that throughout history and across the world, polytheistic religious traditions have flourished in abundance and often contributed to great cultural vitality. Reflecting upon such difficulties, it becomes obvious that a workable definition of religion applicable to the immense variety of religious traditions in the world cannot be something overly narrow or restricted, but must necessarily embrace a wide variety of human experiences and expressions.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim, and after him the Romanian historian of religion Mircea Eliade, developed an understanding of religion as collective experience and activity directed toward something defined as Sacred, something of higher order and greater meaning than the things of ordinary life. More recently, the eminent scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith has articulated the concept of religion as Sacred persistence, collective activities undertaken to preserve and sustain cherished forms of approaching, understanding and experiencing the Sacred.<sup>3</sup> The concept of Sacred persistence alerts us that over time, the focus of concern in a given religious tradition may shift from the original Sacred thing or experience which formed the basis and foundation of said religious tradition, to the beliefs and activities established by earlier generations to express their affinity with their Sacred things. That is to say, the form of relationship with the Sacred becomes itself Sacred and remains so even when the original Sacred becomes remote or inaccessible.

Islam may be viewed as an example of a religion based quite firmly on the remoteness of the Sacred. Islamic tradition teaches that Allah's communication with Mohammed was mankind's last direct contact with the Sacred (Allah) until the eschatological drama to commence at the end of time. In the post-Mohammed phase of history, Allah no longer speaks directly to man, but the record of God's speech, the Qur'an, remains as God's final and perfect testament. With Allah so remote and the Qur'an so directly accessible, it is no surprise to find that the Qur'an has come to occupy an extremely high status in Islamic theology, if not entirely equal to Allah in Sacredness. This illustrates how textual, artistic, folkloric and other such representations or remembrances of the Sacred may replace actual contact or direct experience of the Sacred as the focal point of religious concern and Sacred persistence. The original Sacred remains meaningful as a reference point, but it is the concretized, articulated forms of the Sacred, the Sacred once-removed, so to speak, that now occupy attention and invite participation and devotion.

In the following, I will apply this conception of religion as the aggregate of activities devoted to the Sacred and more particularly, the notion of Sacred persistence to Ásatrú, a modern neo-Pagan religious movement in the Nordic island-nation of Iceland.

## **Overview of Ásatrú**

The Icelandic Ásatrú society<sup>4</sup> is a religious organization which traces its origins to the pre-Christian, Pagan or Heathen religious traditions of the earliest settlers of the Nordic island-state. Ásatrú has no formal creed or dogma, accepts the validity of other faiths and offers neither salvation nor savior. Many members of Ásatrú do not believe in the ancient gods in the unequivocal, dependent way of the Western monotheistic traditions. Theologians of such traditions might not find

Ásatrú terribly satisfactory as a religion, but there is much in Ásatrú that is Sacred to its members, and as an organization which provides its members with an opportunity for remembering and celebrating the Sacred, Ásatrú can surely be described as a religion. The task of this paper shall be to describe Ásatrú within the Icelandic cultural context, analyze some particular aspects of the group and its activities, and discuss the significance of Ásatrú as an ancient-modern hybrid religion centered on a Sacred once-removed, a Sacred forcibly removed by history and now lovingly revived by memory.

## The Icelandic Context of Ásatrú

The first thing which must be understood about *Ásatrúarfélagið*, the Ásatrú Society, is that it is an Icelandic cultural phenomenon, rooted in the history, texts and folklore of a particular place and people. In this it is to be distinguished from other groups elsewhere in Scandinavia and America employing the same name. All Ásatrú groups are united in attempting to reconstruct and reinterpret for modern times the myths, beliefs and folklore of pre-Christian Scandinavia, but they differ widely in the types of knowledge and assumptions which they bring to this enterprise. For members of American Ásatrú groups, their first encounter with Nordic myth is very likely to have been through the popular Thor comic books or outdated nineteenth century romantic reconstructions of Germanic-Nordic myth and religion.

For Icelandic Ásatrúarmenn, the textual and folkloric traditions from which they draw are neither exotic nor foreign, but are basic components of their national cultural heritage. A visitor to the Icelandic capital city of Reykjavík quickly discovers that the old gods—or at least their names—are everywhere. Streetnames include Óðinsgata, Thorsgata, Baldursgata, Tysgata, Freyjugata, Aegisitha and even Lokastigur.<sup>5</sup> A short walk from the restaurant Óðinsve, we find the healthfood store Yggdrasil, named after the great world-tree of Nordic myth, and many other examples could be cited. A very large number of Icelandic personal and surnames are formed from Thor, for example, Thorlakur, Thordís, Thora and Thorstein among dozens of others. Even Thorlakur Thórhallson (d. 1193), the bishop of Skálholt who was later declared the patron saint of Iceland, had a thoroughly Pagan name, which was not considered any impediment to the bestowal of exalted Christian status.<sup>6</sup> This is one of many examples of how Icelandic Christianity was in many cases not so much anti-Pagan as built upon the Pagan, and shows how Icelandic culture has rarely applied an either-or, exclusionary logic to religious matters, but has often preferred to combine strength with strength, Sacred with Sacred. Though the establishment of Christianity in Iceland did entail a ban on the worship of Thor, Odin, and the other Pagan gods and goddesses, belief in Christian saints and deities has never prevented Icelanders from continuing to revere the Elves and other hidden folk and invisible beings which are believed to reside in the countryside, as will be further explored below.

From the time of Iceland's formal adoption of Christianity as the official state religion in the year 1000, Iceland has never been a fanatically Christian country nor particularly orthodox in what Christianity it has had.<sup>7</sup> A strong case can be made that the decision to accept Christianity was motivated more by economic and political considerations than any authentic Christian fervor.<sup>8</sup> When the *Alþingi* (the

Althingi or All-thing, the meeting of all, the quasi-parliament of early Icelandic society)<sup>9</sup> adopted Christianity in the year 1000, the Christian establishment in Europe, consisting of both the church and kings and other leaders exercising their rule in close coordination with the church, had achieved a nearly monopolistic control of trade and politics in the European world. It was evident that good political and economic relations with Christian Europe depended on at least a semblance of Christian conversion, and so this semblance was achieved and good relations secured, but this does not mean a deep and meaningful transformation of religious consciousness, nor a wholesale rejection of the Pagan spiritual heritage.<sup>10</sup>

Iceland became Christian, but not in the same way as in contemporary Europe or to the same degree as in the modern United States, with few persecutions and very little religious violence. The nation's laws were altered to restrict the old Pagan religion to private observance, and then later, with increasing Christian control of legal and institutional authority, to ban it altogether, yet an enduring affection for the old ways remained embedded in the culture alongside knowledge of the Bible and the myths and doctrines of Christianity, as the Sagas, which were for long Iceland's most popular literature, attest. A line was drawn against Paganism, but not a very sharp or severe line, and in Iceland's relatively high degree of tolerance as compared with Europe or America, we find the fertile field in which the seeds of Ásatrú were able to again take root some ten centuries after the supposed Christianization of Iceland.

The everyday, Pagan-derived nomenclature of streets and persons in Iceland is a mundane but significant indicator of how the lore of the ancient gods remains a living part of the Icelandic cultural memory as well as a source of national pride. The widespread use of the names of Pagan gods does not mean that the Icelanders believe in these gods, only that they revere and enjoy their past tradition, including the bygone Pagan deities and religion. Such reverence may reach a higher level of intensity and self-consciousness among Ásatrúarmenn than many other Icelanders, but the root emotions and attitudes are very much the same, with the difference more of degree than of essence. A number of distinguished Icelandic scholars and intellectuals whom I interviewed at the national university in Reykjavík expressed a barely muffled contempt for Ásatrú, but it was clear that they did in fact share Ásatrú's strong devotion to the Icelandic past and cultural heritage, especially its ancient literature.

It is the mythical Eddas and semihistorical Sagas, based partially on oral tradition and largely set into written form by clerical scribes and educated laymen in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which are the most respected monuments of Iceland's cultural heritage. They were focal points of the Icelandic nationalism which gained increasing momentum in the nineteenth century and eventually succeeded in winning independence from Denmark in 1944.<sup>11</sup> Now, more than 50 years after the foundation of the modern nation of Iceland, the Eddas and Sagas remain staples of the educational curriculum and are continually revisited and revitalized in artistic and literary creation. One outstanding recent example is the celebrated 1987 novel *Gunnlaðar Saga* (Gunnlöð's Saga) by Svava Jakobsdóttir, in which a woman falls into a reverie while gazing at the Gundestrup Cauldron in the National Museum of Copenhagen, and finds herself unstuck in time, to use Kurt Vonnegut's phrase, and reliving the episode of Ódin's love-affair with the giant's daughter Gunnlöð from the Eddic poem *Hávamál*. Neither novel nor novelist have

anything to do with Ásatrú, but Svava Jakobsdóttir's imaginative re-working of past Pagan tradition draws on the same love of ancient heritage that also inspires Ásatrú.

A recent government-supported collaboration between Ásatrú and the Icelandic theatre community illustrates the degree to which Ásatrú has become accepted within the Icelandic establishment. This is a theatrical performance dramatizing the Eddic poem *Skírnismál* that was first produced by Ásatrú in December of 1995 and has now become an annual winter pageant timed to coincide with the winter solstice on December 21 or 22.<sup>12</sup> *Skírnismál* is, most simply, the tale of the love of the fertility god Freyr for the beautiful giantess Gerð. Freyr sends his servant Skírnir to Gerð as a Cyrano de Bergerac-like emissary in the hopes of winning her hand, which Skírnir finally manages through an adroit combination of magical spells and threats. In the context of the production, Freyr's passion for Gerð is seen as symbolizing nature's desire for new life and vitality in the depths of winter, a theme with particular resonance in Iceland, where the shortest day of the year is very short indeed, with only a few hours of light separating the brief and fragile dawn from the all-engulfing darkness.

The original production in 1995 was funded both by Ásatrú and a grant from the national government, and was staged in the basement of the Reykjavík Ráðhús, the city hall, with a distinguished audience including the Prime Minister and the mayor of Reykjavík. The government funding, the staging of the pageant in a government facility, and the two government leaders' attendance at the event illustrates how little discord there is between mainstream Icelandic interest in the country's past cultural heritage and the Ásatrú agenda of reconstructing past Pagan tradition. Such government involvement with an explicitly Pagan theatre production, based on an explicitly Pagan text and sponsored by an explicitly Pagan religious group would be unthinkable in the USA, with its markedly Christian identity, the increasing influence of Christian fundamentalists at all levels of the political system, and the tendency of candidates for public office to pepper their speeches with references to the Bible and Judeo-Christian values.<sup>13</sup>

However, not all of Icelandic society is of one mind about the country's past heritage. With Iceland having achieved independence and a high level of prosperity, asserting the uniqueness of Icelandic culture and celebrating its past splendors has become less of a priority for many Icelanders. Against the backdrop of the emerging tapestry of European economic and political union, internationalism has come to match nationalism as a driving force in the self-definition of Icelandic identity. As Icelanders look toward the future and try to find their place at the table of European integration, the general desire of Icelanders to understand themselves as Good Europeans has also affected scholars' views of the Icelandic past, including the semi-canonical Eddas and Sagas. It has been the dominant trend in recent literary studies of the Old Icelandic texts to emphasize the influence of the medieval church and Latin learning, the European Union of medieval times, and to therefore show that from the very earliest times, Iceland was a European Christian nation drawing on the best of European church-based culture. In this heavily biased reading of the past, the kind of ancient, pre-Christian and Pagan traditions celebrated by Ásatrú are viewed as embarrassing, incomprehensible anachronisms, and are accordingly rejected by many scholars as insignificant matters undeserving of exploration.

However, the very vehemence with which some contemporary scholars attempt to disprove or disinherit the Pagan features of these texts calls to mind

Shakespeare's notion of the lady who protests just a little too much. The Old Icelandic texts are a manifest blend of church-derived literary form and Pagan myths and lore. Scholars of medieval literature have tended to fixate on the medieval Catholic church as the mainspring of western civilization and to interpret early Icelandic history, culture and literature within this church-centered framework *only*. However, scholars of comparative religion have long detected in the Icelandic texts strong indications of archaic Indo-European influence far predating the Christian determination of these texts assumed by medievalist scholars.<sup>14</sup>

For the average reader unburdened by any scholarly baggage, it is quite plain to see that the Pagan gods and myths are prominent and aesthetically pleasing features of these ancient texts. Without the colorful presence of the Pagan gods, whether occupying the narrative foreground in the Eddas or performing more of a supporting role in the Sagas, the ancient Icelandic literature would be as lifeless and emasculated as the castrated rams whose singed faces and pickled testicles are standard fare for Icelanders during the winter feast of Thorraþlót.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, the Pagan gods and myths and the texts which have immortalized them are vital and enduring elements of the Icelandic cultural heritage, however much this may displease certain quarters.

By highlighting the Pagan, pre-Christian aspects of the Icelandic past and attempting to reconfigure these to suit modern times, Ásatrú helps to preserve a link to cultural resources which some would prefer to abandon. That these cultural resources are also spiritual resources, and that Ásatrú is a religious group as well as a cultural heritage movement, becomes more explicit when we consider Ásatrú rituals, ethics and beliefs about the Sacred.

### Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson and the Early History of Ásatrú

The problem of the definition of Ásatrú as a religion or merely a cultural heritage movement was inherent in the founding of the group in 1972. Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson (1924-1993) was both a farmer and a poet well-respected for his skill in composing and performing poems in a wide variety of early Icelandic styles. He decided with a group of friends and fellow history and literature enthusiasts, including Jormundur Ingi Hansen, the current *Allsherjargoði* or High-priest of Ásatrú, to form an association dedicated to the pre-Christian customs, myths and beliefs of early Iceland. Some wanted this to be a primarily scholarly society investigating Iceland's Pagan religious heritage, but Sveinbjörn, Jormundur and several others insisted that this be an explicitly and self-consciously religious group. From the very beginning, then, there was in Ásatrú a wide variety of motivations and interests ranging from the literary to the scholarly to the religious, with Sveinbjörn himself, a man at once both a poet and a religious person, embodying the complex intersection of these different agendas.

Sveinbjörn and his compatriots approached the Ministry of Religious Affairs to request official recognition of their new-old religion, which would entitle their organization to a share of the revenues generated by the national religion tax and empower them to perform marriages, funerals and other such religious ceremonies. They did not at this early time call their movement Ásatrú, preferring instead the name *Vor Sithur* (Our Custom) which was felt to more accurately reflect their

priorities in seeking to reconstruct and reinterpret ancient religious traditions, beliefs and customs. The name *Ásatrú*, meaning belief or faith (*Trú*) in the ancient gods (the Aesir, hence *Ása*) became a necessity when government officials, obviously skeptical toward the idea of a non-Christian religion in officially Lutheran Iceland,<sup>16</sup> made clear that it would be easier for the group to win recognition with a name which indicated a belief in some form of deity. Facing the problem of how to operate within a Christian-determined paradigm of what is and is not religious, Sveinbjörn and his colleagues adopted the name *Ásatrú* despite the fact that most members of the group did not so much believe in or worship the ancient gods so much as cherish them as symbols of the ancient heritage whose spiritual values, ideals and customs they hoped to preserve and promote.<sup>17</sup> This greater concern with Pagan cultural and spiritual heritage than with actual worship of the Pagan gods, the traditions of the Sacred as opposed to that which was originally held as Sacred, remains a dominant motif of *Ásatrú* today.

The name *Ásatrú* is problematic for another reason. By referring to belief (*Trú*) in the Aesir, the term *Ásatrú* may appear to exclude or invalidate reverence for other divine or Sacred creatures. This is certainly a misrepresentation of the belief-system articulated in the Eddas and Sagas, which includes an extensive catalogue of varied divine beings, both benevolent and destructive, ranging from the Aesir gods to the fertility-oriented Vanir gods to the Elves, Dwarves, Giants, fate-carving Norns, battle-guiding Valkyries, guardian-spirit *Fylgjar*, female deities known as *Dísir*, and localized nature spirits known as *Landvaettir*. The name *Ásatrú* also ignores the rich Icelandic folk-belief, surviving into modern times, involving the existence of Elves and Dwarves, carried over from the old literature, as well as Trolls and most importantly, *Huldufólk*, the invisible inhabitants of hillsides, lava-formations and other natural features, like the Fairies of Celtic tradition or the *Kami* of Japanese Shinto. Although the ancient Aesir and Vanir deities may be said to be people of the book in that their lore is related in the Eddas and Sagas, the *Huldufólk* are creatures of folklore without representation in any prestigious literature. Considering this wide range of divine and uncanny beings which inhabit the Icelandic religious imagination, *Ásatrú* is clearly something of a misnomer, but one that was accepted as a practical and political necessity.

Miracles are good public relations for any aspiring religion, and the early days of *Ásatrú* can boast at least one noteworthy and uncanny event which might be possible to classify as a miracle. One day during the summer of 1972, when Sveinbjörn and his associates were involved in negotiations with the government over establishing *Ásatrú*, they were leaving the offices of the Ministry of Justice, the government office entrusted with religious affairs, when a mighty lightning bolt flashed across the sky, struck a power station in the capital and plunged much of Reykjavík into darkness. Such powerful electrical storms are almost unknown in Iceland, despite the ready availability of many other forms of inhospitable weather involving various combinations of ice, snow, rain and gale-force winds. Several of my *Ásatrú* informants rather gleefully interpreted this lightning-storm as divine intervention on the part of the thunder-god Thor, expressing in no uncertain terms his great displeasure at the government's continuing refusal to acknowledge *Ásatrú*. Following this demonstration of the power of the ancient gods, so the legend is told, the government had a sudden change of heart, and soon decided to grant official recognition to *Ásatrú*.

Do Ásatrúarmenn believe this was a miracle? An unequivocal answer is neither possible nor very useful for conveying the actual quality of Ásatrú thought and sentiment. No member of Ásatrú with whom I spoke about this unusual lightning insisted in somber tones that it be understood as a miracle, but many took a mischievous delight in the possibility. This mixture of reverence and humor is a distinctive characteristic of the Ásatrú religious attitude, winking at the Sacred more often than worshipping it, but with an extremely affectionate and knowing wink, like that shared between friends or lovers. Religion need not necessarily lack humor nor does a humorous attitude necessarily imply disrespect for the gods; it may simply communicate a sense of intimacy.<sup>18</sup> Once again, we are confronted with the problem of how we are to define religion and conceive its boundaries.

### Sveinbjörn's Contribution

Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson deserves special mention as a man whose personal authority, warmth and charisma were key factors in the successful establishment of Ásatrú as an accepted part of the Icelandic religious and cultural landscape. In my interviews with Icelanders both inside and outside Ásatrú, I heard few, if any, unkind words spoken toward the man. Sveinbjörn appears to have earned the posthumous status of a kind of folk hero and an enduring affection even among people who object to Ásatrú. There are several reasons for the positive feeling toward Sveinbjörn. As a farmer who was also a poet, a man engaged in cultivating both the land and the language of Iceland, he represented two of the most highly valued realms of Icelandic life. While not regarded as a great or significant poet, Sveinbjörn was nonetheless respected for his knowledge of difficult and archaic styles and metres.

On his farm in Dragháls in the township of Borgarfjörður, Sveinbjörn stubbornly refused the comforts and conveniences of modern technology, living without electricity or indoor plumbing well into the 1980s, with the sole exception of a transistor radio, a fitting concession for someone with such a deep love of the Icelandic language. Several younger Icelanders who visited Sveinbjörn's farm in their childhood recall the great fun they had in seeing this kindly old man with his long white beard, living in his old-fashioned house surrounded by antiquated items, like a visitor from the world of their great-grandparents, or as Hjörtur Smárason put it, "like Santa Claus."

Sveinbjörn was not entirely closed to the modern world, however, as he demonstrated in the early 1980s by appearing at various Reykjavík venues where he performed ancient Eddic and *rímur* poetry alongside young punk-rockers grinding out abrasive, electric rock music. Such appearances were all the more striking for Sveinbjörn's distinctly pre-modern persona and helped to win the respect of youthful Icelanders and arouse their curiosity if not their full comprehension or aesthetic appreciation.

Sveinbjörn's interests in archaic forms of poetry, a pre-technological lifestyle, and the Pagan heritage of the early settlers were all but different manifestations of the same devotion to the past. As Icelanders love their past, so also they loved this charming elder who so authentically and appealingly personified this past.

Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson died on Christmas Eve, 1993, and his funeral service was broadcast on national television.<sup>19</sup> Sveinbjörn's funeral contained both Pagan



and Christian elements. He was buried in a Christian churchyard alongside his close kin and laid into the ground not with a book of psalms as is customary in Icelandic Christian burials, but with a number of items with distinctively Pagan associations, such as a drinking horn used at Blót rituals, two Thor hammer pendants, and the Eddic text *Hávamál* (The Teachings of the High One, i.e., Odin), as well as a book of favorite Icelandic poems and his pipe. The funeral service was performed in the church adjoining the graveyard. A Christian minister who had been a close personal friend of the departed gave Sveinbjörn a Christian farewell, Sveinbjörn's successor as Ásatrú high priest Jormundur Ingi read from the Eddic poem *Voluspá*, (The Speech of the Seeress), and the church choir sang traditional songs that were much more easily identifiable as Icelandic than either Pagan or Christian. The relaxed combination of Christian and Pagan elements in the funeral demonstrates the Ásatrú principle, clearly articulated in the group's bylaws and literature, that membership in Ásatrú does not preclude participation in other faiths or rituals. In maintaining this self-consciously nonexclusive, antidogmatic stance toward other religions, Ásatrú pays tribute to the religious situation of the early settlers, a rather pluralistic arrangement in which some Icelanders practiced Paganism, some Christianity, some both, and some neither, as far as can be told from such early records as *Landnámabok* (the Book of Settlements) which tell of the first generations of Nordic settlers.

### Growing Membership, Increasing Acceptance

Following Sveinbjörn's death and the publicity generated by the funeral, Ásatrú experienced a rapid growth in membership which has continued to the present. The membership at the time of the funeral was 120 and in the five subsequent years has grown to 320, a small figure by international standards but significant in the Icelandic context.<sup>20</sup> Asked to explain this steady growth in the group's membership, members and observers suggested several reasons: (1) the publicity around Sveinbjörn's funeral re-awakening previous interest in the group; (2) a series of scandals in the state Lutheran church, particularly a sexual harassment case against a prominent church official, motivating disgruntled church members to seek alternative religious organizations; (3) a feeling among young people that it is *toff* (cool) to be in Ásatrú, based on a perception of this organization, so ultra-traditional and ultra-conservative in its regard for the past, as something rebellious and alternative, for this reason appealing to such people as a biker gang or group of motorcycle enthusiasts who call themselves *Oskabörn Óðins* (the dreamchildren of Odin); and (4) a growing general acceptance of Ásatrú due to its having not only survived, but flourished into its third decade of activity and now become part of the mainstream Icelandic culture. As Jormundur Ingi pointed out to me, Ásatrú now has many younger members who have never known a time when Ásatrú did not exist. To them, Ásatrú is nothing new or shocking, but an established organization occupying a secure and relatively unthreatening position in their consciousness.

## The Organization of Ásatrú

Ásatrú today has several governing structures responsible for the day-to-day operation of the organization and for special events such as the seasonal Blót-feasts and the *Allsherjarthing* (General Assembly, more literally the Thing or Assembly of All People). These structures overlap and are intended to prevent any one person or governing body from becoming overly dominant or autocratic, though in practice the *Allsherjargoði* has considerable influence over the society as a whole. The main governing structures are the *Logrétta* (Administrative Council, more literally the Law-Court), the *Frankvaemdastjórn* (Executive Board), and the *Allsherjarthing*. The *Allsherjargoði*, the Goði of All People, the Ásatrú High-Priest, is the overall leader of Ásatrú. This position has gradually evolved into a lifetime appointment, with the possibility of recall or impeachment through a majority vote at the General Assembly. The term *goði* (gothi, pl. *goðar*) goes back to the settlement period of Icelandic history, referring to wealthy, land-owning farmer-chieftains with control of temples built on their land where seasonal feasts and sacrifices were held.<sup>21</sup> There was no separation of religious and political functions, no distinct castes of rulers, farmers, warriors or priests. Any or all of these roles would be performed by the *goðar* and their retinue on different occasions.

In today's Ásatrú, the *Allsherjargoði* is the main spokesman for the association, responsible for public relations and representing the group on ceremonial occasions. His most important ceremonial role is in consecrating the National Parliament each year, with an equivalent Christian blessing administered by an official of the state church. The *Allsherjargoði* likewise consecrates all Ásatrú meetings that he attends and takes the lead role in all Ásatrú rituals and activities. The *Allsherjargoði* is legally empowered to perform weddings, funerals, and other such life-cycle rites as well as to sanctify contracts of all sorts, for which he is entitled to charge small fees. The other *Goðar* are also empowered to perform the same rites and collect the same fees. Neither the *Allsherjargoði* nor the *Goðar* receive a salary.

While the *Goðar* together with the *Allsherjargoði* are the spiritual and ceremonial authorities of the organization, it is the Executive Board which constitutes the primary management of the Ásatrú and handles its everyday operation and finance. The Board consists of the Lawspeaker, an alternate Lawspeaker in case of the official Lawspeaker's absence, a Secretary, a Treasurer and one Member-at-Large without specific duties. The Lawspeaker's role, based on the position of the same name in ancient times, is to preserve official documents and promote knowledge of the laws of the organization, appoint board members to specific positions, except for his own position, which is decided by the Administrative Council, and to organize board meetings and call them to order. The Executive Board meets at least four times per year, and is responsible for organizing Blót-feasts and deciding the timing and location of the General Assembly.

The Administrative Council is composed of the *Allsherjargoði*, the other *Goðar*, and the Executive Board. The Administrative Council meets three times a year in addition to the annual General Assembly meeting on the last Saturday in October. The meetings of the Administrative Council are open to the general membership of the Ásatrú but only Administrative Council officials are empowered to vote. Administrative Council meetings review and may alter Executive Board decisions and may address disputes between members and the overall direction of the

organization. The Administrative Council selects the Lawspeaker from among those elected to the Executive Board. Decisions of the Administrative Council may be subject to further discussion and vote at the General Assembly.

The General Assembly is in many ways the most powerful governing structure. As the most democratic and inclusive structure, open to all members in good standing twelve years and older, it is sometimes extremely turbulent. The General Assembly elects the members of the Executive Board to two year terms, with two others elected to one-year terms as alternates. Changes in the association's laws and procedures can only be made, and major initiatives and expenditures undertaken, with the 2/3 majority approval of the *Allsherjarthing*.

In a General Assembly which I attended in 1996, there was intensive debate about plans to purchase land and construct a *hof* (temple). Some in Ásatrú feel this is a necessary step in the further establishment of the religion, while others strongly object to Ásatrú becoming more formalized and churchlike, and wish it to remain informal and improvisational. The *Allsherjargoði* and other Administrative Council members presented reports and proposals, with other society members expressing opinions pro and contra frequently and noisily. The obvious tensions and heated emotions seemed to illustrate both the success of Ásatrú in functioning as a democratic institution which places a high value on the involvement of its members, and also the inherent difficulties in allowing open debate among a large number of diverse and strong-willed people.

Several of my Ásatrú informants expressed exasperation at the presence of strange, abnormal and disruptive people in the Ásatrú, meaning people burdened with emotional or addiction problems or endowed with extraordinary cantankerousness. However, when I asked if they would want to see such persons banned from the *Allsherjarthing* or excluded from the organization altogether, not one person endorsed this idea. No one wanted to see Ásatrú lose its open, inclusive and generally tolerant character.

Some Ásatrú movements in America and Scandinavia have been known to espouse racist and neonazi ideology, with the desire to preserve Nordic cultural and spiritual heritage conflated with a racist dream of Nordic racial purity. Such groups interpret the ancient Nordic apocalyptic myth of Raganarok in a racist light, as a final, cataclysmic race-war which they intend to win.<sup>22</sup> I am not aware of any member of Icelandic Ásatrú espousing such sentiments or ideology. The *Ásatrúarmenn* I spoke with in Iceland were all appalled at such groups and their Neonazi ideas of pure blood and racial purity, and vehemently disavowed any affiliation with them. A criticism of the *Allsherjargoði* that I heard from several Ásatrúar was that Jormundur Ingi's frequent contacts and visits with overseas Ásatrú groups risked Icelandic Ásatrú becoming linked with racist or Neonazi groups. Even among such critics, no one believed that the *Allsherjargoði* had any interest in or sympathy for such race-based religious groups. Their chief concern was that Jormundur might be inadvertently drawn into some embarrassing affiliation with such people. When I questioned him on this point, Jormundur asserted that he would not knowingly enter into any formal relationship with any neo-Nazi Ásatrú groups, and that if he did have informal contacts with any such groups, he would break off communication upon learning of any ideology of Nazism or racism.

In interviews with other Ásatrúarmenn I found great interest in non-Nordic, non-European native peoples and religious traditions. Jón Ingvar Jónsson, former Ásatrú Lawspeaker, was quite eloquent on this point.

It's more interesting that we should communicate with people in native religions [than with people in foreign Ásatrú groups]...like native people in Australia, Indians in America, people like that. About Ásatrú, some people say it is racism, and it is very hard to hear that, because for me...I think that no person is better than another....There are Ásatrú people all over the world, and I respect them highly for their interest...but they have not so much in common with us. We should help them with their studies, but we should be more interested in native religions, because, for instance, Ásatrú people [in other regions]...they are always going further from their own origin, from their own culture. They are stepping away from their culture, their history, their tradition....What we are trying to do is build on our ancient tradition, to know our history, to try to live and understand our background...Ásatrú people in Australia are maybe not doing that, but what they're doing is good, they are interested and that's OK... but if they would think about the native religion [in Australia], they would go and try to build...on the ancient values [of Australian native religion]. Therefore, we [Ásatrú in Iceland] have more in common with native peoples and religions than with [foreign forms of] Ásatrú.<sup>23</sup>

Iceland is however, an extremely homogenous nation, and the true test of Icelandic Ásatrú's seeming tolerance and inclusiveness will come if and when non-white, non-native Icelandic people seek to become members of Ásatrú.

## Ritual in Ásatrú

Ásatrú ritual displays two marked features: (1) a conscious attempt to recreate or at least pay tribute to past tradition as this is known from ancient texts and folklore, and (2) an open invitation to ritual participants to innovate, omit, or alter ritual elements according to their personal tastes and priorities. As a result, there is a constant tension between conservative and innovative impulses. Ásatrú rituals may be divided into public and personal rituals or ceremonies. The main public rituals are the seasonal Blóts, organized by and for the Ásatrú community as a whole. These are Sacred feasts in honor of ancient sacrifices timed to coincide with the summer and winter solstices and spring and autumn equinoxes in an annual ritual calendar. The personal rituals, usually performed by a family with the necessary presence of a Goði or the Allsherjargoði, are weddings, name-blessings, coming-of-age rites (akin to the Christian confirmation ceremony), and funerals.

To the present time, weddings have been the most frequently performed personal rituals. Because there is no manual of pagan ritual from ancient times, and because Sagas, Eddas and other early sources do not contain detailed descriptions either of weddings or of any other rituals, it has been necessary for modern Ásatrúarmenn to creatively interpret and combine ancient texts to develop a suitable old-new ritual. In a description of the Ásatrú wedding ceremony which he kindly provided me,<sup>24</sup> Allsherjargoði Jormundur Ingi Hansen discusses a number of sources from the Eddas.

The most important one is the marriage of Sigurdrífa and Sigurd [from *Sigrdrífumál* (The Lay of Sigurdrífa)], perhaps better known as Brunhild and Siegfried in Richard Wagner's magnificent opera, *The Ring of the Niebelungen*. It contains most of the elements used, the Ring of Fire and the Sacred Mead given to the bridegroom by the bride. The marriage of

Ódin or Wotan to Gunnlod in *Hávamál* mentions the second day of the marriage feast and the three drinks of the Sacred Mead. Then there is the marriage of Freyr to Gerd [in *Skírnismál*] which again mentions the Sacred Ring of Fire. The marriage ceremony preferably takes place outside, if possible under a tree and/or close to water, and there should be a Ring of Fire, *Vafurlogi* (surrounding flame).

The outdoors setting is carefully chosen to represent pagan reverence for nature and specific natural features of Sacred import in the Eddic texts, particularly the tree echoing the World-Tree Yggdrasil, the water reflecting the Well of the Norn Urð and/or the Well of Mímir, the fire speaking of ancient sacrifice.

The Goði calls on a wide variety of gods to witness and bless the wedding, consecrating the occasion with the following formula from the Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál*:

Hail to the Day, hail to the sons of Day  
 Hail to the Night and her Daughters  
 Look upon us with kindly eyes  
 And grant to us all victory  
  
 Hail to the Gods, hail to the Goddesses  
 Hail to the bountiful Earth  
 Grant us speech and wisdom and healing hands  
 As long as we shall live.<sup>25</sup>

This same formula is used in consecrating the funeral rite as well.

The wedding proceeds with the Goði reciting other selected passages from the old mythological literature and also asks the blessing of gods and goddesses in a more straightforward manner. The Goði invokes the world-tree Yggdrasil, the three Norns who rule mankind's destiny, and the goddesses Frigg, guardian of home and marriage, Freyja, Goddess of love and fertility, and Vár, protectress of all pacts made between man and woman. Turning to the groom, he quotes *Hávamál* 47:

Young I was and travelled alone  
 thus I lost my way.  
 Rich I felt, when another I found  
 man rejoices in a companion.

And to the bride, the Goði reads from *Hávamál* 50:

Withers the fir that stands alone  
 sheltered neither by needles nor bark  
 So is the one that no one loves  
 how long shall she live?

The bride and groom each state their equal intentions and responsibilities to each other in the same words: "I call upon all gathered here to witness that I (name) take this man/woman (name) as my husband/wife, and fully understand the responsibility and solemnity of this my decision." The Goði then gives the bride a drinking-horn filled with Sacred mead, echoing the Eddic marriage scenes, and she then pours libations to Frigg, Freyja and Thor, guardian of all humanity. After drinking a single draught from the horn herself, she offers it to the groom, quoting once more from *Sigrdrífumál* (v. 5):

Ale I bring you, you Oak-of-Battle,  
 blent with strength and brightest honor  
 mixed with charms and mighty songs,

worthy magic and merry runes.

The groom then pours libations to Thor, Freyja, and Frigg, invoking the same deities as his bride but in the reverse order. He drinks three times from the horn, recites a verse from *Skírnismál* expressing Freyr's longing for his future bride Gerð (v. 42), then returns the horn to the bride that she may drink twice. Having each drunk three times from the Sacred horn, they return this to the Goði. He directs them to place their hands together over a ring or arm-band which he offers to them, and then ends the ceremony with the formula, "In the name of Vár I proclaim you man and wife."

It is a simple ceremony that achieves a certain elegance and drama from its references to ancient literature and mythology, the use of medieval customs such as the drinking-horn and the arm-ring, and the beauty of the natural setting. The simplicity of the rite allows participants leeway to add or alter elements as they may desire. The same mixture of elements are present in the most solemn rite, the funeral. Two passages from Jormundur Ingi Hansen's description of Ásatrú funeral procedures will serve to illustrate how ancient heritage is selectively interpreted and applied on this very different occasion.

The first part of the ceremony takes place at the home of the deceased who is dressed in his/her best clothes or uniform if that is appropriate. The wife or husband, son or daughter places his grave-goods in the coffin, such as books, utensils of his or her profession, even food and drink. Favorite pets can also be buried in the coffin or beside it. This part of the ceremony is only attended by the closest family and best friends. The Goði or family member speaks a few words of farewell and reads an appropriate section of the Edda or from other literature. The coffin is closed and marked with the sign of the deceased's favorite god, and if there are no special wishes, the sun-cross is used. Singing and music can also be performed (Jormundur Ingi Hansen).

The second half of the funeral takes place at the burial-ground where the coffin is laid in the ground. Along with readings of the Edda and remembrances of the deceased by the Goði, friends or family, Jormundur Ingi suggests the following meditation, drawing on the myth of the tree Yggdrasil:

All things are transitory. The growth of the Earth flourishes in the sunshine but just as unfailingly withers in the autumn. Note, however, it sprouts once more next year. So it is with all life, we are born and grow and mature but wither in the autumn of life like the vegetation of the earth. Life and death are eternally connected. Without life there would be no death and without death there would be no rejuvenation of life. In the center of the world stands the World-Tree, mighty Yggdrasil, the tree of life, ever-green over the well of Urð. Our lives can be likened to the leaves on the Ash [tree]. As soon as one of the stags grazing on the tree bites a leaf, another bud springs to life. So, life is eternal though our allotted time in Midgard seems all too short (Jormundur Ingi Hansen).

At the conclusion of the funeral, the Goði wishes the deceased well in whatever form of afterlife they were known to believe or feel an affinity for. Ásatrú has no official doctrine or dogma concerning the afterlife, which follows directly from the ancient texts which describe a variety of different options from the warriors realm Valhalla to the cold and dreary Hel of the Snorra Edda to ancestors feasting together within the local landscape as told in certain saga accounts. And then,

Everyone in turn casts earth on the coffin and those that so desire may also make sacrifices of small symbolic pictures of sun-crosses, Thor's hammers or horses into the grave. The

torches [set at the four corners of the grave] are kept aflame as everyone leaves to join in the funeral feast, where the eulogy is given by a friend or relative (Jormundur Ingi Hansen).

A fuller exposition is necessary to analyze the many meaningful details inherent in this funerary ritual, but what is most evident is the free interpretation and flexible adaption of ancient poetry, lore and customs without the intrusion of any dogmatic ideology. There is reverence for divine and Sacred beings and above all, for nature, but neither fear of punishment nor any expectation of divine intervention or salvation.

Weddings and funerals and other private rituals are important but exceptional events. The regular ritual life of Ásatrú is the seasonal Blót. The one and only Ásatrú ritual I have experienced at first-hand is a Haust Blót (Autumn Sacred Feast) in September of 1996, which was also my first meeting with members of Icelandic Ásatrú. My apprehension at being an intrusive foreigner interfering with another people's Sacred customs was eased by the kindness and immense personal grace of Jón Ingvar Jónsson, then the Lawspeaker, who had invited me to attend the event after we had exchanged several messages through e-mail.

On a Friday evening I rode with Jón Ingvar and about a dozen others in a chartered bus to a beautiful rural location about a half hour north of Reykjavík en route to Borgarnes, in the village of Kjalarnes. We walked a short distance from the road to a roughhewn stone circle nestled in the side of a dark, imposing ridge. Looking down from our spot halfway up the hill, there was a beautiful view of the sun setting over farmlands bordering the ocean. A fire was built in the center of the stone circle as people greeted each other and others continued to arrive to a total of about 50, at which time it was growing dark. Most people came dressed in ordinary clothes, but some wore old-style, traditional-seeming garments. Another member of the Executive Board, Jóhanna Pálsdóttir, engaged in setting up several elegantly carved posts between which was stretched a plain green banner about 4' high by 20' wide. Small lamps were placed here and there in the hillside around and above us, providing the light of myriad small fires to echo the large bonfire around which we gathered in a circle.

The Blót was officially inaugurated by a Goði who recited a formula of consecration and read from the Eddic poem *Voluspá*. The Lawspeaker Jón Ingvar Jónsson chose to read a nineteenth century poem, *Ásareidín* (the Ride of the Aesir) by Grímur Thomsen, reflecting on the passing of the old gods and the importance of historical memory (*Saga*, meaning both story and history). A drinking horn was then passed around the circle, and before each person took a drink, he or she made a toast to the god(s) or Sacred being(s) of their choice. This activity fully illustrated the inadequacy of the term Ásatrú, as many chose to salute not the Aesir gods like Ódin and Thor but the Vanir gods Freyr and Freyja and other Sacred beings such as the Landvaettir (landspirits), the Elves and the Disir (female spirits or deities). Some made very brief and perfunctory toasts, others more elaborate and poetic statements, some quoting from ancient literature, some offering their own compositions or spontaneous utterances. Jóhanna played flute in the background as a man strummed a guitar or tapped on a small drum. At one point people began to clasp hands and sway together to the music, but this did not progress to the point of actual dancing. Hand-carved wooden drinking cups were distributed and continually refilled with Brennivín (Burnt Wine), the strong, schnapps-like native Icelandic liquor affectionately known as the Black Death. The beautiful natural

setting, roaring fire, gentle music, strong drink and easy camaraderie all contributed to a most convivial atmosphere. Hangikjot, a smoked leg of lamb which is a traditional Icelandic delicacy, was also available for each participant to carve into and eat. A collection was later taken up to pay for the food and drink.

The other main activity involved the green banner which had been set up by Jóhanna Pálsdóttir. She distributed paintbrushes and white paint and invited all in attendance to paint some symbol or design onto the banner. A wide range of white shapes appeared on the banner ranging from a tree, perhaps the world-tree Yggdrasil, to human-like figures, a Viking-era ship, and runes, the pre-Roman written characters of the early Scandinavians. When all those interested had applied their contributions, the banner was taken down and hurled into the fire as a sacrificial offering which contained something of each person present. After these activities, the gathering gradually dissipated into small groups of friends drinking and conversing. It was now about 10 PM and people began to leave, as my group soon did also.

According to my informants, this Blót is fairly representative of many others in recent years. The consecration, recital of poetry, toasting of Sacred beings, and festive eating and drinking are standard features of Blóts. Most Blóts are also performed out of doors, except for the winter solstice Blót (Jólablót) which may be staged in a restaurant or other such indoor facility on account of the often harsh winter weather. The improvised music, the possibility of dancing, and the communal banner-painting are activities which have been the cause of some controversy in Ásatrú. At the risk of oversimplifying, my impression is that one faction within Ásatrú, led by Jóhanna Pálsdóttir, is eager to have more of these exuberant, participatory activities, and to move in a direction of more ecstatic and sensually exciting experience.<sup>26</sup> Another faction, representing the *Allsherjargothi* and other older members, prefer more staid and dignified procedures. For them, a cheerful evening of shared food, drink and heartfelt recitations of poetry in a consecrated setting is sufficient. The two factions have had difficulty reconciling their different needs and priorities, leading to the departure from Ásatrú of Jóhanna Pálsdóttir and Jón Ingvar Jónsson among others. I have the impression that these differences may in time prove to be more fruitful than fatal, resulting either in the creation of new structures within Ásatrú to allow more ecstatic pursuits, or perhaps the creation of one or more new groups outside the existing Ásatrú which will be similar in spirit but feature more spontaneous and experimental ritual activities.

The Blót which I attended impressed me on the most basic level as a friendly drinking-party with folkloric overtones, a group of sympathetic people enjoying a pleasantly inebriated descent into past tradition, but there was something more as well. The stark natural setting was a very important part of the evening, a greater-than-human presence literally looming over our tiny human forms gathered for warmth around the fire. The two most powerful values or ideals communicated by the Blót were reverence for nature and respect for past cultural and spiritual tradition, emphasized in many forms, including the old-style stone enclosure, the carved wooden drinking-cups, the use of fire and candles rather than electric light, the traditional Hangikjot and Brennivín, the wearing of traditional clothes, and last but not least, the reciting of ancient poems and myths.



## Ásastrú Ethics

In the Old Norse religious and mythological literature, there is no single text giving a definitive statement of Norse Pagan ethics, but rather many different brief statements and observations scattered across the literature. The single text which contains the fullest discussion of ethical issues is the Eddic poem *Hávamál* (The Speech of the High One, i.e., Odin), a text prominent in Ásastrú ritual life, as we have seen, that is also a featured text in the Icelandic educational curriculum. *Hávamál* is a mixed bag of advice and mythology which scholars have judged to be drawn from quite various sources and time-periods, but this miscellaneous pedigree does nothing to diminish the high regard in which it is held in Iceland. Icelanders revere the text as inspiring, human-based and humanly-meaningful literature, not as direct revelation from infinite deity. As elsewhere, the Sacredness is given through the shared meaning of tradition, not imposed by religious authorities or proven by philosophers.

A large part of the appeal of *Hávamál* consists in its earthy, pragmatic wisdom, a code of ethics grounded not in abstract notions of justice and order, but in the struggle to survive and enjoy life with friends and family despite the difficulties posed by enemies and nature. The core of Icelandic society for most of its history has been the farmer, and *Hávamál* gives us a hardbitten farmer's kind of earthy wisdom, where wit, cunning and generosity are more highly prized than moral exactitude. Some characteristic maxims of *Hávamál* include:

To his friend a man should be a friend  
and repay gifts with gifts;  
laughter a man should give for laughter  
and repay treachery with lies (v. 42)

A farm of your own is better, even if small  
everyone's someone at home;  
A man's heart bleeds when he has to beg  
for every single meal (v. 37)

Average-wise a man ought be,  
never too wise;  
for he lives the best sort of life,  
he who knows a fair amount (v. 54)

Silent and thoughtful a prince's son should be  
and bold in fighting;  
cheerful and merry every man should be  
until he waits for death (v. 15)

Fire is best for the sons of men,  
and the sight of the sun  
his health, if a man can manage to keep it,  
living without disgrace (v. 68)

Cattle die, kinsmen die  
you yourself shall die

I know one thing which never dies:  
the reputation of each dead man (v. 77)<sup>27</sup>

There is propounded here no absolute ethical standard, no aspiration to saintliness or moral perfection, but simply the attempt to live a life of enjoyment, accomplishment and integrity within an acceptance of human limitations. This down-to-earth, matter-of-fact view of life is profoundly humanistic without denying the importance of the Sacred or the supernatural. Gods, Elves and other supernatural beings are however conceived in largely human terms, as are relations with these beings and among them. The ethics of *Hávamál* and other ancient Norse texts are very much relational or relationship-centered: one seeks to be on good terms with other people, with the natural world and the supernatural world as well, while not shrinking from conflict and from defending one's rights where the need arises. There is no turning the other cheek, no valorization of peace at any cost or meekness as an end-in-itself. The Sagas in particular celebrate tough, shrewd heroes who fight on against the odds and do not back down, even at the cost of death.<sup>28</sup> This reflects the attitude of the gods in facing the final battle of Ragnarok. They are fated to fall in combat against the giants, as Odin learns in *Voluspá*, but prepare in full earnest and make their maximum effort nonetheless. The sense of living a dignified life without any hope of a miraculous salvation is central to the ethics and world-view of the ancient Norse texts, valued in Icelandic culture in a general way and also within Ásatrú, though members are always free to pursue their own interpretations and adaptations.

## The Sacred and the Supernatural in Ásatrú

The classification of Ásatrú as a religion depends largely on how we define religion. If religion is defined as absolute belief and total emotional dependence upon a transcendent deity with the hope of future salvation, then Ásatrú is clearly *not* a religion. But if religion may be defined as the shared pursuit and cultivation of activities and attitudes which bring people into contact with something which they define as Sacred, then Ásatrú may indeed be so classified.<sup>29</sup> For Ásatrúarmenn, what is Sacred is not so much or not only the ancient gods, but the historic traditions, cultural heritage and natural landscape with which the Nordic gods and other supernatural beings are associated. All of these things are indeed *Vor Sithur*, Our Custom, a source of pride and inspiration as well as amusement for members of Ásatrú.

There are Ásatrúarmenn who would reject the above characterization of Ásatrú as a religion. Former Lawspeaker Jón Ingvar Jónsson, for instance, in explaining his reasons for leaving the group, declared quite emphatically, "I believe in nothing." No sooner had he made this dramatic announcement, however, then he began to tell me of different aspects of Ásatrú that were indeed highly meaningful to him: the closeness to nature, the old poetry, the respect for the past. What he did not believe in was the *literal* reality of the gods or other such beings, accepting them only as metaphors and guiding figures in cautionary tales.

No member of Ásatrú spoke of a literal belief or direct experience of these beings, but a number of people mentioned knowing other people in or out of Ásatrú who did believe in Huldúfólk, Elves and other spiritual beings dwelling in and

protecting the landscape of Iceland. I developed the suspicion that some of the people I interviewed may indeed have had their own belief or experience of Elves or other hidden beings, but chose to keep their own feelings private by speaking instead of unidentified other people. Baldur A. Sigurvinsson interpreted this in terms of Icelanders desire to present themselves, especially to foreigners, as completely modern, sane and scientific, without any beliefs or ideas that might give rise to ridicule, and suggested that a longer and more intimate acquaintance with Icelanders might open the way to a more honest and open discussion of these hidden matters.<sup>30</sup> Or perhaps not.

An objective demonstration of the fact that many Icelanders regard Elves and Huldufólk as a reality is found in the government's road-building policy. The public works administration employs one official for the sole purpose of routing roads away from locations where they might disrupt the dwellings of hidden supernatural beings. Psychics known to possess the ability to perceive the dwellings of such hidden beings are consulted to make sure that a projected road will not trespass upon or disturb the Elves or Huldufólk. It is believed, based, I am told, on actual past experiences, that interference with these beings is an extremely risky business, as they may retaliate by causing sickness, mechanical malfunction or other calamities. Treating them with kindness and respect will produce benefits or at least avoid conflict.

Assuming that some Ásatrúarmenn believe or have experience of Elves and Huldufólk as do other Icelanders, such belief is another way in which the love of the land and respect for nature is expressed in Ásatrú. The Elves and their other invisible kin are not transcendent deities separated from mankind by an unbridgeable gulf, occasionally popping by to work a miracle or drop off a scripture. They are part of the natural landscape, and their primary concern is to preserve the land in which they dwell alongside mankind. The Huldufólk are in this way not so much supernatural as ultranatural, representing not an overcoming of nature in the hopes of a better deal beyond but a deep reverence for the land and the mysterious powers able to cause fertility or famine. The gods of the ancient myths are also associated with powers of nature: Thor with storm and lightning, Freyr with the growth of crops, Freyja with sexuality, fertility and death, and Njorthur with the fecundity of the ocean. The land is also where the ancestors are said to dwell, either in mounds or inside mountains, in such texts as *Eyrbyggja Saga* and *Landnámabók*.<sup>31</sup>

Again and again, the link with the land is reiterated, on multiple levels of meaning. Jormundur Ingi Hansen called my attention to a passage at the beginning of the medieval law book *Grágas* in which it is declared that ships approaching Iceland with dragon-heads mounted on the prow must conceal or remove such devices to avoid alarming the Land-Spirits. One can but sadly observe that the Landvaettir today must pass some very unhappy hours when they contemplate the growing pollution in Iceland caused by the total lack of recycling facilities, despite the increasing amounts of garbage that come with Iceland's adaptation of modern consumer culture, and the almost total lack of sewage treatment facilities for human waste, most of which is simply dumped in the ocean untreated.<sup>32</sup> It is possible that Ásatrú, as a group rooted in ancient heritage with a high level of concern for the integrity of the natural landscape, may be able to play a useful role in raising the ecological awareness of the nation in future times.

We see, then, that the Sacred in Ásatrú weaves together a number of diverse elements, ranging from myths, values and traditions associated with the ancient texts, to the history and cultural heritage of the nation going back to the earliest times, to a love of the land and a reverence for the forces of nature which may be imagined or experienced as supernatural beings. This is a very Icelandic Sacred, deeply rooted in the texts, traditions and earth of Iceland. It is also a very postmodern Sacred, with more diversity than dogma, with many beloved narratives but no monolithic meta-narrative, allowing a broad range of interpretations and experiences only loosely tied together with the thread of reverence for the Pagan traditions of the past, Vor Sithur, Our Custom. Icelandic Ásatrú is best understood as a thoroughly Icelandic, yet thoroughly postmodern form of religion, rooted in the past but looking toward the future.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the author's experiences living in Iceland while studying at the University of Iceland (Háskoli Íslands) from September 1996 through May 1997 courtesy of a Fulbright Commission Fellowship research and a short visit for interviews and document collection in February of 1998. Special thanks to Baldur A. Sigurvinsson and Hjörtur Smárasson, anthropology students at the University of Iceland, who freely shared their own research and reminiscences with the author and provided numerous forms of assistance, including humor, food and translation.

<sup>2</sup> For a thoughtful overview of the development of the field of study, see Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (1982): 36-52

<sup>4</sup> The term Ásatrú will here be used to denote the religion as a system of beliefs and also the society as a whole, Ásatrúarmathur (Ásatrúarmar) (sg), Ásatrúarmenn (pl), its members.

<sup>5</sup> Ódin (Óðin) is the sovereign god of poetry, magic, war and wisdom; Thor, (Þór), the god of thunder and power who protects mankind against the giants; Baldur, the son of Ódin slain by mistletoe who returns from the dead to rule the cosmos after the battle of Ragnarok; Týr, another god of battle also associated with oaths and honor; Freyja, the great goddess of fertility, beauty, war and magic; Aegir, the god of the sea; Loki, the god of mischief and deceit who leads the forces of chaos in Ragnarok. The most important texts are *Snorri Sturluson: Edda* trans. Anthony Faulkes (1987) and *The Poetic Edda* trans. Carolyne Larrington (1996). In this article, anglicized versions of Norse-Icelandic names will be employed where these are well established in modern English usage, hence, *Odin* for Óðin, *Thor* for Þór, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Árni Björnsson, *High Days and Holidays in Iceland* (1995): 46-48.

<sup>7</sup> Basic issues and useful discussions concerning the early Icelandic church are available in Jón Jóhannesson, *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*, trans Haraldur Bessason (1974): 118-221 and Jesse Byock, "Integration of the Church" in Byock, *Medieval Iceland: Society, Sagas and Power* (1988): 137-164.

<sup>8</sup> Pétur Pétursson describes a similar lack of Icelandic religious enthusiasm in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in his study, "Revivalism and Lay Religious

Movements on Iceland: a Survey and an Account of the Current State of Research" in *Scandinavian Journal of History* 11, 4 (1986): 335-344. Pétursson quotes as follows a letter from a frustrated Swedish Pentecostalist missionary writing in 1921: "The position looks almost hopeless in Reykjavík, where most of our meetings have been held. We have achieved little success; just a few individuals who have sought salvation along with a sister who has received baptism in the Spirit. Apart from these cases, there has been no hunger after God among the people. It looks as if the Spiritists and Theosophists have the greatest power here—oh, how deplorable!" (p. 342).

<sup>9</sup> The Alþingi was the semi-democratic, quasi-parliamentary annual gathering of regional leaders and their retainers where laws were debated and revised, business deals arranged, conflicts mediated and grievances settled, often celebrated as the world's first democratic parliament. The site of the Alþingi remains an important national monument today as a symbol of the country's early independence before submission to Norwegian and then Danish control beginning in 1262, a period of foreign domination that was often ruthlessly, if not lethally exploitative for the bulk of the population. See Jóhannesson (1974): 35-93, and Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (1982) and *Medieval Iceland: Sagas, Society and Power* (1988).

<sup>10</sup> See Dag Strömback, *The Conversion of Iceland* (1975) and Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, *Under the Cloak: the Acceptance of Christianity in Iceland with particular Reference to the religious Attitudes prevailing at the time* (1978).

<sup>11</sup> See Gunnar Karlsson, "A Century of Research on Early Icelandic Society" in Anthony Faulkes, ed., *Viking Revaluations* (1993): 15-25 and "The Emergence of Nationalism in Iceland" in Sven Tagil, ed., *Ethnicity and Nation-Building in the Nordic World* (1995): 33-62, and, Gísli Pálsson, *The Textual Life of Savants: Ethnography, Iceland and the Linguistic Turn* (1995).

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, the theatre director for the first year's production and a scholar of religion and mythology in her own right, for showing me a videotape of the production and sharing her experiences in working with Ásatrú in putting *Skírnismál* on the stage.

<sup>13</sup> It is acceptable, even endearingly risqué, for an American politician to play the transvestite and dress in drag, as Rudolf Giuliani did during a fall 1997 appearance on the popular comedy program "Saturday Night Live," but if the Mayor of New York City had attended a Pagan event sponsored by a neo-Pagan group such as Wicca, he would have committed political suicide, so great would have been the outcry from devoutly Christian segments of the population.

<sup>14</sup> Examples include the sociologist of religion Haraldur Ólafsson's fine study of "Indo-European Horse Sacrifice in the *Book of Settlements*", *Temenos* 31 (1995): 127-43, illustrating the coherent if well-concealed Indo-European component inherent in early Icelandic religion, and the numerous works of Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, the eminent folklorist and historian of religion, including "Old Norse Religion in the Sagas of Icelanders" in *Gripla* 7 (1990): 303-321 and *Blót í Norraenum Sið* (1997), a full-length study of sacrifice in early Iceland, which contains an English language summary.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the historical evolution of the holiday, see Árne Björnsson, *High Days and Holy Days in Iceland* (1995): 88-92.

<sup>16</sup> More than 95% of Icelanders are registered as members of the National Lutheran Church, but this does not indicate a high level of Christian piety or participation, only the fact that all citizens are automatically reckoned as members of the state church unless they formally request otherwise. As most Icelanders do not care very much one way or the other about this, most remain listed on government records as members of the Lutheran church, despite the fact that their only participation in church life is likely to be in the form of the automatic financial contribution which is annually siphoned from their taxes. The resentment many Icelanders feel toward this mandatory tax is leading some to join alternative religious groups like Ásatrú, others to call for the separation of church and state. My thanks to naturalist Ole Lindquist and Professor Haraldur Ólafsson for enlightenment on this point.

<sup>17</sup> An apt comparison could be drawn with early (Theravada) Buddhism, where the cultivation of certain values, attitudes and disciplines taught by the Buddha was seen as the core religious issue, not worship of the Buddha(s) or other divine beings as would later become dominant in Mahayana and particularly Pure Land Buddhism.

<sup>18</sup> See my "Odin, Loki, Thor: Grim Gods and Gallows Humor" in *Explorations: Journal of Adventurous Thought* 14, no. 1 (1995): 79-82.

<sup>19</sup> I am grateful to Hjörtur Smarasson for detailed information about Sveinbjörn's funeral.

<sup>20</sup> Though Iceland is somewhat larger in land mass than its North Atlantic neighbor Ireland, it has only 275,000 residents compared to the approximately 5 million population in Ireland. Some say that when the Elves and other invisible inhabitants are included, the population of Iceland is however much higher.

<sup>21</sup> For the political function of the Goði, see Byock (1982) and (1988) and Ross Samson, "Goðar: democrats or despots?" in Gísli Pálsson, ed., *From Sagas to Society* (1992): 167-188. For the religious dimension, see Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson, "The Function of the Tenth Century Goði" in *Temenos* 21 (1985): 23-29.

<sup>22</sup> See Jeffrey Kaplan, "Odinism and Ásatrú" in his *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (1997): 69-99.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Jón Ingvar Jónsson, computer technician, 41, married, one son, former Lawspeaker, now withdrawn from Asatru. We spoke in his home in Reykjavík in February 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Jormundur Ingi Hansen will be publishing the full texts from which I here take excerpts.

<sup>25</sup> *Sigrdrífumál* v. 3-4, Jormundur Ingi Hansen trans., revised by M. Strmiska.

<sup>26</sup> My impressions of these differences within the Icelandic Ásatrú community are based upon my interviews with Jón Ingvar Jónsson, Jóhanna Pálsdóttir, Jormundur Ingi Hansen, Baldur A. Sigurvinsson and Ole Lindquist in February of 1998 in Reykjavík. My thanks to all for greatly enhancing my understanding of the different parties' conflicting views and priorities.

<sup>27</sup> Translation of *Hávamál* adapted from Carolayne Larrington's translation of the *Poetic Edda* (1996).

<sup>28</sup> While quite a few Sagas conclude with the heroes converting to Christianity and heading off to Rome on a pious pilgrimage, this is usually the least memorable part of the story and reads rather like an advertisement for the Christian faith tacked on as a political necessity, providing a cover for the main body of the text just as health-warnings on packs of cigarettes only slightly disguise the cigarette companies' desire to cause profitable addiction. One could also compare the standard paeans to Marxist-Leninist Communist ideology that authors were required to insert into USSR scholarship, even where the other contents had absolutely nothing to do with Lenin or Marx.

<sup>29</sup> I develop this line of thinking in greater depth in my article "Religion as Art and Entertainment: toward a Continuum Model" in *Explorations: Journal of Adventurous Thought* 14, no. 3 (1996): 35-54.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Baldur A. Sigurvinsson, anthropology B.A student at the University of Iceland and research assistant for this article, in his home in Reykjavík in February 1988.

<sup>31</sup> *Eyrbyggja Saga* (ch. 11) and *Landnamabók* (ch. 85).

<sup>32</sup> I am grateful to the expatriate Danish historian and naturalist Ole Lindquist for educating me about the dark and dirty side of Iceland's "unspoiled natural beauty."