Introduction

Initial Encounters

“How could this happen to me?” – It is 1986 and I am sitting in a hall in an old German castle amongst a small, rather diverse crowd: men and women of all ages in ceremonial robes, long-haired, gentle-eyed esotericists, martial-looking young men in paramilitary black, and families in traditional German costumes. Listening to Richard Wagner’s “The Ride of the Valkyries” on a hoarse cassette player in front of an altar adorned with runes, Easter eggs, and small bread-ornaments along with a clumsily painted image of the goddess Freya, ostentatiously blue-eyed with wavy blond hair, I feel out of place. A tall woman with a charismatic voice stands and begins speaking about the true ancient significance of Easter: a seasonal celebration dedicated to fertility. And then it comes: fertility not only in general, as a celebration of life reborn in nature, but in the service of the Germanic race. I feel a sense of panic. She is actually giving us instructions on how to most effectively breed blond-haired and blue-eyed children and to re-awaken the spirit of the Germanic people. What am I doing here? How in the world did I, a reasonably politically critical, left-leaning albeit a little naïve student in my mid-twenties end-up in a situation like this, where I have to listen to racist ideology couched in esoteric terminology and ritual for an entire weekend?

At the time, it was quite common to search for a mythic world with roots far back before the advent of Christianity – a spiritual world which also reaches beyond established religion. There was a longing for a religion close to nature, a reservoir of ancient truths and a tradition not purloined from Asian, Native American, or other indigenous cultures. Worshipping deities such as Odin, Thor, and Freya, along with the rich world of Nordic myth promising to reconcile green-alternative, esoteric and seemingly non-exploitive, anti-imperialist ideas – all of this vaguely reverberated with the popular Romanticism surrounding American Indian spirituality and Tolkienian worlds. They exuded a seductive appeal to me as a young undergraduate student searching for an authentic spirituality that would not contradict my academic interests. Thus, in 1985, when I first heard about a group that based its religion on Norse mythology, I was slightly intrigued. I arranged an afternoon visit with one of its leaders, the above-mentioned woman who served herbal tea from her kitchen garden. She styled herself as a wise woman of old, and told me stories about living, albeit well-concealed, allegedly ancient, German-Celtic esoteric

traditions. As charismatic as the woman was, the afternoon failed to entice me into pursuing the matter further; although at the same time, no alarm-bells were set off either.

This could not be said of the situation that I ended up in a year later, when I decided to re-establish contact with this group in order to do interviews for a class paper. I was admitted to a *Thing*, a weekend of ritual, celebration, song, dance, and lectures, and ended up in the scene described above. I was alarmed by my own naïvety, along with the fact that not only the overtly right-wing extremist activists present, but also the more alternative-minded participants seemed convinced that they were in the presence of ‘high initiates,’ and that the racist teachings seemed to be accepted by all as deep esoteric truths.

Returning home, I found that my fellow students, my professors and the general public were completely unaware of such right-wing religious groups. My critical spirit was spurred by this experience, and I made it my mission to further investigate the phenomenon of Germanic Neopaganism – an endeavor that resulted in my dissertation, two books and several articles in different languages.¹ All of them concluded that Germanic Neopaganism is a field in which alternative, dissident spirituality and ultra-nationalist, racist, and radical right-wing ideology meet and influence each other.

The association between the radical political right and Germanic Neopaganism can be traced back to common roots in the *völkisch* movement of the late 19th and early 20th century. Core ideas of today’s radical right-wing thought were formed within this ideology, which merged nationalism, cultural pessimism, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-materialism, anti-liberalism and an enthusiasm for all things ‘Nordic’ or ‘Germanic’ into a heterogenous *Weltanschauung*. Among these core ideas characterizing right-wing radical thought today are:

- the belief in a social inequality based on racial or ethnic categories,
- the belief in the ethnic homogeneity of peoples,
- an anti-egalitarian stance directed against universal human rights,

1 Stefanie v. Schnurbein, *Religion als Kulturkritik. Neugermanisches Heidentum im 20. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1992); *Göttertrost in Wendezeiten. Neugermanisches Heidentum zwischen New Age und Rechtsradikalismus* (Munich: Claudius, 1993); “Fornyet naturreligion eller rasistisk kult. Moderne åsatrogrupper i Tyskland og Norden,” *CHAOS. Dansk-norsk tidsskrift for religionshistoriske studier* 22 (1994); “Religion of Nature or Racist Cult? Contemporary Neogermanic Pagan Movements in Germany,” in *Antisemitismus, Paganismus, Völkische Religion – Antisemitism, Paganism, Voelkisch Religion*, ed. Hubert Cancik and Uwe Puschner (Munich: K.G. Saur, 2004).

- the priority of community over the individual and the subjection of the individual under a strong state or a strong community and
- the rejection of a pluralism of values as promoted in liberal democracies.²

Völkisch, and to a certain degree today's right-wing radical ideology, envisioned the renewal or rebirth of the German people living in unity with its territory, its culture and its racial substance. This "palingenetic nationalism," as Roger Griffin³ has termed this constellation in his discussion of international fascism, already implies religious connotations, and it comes as no surprise therefore that the *völkisch* movement put religion at the centre of its attention. The search for a religion that was suitable and indigenous for this reborn German *Volk* formed a site of vivid discussion and fierce controversy. While a majority of *völkisch* thinkers favored a Christianity purged of its Jewish roots, so-called Ariosophy and the German(ic) Faith Movement sought to (re-)create a religion

2 These core ideologemes are derived from Hans-Gerd Jaschke's definition of right-wing extremism, which he formulated in Peter Dudek and Gerd Jaschke, *Entstehung und Entwicklung des Rechtsextremismus in der Bundesrepublik. Zur Tradition einer besonderen politischen Kultur*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1984). See also Armin Pfahl-Traugher, *"Konservative Revolution" und "Neue Rechte." Rechtsextremistische Intellektuelle gegen den demokratischen Verfassungsstaat* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1998); Uwe Backes, ed. *Rechtsextreme Ideologien in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Schriften des Hannah-Arendt-Instituts für Totalitarismusforschung (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2003). More recent culturally-oriented studies of international fascism conducted by Anglo-American scholars, such as Roger Griffin or Roger Eatwell, emphasize the importance of themes like a palingenetic renewal of the nation (or other entities imagined as 'natural' and 'eternal,' such as tribal regions, or Europe), the creation of a 'new man,' and a new state, whereby a key element has been so-called 'mythic thinking.' See for example Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1991); Roger Eatwell, "The Nature of 'Generic Fascism'. The 'Fascist Minimum' and the 'Fascist Matrix,'" in *Comparative Fascist Studies. New Perspectives*, ed. Constantin Iordachi (London: Routledge, 2009), as well as the controversial discussions in Andreas Umland, Werner Loh, and Roger Griffin, eds., *Fascism Past and Present, West and East. An International Debate on Concepts and Cases in the Comparative Study of the Extreme Right* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2006). The terms 'right-wing extremism' and 'right-wing radicalism' have given cause to much controversy and are used somewhat differently depending on the national and disciplinary contexts. For the purpose of this book, I use the terms synonymously in order to emphasize the continuities within the spectrum of the far right. As the main interest of my book lies in exploring continuities of *völkisch* ideology, I limit the use of the term 'fascism' to the fascist regimes of Europe in the 1930s, without denying the continuities with the contemporary right-wing phenomena to which Griffin points. Nevertheless, my approach to such continuities is not dissimilar to Griffin's, as both point out the significance of cultural aspects in the formation of political ideology and action.

3 Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*.

appropriate for the German people, the Germanic folk-soul, or the Nordic or Aryan race – a religion that is opposed to and goes beyond Christianity, which was seen as racially and culturally foreign, not the least because of its Jewish roots. Contrary to general opinion, this religious movement had little influence during Hitler's regime, in spite of indubitable ideological affinities. However, it was revived after 1945, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s the ideological affinities originating in *völkisch* and fascist ideology turned Germanic Neopaganism into an organizational and ideological link between the political radical right and the esoteric and Pagan scene in general.

By the time my books were published in the early 1990s, there were few exceptions to this rule, though some younger people within the scene had expressed growing concern about this *völkisch* history and its racist implications. There were also a few groups in Scandinavia which seemed to avoid contact with right-wing ideology quite successfully. They promoted something that looked more like the benign religion of nature which had initially attracted me to the scene, and which was based not on the racial-esoteric speculations of Ariosophy, but presumably on 'original' written and material sources.

Many academic researchers of Neopaganism relate stories of how they were changed or even converted through their participation in rituals, festivals and personal encounters with the subjects of their research.⁴ My initial experience was the opposite. I entered the field of Germanic Neopaganism with a vague personal interest in and openness to Pagan and esoteric teachings and ritual experience, and left it in the beginning of the 1990s not only with a deep and well-founded scepticism toward such attempts at a Pagan revival, but also with the will to enlighten the public about its problematic aspects.

Transformations and Key-Questions

My own naïve encounter with the Germanic Neopagan scene, along with my own initial ignorance of its right-wing and racist connections, had alerted me to a number of general problems underlying attempts to reconstruct or re-imagine 'ancient,' 'pre-Christian' religions and cults. I became increasingly aware of how deeply ingrained some of the stereotypes of an indigenous

4 See many of the contributions in Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy, and Graham Harvey, eds., *Researching Paganism* (Walnut Creek etc.: Altamira Press, 2004), as well as Jone Salomonsen, *Enchanted Feminism. Ritual, Gender and Divinity among the Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), and Helen A. Berger, *A Community of Witches. Contemporary Neo-Paganism and Witchcraft in the United States* (Columbia, sc: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

Germanic or Nordic spiritual tradition are, not only in right-wing contexts, but also in other alternative circles as well as in mainstream thought, where elements of *völkisch* ideology continue to thrive.⁵ Synchronous with my deepening awareness of such mainstream remnants of *völkisch* ideology, the Germanic Neopagan scene underwent a number of changes throughout the 1990s and even more so in the 2000s. New groups emerged in Scandinavia, North America, and Germany. The Internet facilitated the rapid internationalization of the scene, while parts of the community started to develop a critical distance to the right-wing radical and racist ideology in addition to the *völkisch* traditions within their own history.

When I went back in 2010 to conduct the research and interviews that form the basis of this book, my interview partners from these new groups expressed a strong desire for respectability, and assured me that they most definitely did not belong to any right-wing political scene. While these encounters changed my perception of the field and its activists, they still did not cancel out the fact that the basic assumption underpinning the idea of a revival of Germanic

5 See for example Stefanie v. Schnurbein, "Gjenbruken av edda-diktningen i 'völkisch-religiøses Weihespiel' rundt århundreskiftet i Tyskland," *Nordica Bergensia* 3 (1994); "Die Suche nach einer 'arteigenen' Religion in 'germanisch'- und 'deutschgläubigen' Gruppen," in *Handbuch zur 'Völkischen Bewegung' 1871–1918*, ed. Uwe Puschner, Walter Schmitz, and Justus H. Ulbricht (Munich etc.: K.G. Saur, 1996); "Mütterkult und Männerbund. Über geschlechtsspezifische Religionsentwürfe," in *Kybele – Prophetin – Hexe. Religiöse Frauenbilder und Weiblichkeitskonzeptionen*, ed. Richard Faber and Susanne Lanwerd (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997); "Kräfte der Erde – Kräfte des Blutes. Elemente völkischer Ideologie in Marion Zimmer-Bradley: Die Nebel von Avalon und Diana Paxson: Der Zauber von Erin," *Weimarer Beiträge* 44, no. 4 (1998); "Transformationen völkischer Religion seit 1945," in *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne. Entwürfe 'arteigener' Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende*, ed. Stefanie v. Schnurbein and Justus H. Ulbricht (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001); "Religionsforskning og religionsfornylse i 'nordisk' ånd i Tyskland etter første verdenskrig," in *Myter om det nordiska – mellan romantik och politik*, ed. Catharina Raudvere, Anders Andrén, and Kristina Jennbert, Vågar till Midgård (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2001); "Religiöse Ikonographie – religiöse Mission. Das völkische Weihespiel um 1910," in *Kunst, Fest, Kanon. Inklusion und Exklusion in Gesellschaft und Kultur*, ed. Hermann Danuser, Herfried Münkler, and in cooperation with the Staatsoper Unter den Linden (Schliengen: Edition Argus, 2004); "Schamanismus in der altnordischen Überlieferung – eine wissenschaftliche Fiktion zwischen den ideologischen Lagern," in *Kontinuität in der Kritik. Zum 50jährigen Bestehen des Münchener Nordistikinstituts: Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven der Skandinavistik*, ed. Klaus Bödl and Miriam Kauko (Freiburg i.Br.: 2005); "Neuheidentum und Fantasyroman," in *Bilder vom Mittelalter. Eine Berliner Ringvorlesung*, ed. Volker Mertens and Carmen Stange (Göttingen: 2007); "Kontinuität durch Dichtung. Moderne Fantasyromane als Mediatoren völkisch-religiöser Denkmuster," in *Völkisch und national. Zur Aktualität alter Denkmuster im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Uwe Puschner and G. Ulrich Großmann (Darmstadt: WBG, 2009).

religion is inherently problematic: the persuasion that religious identity can and should be based on indigenous landscape, soil, climate, ancestry and heritage – or to say it short and polemically – on ‘blood and soil.’ This ‘Norse revivalism’ is a cluster of ideas taken from an ideological constellation that can be traced back to 19th century Romantic nationalism in Germany and Scandinavia, as well as to Anglo-Saxonism of the same era. It is a politically and ideologically malleable constellation, which has had influence on both nationalist and diverse counter-cultural movements up until today. However, it remains dependent on a certain logic of exclusion. It allows for diversity between nations, religions, or cultures as well as between different traditions, but it requires internal homogeneity. It does not allow for pluralism within these national, ethnic, or cultural holistic entities and thus remains tied in with theories of race and ethnicity, or a cultural essentialism. Furthermore, it has a tendency to ‘purify’ the respective ‘diverse’ traditions. It is this aspect which was taken up and radicalized into more violent politics of racial and cultural exclusion by the *völkisch* movement during the beginning of the 20th century.

Such observations motivate the core question of this book: how can we account for discrepancies between a self-understanding of the majority of current Germanic Neopagans as part of a pluralistic, democratic society, and the fact that Germanic Neopaganism carries with it remnants of *völkisch* ideologemes? My thesis is that we have to look at changes both within Asatru and within mainstream thought in order to understand this development and field of tension. On the one hand, Asatru has undergone a reform process during which fantasies of racial or ethnic exclusion and the striving for purity or purification of one’s ‘own’ tradition have become less violent. On the other hand, the reception of the Romantic constellation of a unity between nature, ethnicity, cultural tradition and religion has moved from being perceived as a paradigm of the radical right into being a viable facet of mainstream thought in the 1990s and 2000s.

The shift within Asatru away from racial ideology and into a more critical attitude toward the *völkisch* heritage has of course not been absolute. Rather, it can be described as a shift in the centre of gravity between three main factions within the scene:

- (1) A **racial-religious** current that bases religion on a biological concept of race and continues to promote a radical *völkisch* racial ideology along with ideas of racial and religious purity and purification.
- (2) A current that has been labelled ‘folkish’ and that I choose to call **ethnacist** in order to stress the fact that religion here is based on a traditional, homogenous heritage that is to be preserved or restored. This heritage is not exclusively conceptualized in biological terms, but is seen as

rooted in landscape, nature, climate and culture as well. The ethnicist faction thus tends toward a cultural essentialism which sees 'culture' as an immutable and ideally homogenous entity rooted in a deep past – an idea which often carries with it a desire to purify and re-homogenize this alleged essential, traditional culture.

- (3) A current that has been called 'universalist' or 'anti-racist,' but that I choose to describe as **a-racist** because it (a) rejects the category of race and goes against conflating biological heritage and religion, (b) is generally inclusive of individuals of all backgrounds, but (c) usually does not go actively against racism, as the term 'anti-racist' would suggest. This faction tends to conceptualize culture in a more dynamic way, as something that is to be created and that is continually transformed through cultural exchange and mixing.

What remains common among all these currents is the close relation which is seen between religion and culture, and therefore, an emphatically culturalist understanding of religion. This common link unites the different factions, which of course never exist in pure forms, but instead intersect in complex and often contradictory and inconsistent ways. As a general tendency, however, we can say that while Germanic Neopaganism in the 1970s and 80s was dominated by racial-religious and ethnicist groups and the controversies between them, the racial-religious groups have been increasingly marginalized throughout the 1990s and 2000s, while the mainstream, most widely accepted, and visible part of Asatru today moves in the field between ethnicist and a-racist.

The shift in mainstream discourse that has contributed to Asatru's gaining of respectability has to do with the perception of religion, culture, and ethnicity. Ideas about the intimate correlation between these entities were perceived as right-wing radical in the 1970s and 80s, but have become more generally accepted after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the end of the Cold War, and even more so after September 11, 2001. This is most visible in the discourse on immigration and Islam, where culture, religion, and ethnicity are conflated into one indistinguishable and immutable entity posited as an antagonist to 'our' cultural identity. Already around 1990, Etienne Balibar had argued that the exclusionary mechanisms of racist thought were not dependent on a naturalist or biological paradigm, but that a cultural essentialism had more or less replaced 'race' in public discourse.⁶ This allowed for a circumvention of the

6 Racism is traditionally defined as "the idea that human beings could be placed in groups based on physical characteristics, or more deeply, their genetic make-up, and that an individual's personality and likely behavior could be read off from that membership." (Ralph D.

racial biological paradigm that was strongly stigmatized after 1945. In this process, 'culture' or 'cultural identity' became equally deterministic; unchangeable, essentialist foundational entities and anxieties about mixing and exchange permeate such discourses as much as they did classical racism.⁷ I would argue that this cultural or 'differentialist' racism, as Balibar calls it, has by now moved beyond the confines of the political and cultural (New) Right's ideology and entered mainstream discourse. Moreover, I would put forth that the central factor in this constellation is religion. Nowadays, there is a general tendency to view 'culture' as a quasi-sacred entity, as well as to perceive religion as a phenomenon that is closely tied not only to 'culture,' but also to specific 'cultures.'

The thesis of this book can thus be specified as follows: The sacralization of culture and simultaneous culturalization of religion found in both Asatru and in mainstream discourse contribute to the increased respectability of Asatru, while at the same time renewing interest in 'Germanic' or 'Nordic' religion and pre-Christian cultural heritage in high and popular culture alike.

The intertwined developments of Asatru reform and the change in mainstream discourse, with regard to the sacralization of culture and culturalization of religion, motivate the double perspective of this book. The first part provides the historical genealogy (Chapter 1), the further development of Germanic Neopaganism and its organizational progression (Chapter 2), and the core beliefs and practices (Chapter 3). This encompassing description of the international, alternative, spiritual subculture or cultic milieu⁸ of Asatru

Grillo, "Cultural Essentialism and Cultural Anxiety," *Anthropological Theory* 3, no. 2 (2003), 162). However, as I will show in Chapters 4 and 5, 'classical' racism has never existed without strong references to 'culture' and religion either.

- 7 Cf. Étienne Balibar, "Is there a 'New Racism,'" in *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London/New York: Verso, 1991).
- 8 The concept of 'cultic milieu' was first elaborated by Colin Campbell in 1972. It describes 'fuzzy' constellations held together loosely by a "bundle of ideas and practices related to other ideas and practices in the cultural underground of society" (Jesper Aagaard Petersen, "Introduction: Embracing Satan," in *Contemporary Religious Satanism. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 4) – milieus which spurn the emergence and decline of "ephemeral and highly unstable" (Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972), 120) groups, whereas the general milieu and field of discourse from which these groups emerge are relatively stable and cohesive, although not coherent and consistent. The concept has been fruitfully applied to the study of modern esotericism, occultism, and "Satanism" (cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden/New York/Cologne: Brill, 1996); Petersen, "Introduction: Embracing Satan").

lays the groundwork for the in-depth investigations that follow. In the latter part I examine:

- the interactions and flow of ideas between this religious sub-culture and more general developments in history;
- the history of ideas, ideology and aesthetics;
- the history of the humanities in general, and of religion and Scandinavian studies in particular.

In summary, I closely analyze the ‘fields of discourse’ and ‘shared concerns’ that constitute Germanic Neopaganism and tie it to surrounding societies.⁹

In this lengthier second part, the micro-phenomenon Asatru is used as a prism through which to focus on discourses and concepts that have been predominant and contested in what we call ‘Western societies’ since the 19th century, and which play a central role in the processes of a culturalization of religion and sacralization of culture. They comprise contested fields such as race and ethnicity (Chapter 4), concepts of religion (Chapter 5), and discourses developed in relation to social movements, such as ideas about nature (Chapter 6) and gender (Chapter 7), and their relation to religion. Last but not least, they include the areas of academic thought (Chapter 8) and art and aesthetics (Chapter 9), in which ideas about the relations between religion and culture – as well as about Nordic myth – have been systematically developed and popularized.

Twisted Terminologies

The inner contradictions, changes, and transformations of this religious phenomenon, which I have thus far called Germanic Neopaganism, are mirrored in the shifting terminology used by the groups themselves as well as outside observers. In the first third of the 20th century in Germany, it was called ‘German,’ ‘Nordic,’ or ‘Germanic Faith,’ indicating a mythization or spiritualization of the nation or the ‘Aryan’ or ‘Nordic’ race. As we shall see, all of these

9 The concepts of “shared concerns” and “fields of discourse” is inspired by the German historian of religion Kocku von Stuckrad, who uses it to account for the “fuzziness” of recent religious movements. Stuckrad bases his investigations on the observation that “religious identities are shaped through communicative processes. They are not found but negotiated.” (Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism. A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox, 2005), 86).

terms, as well as the word 'Teutonic,' which has been used in English-speaking contexts since the mid-19th century, refer to constructions of ethnic entities, which by now are strongly contested, and which are based on untenable ideological, for example nationalist and imperialist, assumptions.¹⁰

Following the terminology of Alexander Rud Mills, an Australian sympathizer with National Socialism and founder of an Anglo-Saxonist version of Germanic Faith, the first American and English post-war groups called their religion Odinism, a term which is still fairly widespread in the UK and North America. As a reaction to the 'monotheistic' connotations of the term 'Odinism,' American groups started to adopt the Scandinavian term Asatru.¹¹ The term derives from modern Icelandic, and denotes the belief, trust in or allegiance to the Norse gods called *Æsir*.¹² Together with 'Heathen',¹³ a Germanic word for Pagan, it is most commonly used today both by adherents of the religion and by outside researchers. The term 'Asatru,' however, is criticized by many for being a relatively young term, having arisen in Scandinavian Romanticism.

A still more recent development is the rejection of terms that were not used in pre-Christian times. This is based on the observation that pre-Christian religions did not identify 'religion' as a separate field within society, and thus did not have words to describe their world-view and religion or to distinguish them from other religions. As a result, names like '*Forn Sed*' or '*Forn Siðr*' (Scandinavian and Old Norse terms for 'the old way' or 'the old custom') have been adopted. This is also a reaction to the fact that both 'Paganism' and 'Heathenism' are terms which were originally coined by the Christian churches in order to separate 'proper religion' from rejected forms of worship. The terms 'Pagan' or 'Heathen' were associated with rural people who adhered to regressive beliefs and lived at the margins of society. Nowadays, when groups or persons describe themselves as Pagans, it can be understood as an attempt to re-signify an originally pejorative term in a similarly complex way as with the term 'queer' for example, i.e. in order to both re-evaluate traditional assumptions and to be provocative.

The prefix 'neo,' which is common within scholarship and the general public, is equally misleading. It presupposes the existence of an ancient, original

10 For discussions of concepts of the 'Germanic' see the contributions in Heinrich Beck, *Zur Geschichte der Gleichung "germanisch – deutsch."* *Sprache und Namen, Geschichte und Institutionen* Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004).

11 Asatru is also spelled Ásatrú, Asatrú or Asatro.

12 The singular for *Æsir* is *Áss* and the genitive plural *Ása*.

13 Equivalents of Heathen are also commonly used in German (*Heiden*) and in Scandinavian languages (*hedning*).

Paganism that only needs to be recovered and revitalized. In fact, the opposite is the case: (neo-)Paganism is a decidedly modern phenomenon, which constructs an idealized religious and cultural past, projecting this imagined past onto sparse sources that tell us very little about pre-Christian European cults. It is not the task of this book however, to dissolve such terminological contradictions.¹⁴ Since they are still most common amongst believers and scholars alike, I shall thus use the terms 'Asatru' and 'Heathen' for the modern groups described here. I will employ the more artificial term 'Germanic Neopaganism' to describe the phenomenon in its broader historical dimension, i.e. for both older German Faith groups and modern Heathen groups.

What Others Say

Due to the right-wing political inclinations and activities in parts of the international Germanic Neopagan milieu, the political and ideological aspects of Asatru and Odinism have attracted the most attention from researchers and more popular writers. The first study conducted was Jeffrey Kaplan's examination of the American scene in a chapter in his *Radical Religion in America*,¹⁵ published in the late 1990s. More recently, the most important study in this context has been Mattias Gardell's *Gods of the Blood* from 2003. Gardell, a Swedish historian of religion, offers an in-depth investigation of the racist, white supremacist, Odinist underground in the USA. Based partly on Kaplan's earlier research, but mostly on in-depth interviews with racial-religious and ethnicist Pagans in North America, this book alerts us to the political radicalism present in parts of Asatru, and brings to light the major significance of the Norse religious revival for a North American context. However, it does not address the international contexts and German origins of such radical thought. Moreover, it excludes a-racist (or in Gardell's terminology anti-racist) groups. Hence, Gardell's investigation is unable to illuminate the more problematic sides of the mainstream discourse on culture and religion, i.e., the intersections

14 For a more thorough discussion of terminology from the point of view of a practitioner and researcher see Michael Strmiska, "Modern Paganism in World Cultures. Comparative Perspectives," in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures. Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Michael Strmiska (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

15 Jeffrey Kaplan, *Radical Religion in America. Millenarian Movements from the Far Right to the Children of Noah* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997), for Germany see for example Franziska Hundseder, *Wotans Jünger. Neuheidnische Gruppen zwischen Esoterik und Rechtsradikalismus* (Munich: Heyne, 1998).

of *völkisch*, Germanic Neopagan and contemporary mainstream discourse on Norse myth, which are of central interest in this book.

In the past few years, a-racist Asatru has attracted the attention of younger scholars, who have reacted against the one-sided focus on the racist and right-wing extremist dimension of earlier research. Firstly, studies of national European milieus have been offered by insiders, i.e. researchers with Pagan affiliations themselves, who tend to take an apologetic stance and whose main goal is to actively contribute to Asatru gaining respectability.¹⁶ More importantly, two master theses and two dissertations now provide field-studies of the national Asatru scenes in Iceland,¹⁷ Sweden¹⁸ and Germany,¹⁹ written in the respective languages by students and scholars not affiliated with Asatru or Neopaganism in general. Swedish historian of religion Fredrik Gregorius and Icelandic master's student in the history of religion, Eggert Solberg Jonsson, take historical approaches, situating the respective Northern European Asatru groups in a context reaching back to National Romanticism. Gregorius' conclusion in particular, that Swedish Asatru is driven by a fundamental cultural essentialism, coincides with my own reading of the phenomenon. Both studies are based on first-hand material such as interviews and participant observation, and thus provide material for my investigation as well.

The same is true for the dissertation by German historian of religion René Gründer, who conducted in-depth interviews with German Asatrueers. In contrast to the other researchers, Gründer chooses a knowledge-sociological approach and provides insight into individual German Heathens' construction

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- 16 The following books on Pagan movements contain comprehensive chapters on Asatru: Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth. Contemporary Paganism* (London: Hurst&Company, 1997), Michael Strmiska, ed. *Modern Paganism in World Cultures. Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005); Blain, Ezzy, and Harvey, *Researching Paganism*. Jenny Blain currently researches British and American Asatru and has already published parts of her results. See Jenny Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic. Ecstasy and neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism* (London etc.: Routledge, 2002); Jenny Blain and Robert J. Wallis, "Heathenry," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizzia (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009).
 - 17 Eggert Solberg Jonsson, "Ásatrú á Íslandi við upphaf 21. aldar. Uppruni, heimsmynd og helgiathafnir" (Master's thesis, University of Iceland, 2010).
 - 18 Fredrik Gregorius, *Modern Asatro. Att konstruera etnisk och kulturell identitet* (Lund: Lunds Universitet, 2008).
 - 19 René Gründer, *Germanisches (Neu-)Heidentum in Deutschland. Entstehung, Struktur und Symbolsystem eines alternativreligiösen Feldes* (Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2008); *Blótgemeinschaften. Eine Religionsethnografie des 'germanischen Neuheidentums'* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2010).

of their own world-views in late modernity. He focuses on individual perspectives and appropriations along with individuals' attempts to situate their world-view within the conditions of late modernity. It thus alerts one to inner contradictions and ideological problems that circulate within the scene – information and observations which are highly informative for my own investigation on the changes within Asatru in recent years. One of the more stunning findings of Gründer's study is the degree to which the individual believers' religious constructions that he lays out in his book deviate from the official written material the respective groups have published in books, pamphlets, and on the Internet. Gründer, who is interested in reconstructing individuals' world-views in the context of post-modern neo-liberal society, chooses to almost completely ignore such written material. This keeps him from addressing the complicated historical continuities and transformations, as well as the more general significance of the discursive clusters on which my book focuses.

Complicated Involvements

Alerted to the gap between written material and individual beliefs by Gründer's study, my approach to it is the reverse. Since I am more interested in continuities and transformations of a discursive constellation, I pay closer attention to the public image of Asatru as it is presented in diverse published materials (texts, images, music distributed through various media, inside journals, flyers, and not least the groups' homepages, Asatru forums and blogs on the Internet).²⁰ Here, we find the influences of older ideas. Moreover, it is mainly through these public materials that Asatru interacts with other social and discursive fields, for example academia, the arts and social movements. Such written materials contribute to the transmission and transformation of concepts, ideas and (particles of) ideologies over time and space. However, relying exclusively on published and Internet material brings with it the danger of not being able to judge the factual importance of persons, groups, and individual statements. In order to assess the relative importance and impact of my findings, I established contact with leaders and prominent members of Asatru groups operating nationwide in Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, the USA,²¹

20 In order to respect the right to, and wish for, privacy, I am only using material from public forums, and not from those which have restricted access or require registration. Moreover, I quote without mentioning names or pseudonyms.

21 I limited my field research in Sweden and the USA because the studies by Gregorius, *Modern Asatro* and Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood. The Pagan Revival and White*

England, and Germany. Mainly in 2010, I conducted 25 unstructured qualitative interviews, most in person, although some via e-mail or over the telephone,²² and attended events of a few German and Danish groups.

My personal contacts, especially with German Asatruers, were complex to say the least. In addition to my books and articles, I had been indirectly involved with the scene for almost twenty-five years through my earlier interviews and participant observation in the 1980s. My research (or rumors and word-of-mouth information about it) had been observed, despised and hailed by different groups, mostly, but not exclusively, in Germany since the 1990s.

Some Asatruers had used my books in an attempt to actively rid the scene of extreme right and racial esoteric influence; others had spent considerable energy distancing themselves from my and others' allegations of the close ties of Asatru to the extreme right. In the process of gaining respectability, Asatruers had taken on the role of interpreters and critical analysts of their sources as well as their own traditional assumptions. In doing so, they also related to more recent texts, such as my own, or books by other critical commentators, such as Kaplan, Gardell, Gregorius, or Gründer. All of this resulted in awkward feedback loops for both sides, which shaped the perception of my questions and the informants' answers. In other words: my writing pre-formed the assumptions my interview-partners had about the stories I wanted to hear, and the stories they told were colored by these assumptions.

Working in the field this time around, I could not deny sympathies and shared interests with parts of the scene that are interested in uncovering the *völkisch* roots of contemporary Asatru and getting rid of shady political associations. I thus re-defined my role as that of a critical observer and interlocutor of these parts of the scene, realizing that through my continuing work with a field that I had studied earlier, I had become an unintentional contributor to the tendency of normalization that I observed within the field. It also has to be taken into account that my current and future work (i.e. my conversations with Heathens, as well as this book) will continue to interact with the scene and contribute to its change. Metaphorically speaking, my position has oscillated between that of being a member of the audience watching and analyzing a play called Asatru, and that of an actor playing the role of adversary and critical companion within the play. Acknowledging that this book will have certain

Separatism (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003) already provide abundant field-material.

22 These interviews are quoted in two ways: statements made by holders of offices within the groups regarding official group policies are quoted by name; statements regarding individuals' beliefs and convictions are quoted anonymously.

effects on the scene, as a scholar writing on Asatru I am cast in the position of a co-writer of the play as well – a role which becomes amplified and complicated by the fact that Asatruers themselves are making eager use of popular academic writing in order to gain respectability (as Chapter 8 shows in detail).

Receptions, Adaptions, and Goals

As of today, the attainment of respectability for Asatru and the changes within it have not caught considerable public attention. That Asatruers in general have been more heavily subjected to a scrutiny of the right-wing implications of their faith than other alternative-religious communities is certainly due to Germanic Neopaganism's history and the current involvement of several groups and individuals with Germanophile, racial and ethnicist ideology. However, this association has also been exacerbated by a public and by outside observers who are more interested in sensationalist accounts of the political dangers connected with marginal and exoticized new religions than in neutral assessments of their beliefs and practices. The reaction of some friends and colleagues to my tales about the changes within Asatru and the pleasant encounters and good conversations I have had is quite indicative in this respect: "But if they are not actually racists, what is the point of researching them?"

One of this book's goals is to dispel such easy accusations and apologies alike. Asatru today presents itself as a lively micro-cosmos where all imaginable ideas, topoi, and stereotypes about 'Germanic' myth, religion and culture are used, discussed, re-contextualized, and transformed. It is a grateful field of study for anyone who wants to learn about the reception and adaption of such ideas in different historical, political, and ideological contexts. It is a dynamic field of exchange where relations between religion, political and cultural ideology have played a prominent role all along, and where they still lead to controversy and give rise to schisms. It is thus a vibrant field, which can serve as an instructive prism for studies of the complex and contradictory relations between religious subcultures and political ideology.

Instead of singling out Germanic Neopaganism as a weird, marginal, and aberrant form of a political religion, this critical investigation into this small but by now quite diversified subculture offers the occasion to question, discuss and revisit much broader intellectual problems. It is able to shed light on fundamental questions about the relation between modernity and constructions of the past. More particularly, as will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, it can illuminate the role that has been assigned to the constructed categories of race, ethnicity and religion in building identities. It can also serve as a prism

through which to investigate environmental and gender issues in their relation to modern spirituality, as we shall see in Chapters 6 and 7. Last but not least, it can tell us much about the place and function of the humanities, poetry and art in regard to myth and religion in modern societies, as I will show in Chapters 8 and 9.

Thus, rather than just being an analysis of Germanic Neopaganism as a form of cultural essentialism (which it is), this book strives to provide a critical analysis of traces of such cultural essentialism in different contexts of so-called 'mainstream discourse.' It is not so much a study of the political involvement of individuals and groups (although these play a role and have to be addressed), but rather a more general critical discussion of discursive figures and circulating signs, their history and broader implications which, though much more widespread, crystallize in Asatru in a way that makes for a fruitful field of investigation.

Methodologically, my reconstruction of a Germanic Neopagan discourse in particular, as well as a mainstream discourse on Nordic myth, is informed by the somewhat diverse approaches of the history of ideas and ideology as well as analytical discourse theory. Both approaches have one interest in common: the analysis of the flow and transformation of ideas (not individual or group-policies) over time and space, and their potential political and ideological implications. Both methods are suitable for analytically negotiating between the descriptions of a contemporary social and religious phenomenon, its immediate cultural historical contexts, and its being embedded in contemporary and historical discourse.

This approach requires simultaneous discussions about established intellectuals, philosophers, theorists and Neopagan authors of articles in obscure underground magazines with a minuscule circulation. The purpose of discussing such ideological intersections is not to level out the significant differences in erudition and intellectual complexity between these texts and authors, but rather to reveal the broad distribution of a persistent discursive constellation connected to ideas about Nordic myth, religion and culture, in addition to demonstrating interactions and interrelations between 'high' and 'low' culture, and to put into question the only seemingly clear distinctions between mainstream and aberrant, marginal discourses. Ultimately, this book is concerned with broad questions about the relation between conceptions of myth, nature, tradition, heritage, spirituality, culture and identity. Focusing on a small and manageable phenomenon such as Asatru helps to illuminate the broader fields of discourse which constitute it and which it has helped constitute.