

**Testing the Temperature  
of a 50-year-old New Religious Movement**

**Ásatrúarfélagið**

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## Abstract:

Ásatrúarfélagið is a 50-year-old neopagan movement in Iceland. Numerous neopagan movements have arisen globally as alternatives to normative, traditional religions, and draw from pre-Christian, autochthonous ritual practices, beliefs, and literatures. Recent scholarship trains attention on neopagan movements in the US, especially those using Norse historicization to legitimize white supremacist doctrines.<sup>1</sup> Current scholarship on such neopagan new religious movements (NRMs) tends to focus on religio-racial theories and skews toward social-scientific research; however, such foci and methods may not adequately apply to Ásatrúarfélagið. With their central tenet of respecting all other religions and cultures, Ásatrúarfélagið is a springboard for expanding humanistic, scholarly understanding of neopaganism and NRMs. We plan to conduct zoom interviews with current members, apply religious studies hermeneutics to their recommended sources, and contextualize our findings with reference to secondary literature on other NRMs. Our resulting paper will explore how the case of Ásatrúarfélagið may productively complicate and expand the field of NRM studies within the academic study of Religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Damon T. Berry, *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017); Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 69-99; Stefanie v. Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Studies in Critical Social Sciences) (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017); Jefferson F. Calico, *Being Viking: Heathenism in Contemporary America* (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2018).

## Project Narrative:

Christianity was adopted as Iceland's state religion at the dawn of the 11th century, and the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, has dominated its religious landscape since the 16th century Icelandic Reformation. In spite of the hegemonic force of Christianity on Iceland, pre-Christian folk practices and beliefs have persisted, often through absorption into the dominant religious practices. In 1972, the farmer-poet Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, along with a few others, founded *Ásatrúarfélagið* to address what they felt was a tenacious and pervasive Icelandic desire to cultivate and celebrate their authentic identity, untethered from the culturally and spiritually dominant import, Christianity. The establishment of New Religious Movements (NRMs) to redress colonial harm is by now a familiar maneuver to scholars of religion, a discipline where decoloniality is an entrenched and productive discourse, and grassroots religious movements that challenge exogenous religious institutions are frequently the subject of research.<sup>2</sup> The establishment and growth of *Ásatrúarfélagið* interests us as scholars of religion because it presents an autochthonous, pluralist, religious option that co-exists with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, less to redress colonial harm than to elevate the distinctive Norse roots of Icelandic culture.

In addition to cultivating a definitively Icelandic identity, another central purpose of *Ásatrúarfélagið* is to promote understanding and respect for folk and other old traditions “without underestimating other religions, old or new, or the culture of other nations.”<sup>3</sup> Pluralist in orientation, *Ásatrúarfélagið* emphasizes tolerance and respect towards their own ancient

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<sup>2</sup> *Vide* the prevalence of “decolonial” in panel and paper titles from the last decade from the [American Academy of Religion](#) annual meetings; the AAR is both the showcase and pulse of the field of religious studies. Decolonial scholarship has recently dominated the Critical Theory and Discourses in the Study of Religion Unit, which happens to be co-Chaired by principal investigator (faculty name).

<sup>3</sup> <https://asatru.is/um-asatruarfelagid/>

traditions and those of other groups, considering that “fanaticism or hatred towards others can never be in line” with Ásatrúarfélagið.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Ásatrúarfélagið considers “morality ceremonies” to be central to their work and faith. In these ceremonies, teenagers take a series of preparatory courses run by ordained priests in the organization, and the morality ceremonies are understood as Ásatrúarfélagið’s alternative to Christian confirmation. The courses teach what they consider to be pagan ethics based on the *Poetic Edda* and *Hávamál*, two books of Ancient Norse poetry. The priests also organize discussions around current social and political issues with the goal of encouraging teenagers to express themselves and engage in philosophical speculations about life and existence. Participants explore topics such as “*Good and evil, black and white. Pros and cons of humans and gods. Nature and the environment. What responsibilities do we have as adults? What is most important for the future?*”<sup>5</sup> These courses and their concomitant morality ceremonies function within the central mission of Ásatrúarfélagið to promote tolerance and respect for every person, tradition, and culture, within a framework grounded in Icelandic identity and ancient Norse tradition.

Ásatrúarfélagið’s explicit emphasis on tolerance for other cultures and traditions complementing their own ethnic identity complicates current scholarship of other neo-pagan movements that, like Ásatrúarfélagið, ground themselves in ancient Norse tradition, often to construe racially-bound identities into a supremacist narrative. Since the 1970s there has been an outburst of numerous neopagan revival movements in the US and in Europe. Some of these movements fit well into scholarly frameworks of naturalizing racial power and producing supremacist doctrines.<sup>6</sup> One movement that fits more clearly into such religio-racial frameworks

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<sup>4</sup> <https://asatru.is/um-asatruarfelagid/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://asatru.is/sidfesta/>

<sup>6</sup> Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

is the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA), a US-based new religious movement that uses Norse tradition to legitimize white “folk identity” and to bolster white supremacist doctrines. We noticed, however, that while *Ásatrúarfélagið* shares the same root historicization as AFA, the rationale and consequence is considerably different. As a subject for comparative study, then, *Ásatrúarfélagið* appears to strain scholarly frameworks currently deployed to understand Norse-resurgent religiosity that are keenly attentive to the AFA and similar NRMs in North America: naturalized power, appropriation, and white supremacy. Part of why *Ásatrúarfélagið* complicates ‘naturalized power’ approaches is that the movement does not seem to promote political or racial power agendas; the movement publicly portrays themselves as actively teaching progressive values and practices such as tolerance, ethical behavior, and respect for ancient cultures beyond just their own ancient culture. In other words, *Ásatrúarfélagið* historicizes their identity and practice to “ancient tradition,” as the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) does, but *Ásatrúarfélagið* does not proclaim a naturalized superiority or racial hierarchy.<sup>7</sup>

The study of New Religious Movements is a defined field within the American Academy of Religion, and considerable work has been performed on white supremacist NRMs, several of which historicize themselves with reference to Norse tradition. *Ásatrúarfélagið*, as an insular NRM in Iceland, is understudied and largely unrepresented in any extensive scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Humanistic scholarship on *Ásatrúarfélagið*, grounded in close-reading its core texts recommended to us by our contacts and based on first-hand accounts garnered through interviews, is an important corrective to dominant social-scientific scholarly theories, which

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<sup>7</sup> For example, they permit but do not encourage proselytizing missionary work.

<sup>8</sup> A notable exception is Michael Strmiska, “Ásatrú in Iceland: The Rebirth of Nordic Paganism?,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol.4, No.1 (October, 2000), pp. 106-132. This decades-old article covers the history of the movement, its rituals and ethics, and its discomfort with associations to self-proclaimed Ásatrú groups in North America with fascist, neo-nazi, and white supremacist leanings.

perhaps inadequately generalize race and identity-power agendas to all neopagan movements. Use of Norse mythology and tradition in our case study cannot be understood as appropriation or as tools of race-power legitimization. As former Ásatrúarfélagið Lawspeaker Jón Ingvar Jónsson said, “What we are trying to do is build on our ancient tradition, to know our history, [and] to try to live and understand our background.”<sup>9</sup>

Religious studies research tends to gravitate towards the world’s major religions, monolithically framed as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. Yet, according to Gordon Melton, the executive director at the Institute for the Study of American Religions at UCSB, 40-45 new religious movements emerge each year in the US alone.<sup>10</sup> Considering how rapidly NRMs are erupting and gaining ground, it is the responsibility of religious studies scholars to conduct rigorous study so that we can better understand this rapidly expanding phenomenon in lived religion. As a neopagan NRM using pre-Christian, Norse-originating, Icelandic-ethnic identity to ground their neopagan religion in Iceland, Ásatrúarfélagið represents a potential complication to the current frameworks scholars apply to understand new religio-ethnic movements, and an enticing problem for theorists in the study of religion to explore.

How might we characterize this religious movement within or beyond current frameworks, considering that Ásatrúarfélagið maintains an ethnic identity while also dissociating from supremacist movements? As seen in local nationalistic pride movements throughout the United States, slippage from rhetoric on “Icelandic pride” to “racial supremacy” could happen. However, part of Ásatrúarfélagið’s self-definition is in their explicit distancing from the white nationalist neopagan movements and in stressing respect for “other religions, old or new, [and] the cultures of other nations.” We will think alongside theorists like Sylvester Johnson, who

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<sup>9</sup> Strmiska, 117-118.

<sup>10</sup> “Seeking Entry-Level Prophet: Burning Bush and Tablets Not Required,” *New York Times*, August 28, 2006.

focuses on the intersection of religion and imperial racial ideologies, to begin to understand how Ásatrúarfélagið's autochthonous foundation coexists with their anti-imperial and anti-racial-hierarchy ideologies.<sup>11</sup>

In order to answer this question, pending approval from Reed's IRB, (faculty name) and (Student name) will conduct interviews with members of Ásatrúarfélagið (known as Ásatrúarmenn) and ask them questions about what drew them to the movement, and if (and how) they consider Ásatrúarfélagið to be similar or different to other movements that ground themselves in ancient Norse traditions. We have made contact with several of Ásatrúarfélagið's priests and we have received confirmation from those who are willing to help with the project and to conduct interviews with us. This initial connection is promising and necessary, considering that the group is insularly located in Iceland *and* largely unrepresented in scholarship. Given the current travel ban, we will need to rely on email and zoom interview communications to supplement our study of their recommended primary sources and our syllabus of salient secondary sources. Our goal is to learn about members' self-understandings and self-characterizations of Ásatrúarfélagið, to "take the temperature" of this autochthonous movement. We have begun the process for IRB approval for the human-subject research.

While we plan to use religious studies methodologies to situate Ásatrúarfélagið in historical, humanistic, and theoretical frameworks, we want the project to be responsive to the information we gather from our interviews. Attentive to the religious studies dictum, "...the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious," we will purposefully aim for a more emic framework that affords agency to Ásatrúarmenn in their self-definition. We plan to co-author a paper for publication. We will

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<sup>11</sup> Sylvester Johnson, *African American religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, democracy, and freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

present our research in an early September Religion Symposium at Reed, and submit our enriched manuscript to the esteemed journal *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. We also plan to present our paper at the Pacific Northwest regional American Academy of Religion conference in May, 2023.

### **Project Design and Preliminary Bibliography:**

**March-May 2022:** IRB submission, establish initial contacts with Ásatrúarfélagið

- a. Jóhanna Harðardóttir, [johanna@hlesey.is](mailto:johanna@hlesey.is)
- b. Árni Hegranesgoði, [arnisve@simnet.is](mailto:arnisve@simnet.is)

**June 2022, M/F meetings in ETC 209:**

- a. Secure zoom interview dates/times with Ásatrúarfélagið members ((Student name))
- b. Review primary literature recommended by Ásatrúarfélagið priests ((Student name) and (faculty name)):
  - i. *Poetic Edda*, a collection of old Norse narrative poems. Ásatrúarfélagið uses this as a reference point of pagan-ethics in their ethics workshops for teenagers. Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), as well as Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, *Revisiting the Poetic Edda : Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
  - ii. *Hávamál*, another collection of old Norse narrative poems, which Ásatrúarfélagið uses in their ethics workshops. David A. H. Evans, *Hávamál* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, University College, 1986).
- c. Consult the Ásatrúarfélagið website and social media ((Student name))
- d. Review literature on Ásatrú ((Student name) and (faculty name))
  - i. Michael Strmiska, “Ásatrú in Iceland: The Rebirth of Nordic Paganism?,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol.4, No.1 (October, 2000), pp. 106-132.
  - ii. Stefanie v. Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Studies in Critical Social Sciences) (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017)
  - iii. Halink, Simon. 2017. “Noble Heathens: Jon Jonsson Aoils and the Problem of Iceland's Pagan Past.” *Nations and Nationalism* 23 (3): 463–83.
- e. Survey secondary literature on NRM, religio-racial, and neopagan frameworks ((Student name) and (faculty name))
  - i. Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)



- ii. Damon T. Berry, *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2017)
- iii. Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America: Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (New York.: Syracuse University Press, 1997).
- iv. Jefferson F. Calico, *Being Viking: Heathenism in Contemporary America* (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2018).
- v. Urban, Hugh B. 2015. *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements : Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- vi. Robert A. Saunders, “Pagan Places.” In *Progress in Human Geography* 37 (6) (2013), pp.786–810.
- vii. S. Magliocco, “Neopaganism,” in O. Hammer and M. Rothstein (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

**July 2022 (M/F meetings in ETC 209):**

- a. Think alongside theorists in the study of religion (who actively complicate religio-racial identification, or who theorize the utility and history of the discipline of religious studies in projects of re-enchantment that push against Protestant presuppositions of our field. ((Student name) and (faculty name))
  - i. Sylvester Johnson, *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
  - ii. Judith Weisenfeld, “The House We Live In: Religio-Racial Theories and the Study of Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, June 2020, Vol. 88, No. 2, pp. 440–459.
  - iii. Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, “God’s Shadow: Occluded Possibilities in the Genealogy of ‘Religion’” *History of Religions*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (May 2013), pp.309–339.
- b. Conduct interviews via zoom ((Student name) and (faculty name))
- c. Transcribe interviews ((Student name))
- d. Outline paper ((Student name) and (faculty name))

**August 2022:** Write paper ((Student name) and (faculty name))

**September 2022:**

- a. Submit paper to Jolie Griffin ((faculty name))
- b. Public presentation of paper to Reed Religion Symposium (Wednesday, 9/21/22) ((Student name) and (faculty name))
- c. Submission for peer review and publication to *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* ((Student name) and (faculty name))

**May 2023:** Present to the Pacific Northwest Region American Academy of Religion Conference