

УДК 299.572:130.3[(470):(489)]

**ETHNIC RELIGION IN NOWADAYS EUROPE:  
RENAISSANCE OF THE HISTORICAL PAGAN BELIEFS OR  
POLITICAL PAGANISM? EXEMPLIFIED BY THE ASATRU  
IN DENMARK AND THE MARI NATIVE RELIGION IN RUSSIA**

**Christensen C.S.**

The article deals with the history and the problems of ethnic religions in nowadays Europe. Based on a definition and discussion of Paganism and Neopaganism, and a thereby following definition and discussion of differences between ethnic religion and monotheistic religion, the article tries to get the answer as to whether ethnic religion, nowadays, is a Political Paganism, a renaissance of historical pagan beliefs or a mixture. To answer the question, the problem of the article will be exemplified by an analysis of two types of paganism in contemporary Europe: the Asatru in Denmark and the Mari Native Religion in Russia. Revived in the 1970s, the Asatru is a rather new phenomenon as well in Denmark as in other countries of the world. On 15 November 1997 the Forn Siðr association, the Asatru and Vanatru Association in Denmark, was established, in 2003 recognized, and registered as an official religion in Denmark. Whereas the Mari Native Religion, a religion practiced by the Mari people in a Russian region of Mari El Republic, 800 kilometres east of Moscow, can lead its roots several thousand years back.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Religion, Mari Native Religion, Political Paganism, Asatru, Paganism, Heathenry, Animism, New Age Movements, Indigenous Peoples, Nordic Paganism, Odin and Thor, Neopaganism, Blot, Mari People, Yoshkar-Ola, Modern Paganism.

**ЭТНИЧЕСКИЕ РЕЛИГИИ СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ЕВРОПЫ:  
ВОЗРОЖДЕНИЕ ЯЗЫЧЕСКИХ ВЕРОВАНИЙ ИЛИ ПОЛИТИКА?  
НА ПРИМЕРЕ АСАТРУ В ДАНИИ И МАРИЙСКОЙ  
ТРАДИЦИОННОЙ РЕЛИГИИ В РОССИИ**

**Христенсен К.С.**

Статья посвящена истории и проблемам этнических религиозных групп в современной Европе. Основываясь на определении терминов "язычество" и "неоязычество", и, вследствие этого, выявлении различий этих явлений, автор статьи пытается найти ответ на вопрос, являются ли современные этнические религии возрождением языческих верований, политикой или чем-то средним. Чтобы ответить на этот вопрос, в статье приводятся анализ двух типов язычества, существующего сегодня в Европе, Асатру в Дании и марийской традиционной религии в России. Асатру, возрожденная в 70-х годах XX века, – достаточно новое явление как в Дании, так и в других странах. Религиозная организация Форн Сидр – датская ассоциация Асатру и Ванатру – была основана 15 ноября 1997 года, признана и зарегистрирована в 2003 году как официальная религия в Дании. В свою очередь марийская традиционная религия, народная религия марийцев (Республика Марий Эл, находится в 800 км от Москвы), уходит корнями на тысячу лет назад.

**Ключевые слова:** этническая религия, марийская традиционная религия, политическое язычество, асатру, язычество, языческие народы, анимизм, движения «Нью Эйдж», коренные народы, скандинавское язычество, Один и Тор, неоязычество, марийцы, Йошкар-Ола, современное язычество.

**Paganism, Modern Paganism, Political Paganism and Nordic Paganism**

At the beginning of the fourth century, Early Christianity population of the Roman Empire first used terms, paganism or pagan, about people who practiced polytheism. At that time, around the year 312, Christianity became the dominant religion following the battlefield convention of the Emperor Constantine and the relocation of the imperial capital from Rome to Constantinople. In the following

centuries, Christians received support and military protection for establishing churches and Christian communities in Rome, Constantinople and other greater urban areas in the Roman Empire. The outlying areas, the so-called *pagus districts*, became associated with worshippers of the traditional polytheistic religion. In the following power struggle, the 'Pagan' Romans were seen as adversaries to the ascendant religion of Christianity. In several hundred years thereafter, the term paganism was a term with pejorative connotations. The worshipping of the traditional polytheistic religion later got the definition of Ethnic Religions because they are often distinguished from religions that claim not to be limited in ethnic or national scope or to be a monotheistic religion, such as Christianity or Islam

*Paganism*, from Latin *paganus*, *pagan* and Latin *pagus*, village, also known as historical pagan beliefs, refers to the history of religion from a Christian point of view, the condition not to belong to one of the monotheistic religions. Based on historical texts from antiquity and the middle Ages, these are demarcated in Europe and the Near East by Christians, Muslims, Jews, Zoroastrians and Manicheans, the Abrahamic religions. In the primary literature of these epochs, the use is usually pejorative due to the religious exclusivity claim. In the newer research literature, paganism / pagan / pagan / pagan cults – in relation to antiquity and the middle Ages are used without any value in order to distinguish the followers of various divine cults from Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Manicheans, without devaluing them.

Paganism or heathenry are names of religious cultures, usually polytheist, or animistic. The term is placed in contrast to another religion, mainly Christians, Jews and Muslims, against this different religion, but sometimes, for example, Christians denote Jews as gentiles. Consequently, the term has been used for a wide range of spiritual or ritual practices or beliefs in folklore and polytheist religions. The term occurs adjectively in expressions such as "heathenry missions", "pagan rites" and "heathendom", which refers to pagan / pre-Christian times implicitly aimed at the time before the tenth century for instance in the Nordic region. Ethnologists therefore often prefer to define more precise terms, such as polytheism, shamanisms or animism to explain the different aspects of paganism.

Nevertheless, the negative connotation of the term paganism has hardly survived in today's linguistic usage due to continued effective religious imprints. In modernity, however, the term heath no longer applies to atheists, agnostics or minority religions due to pluralistic liberal tendencies. As a self-designation of followers of Neopaganism movements, however, it is used again.

However, the revived Paganism of modern times has sometimes been referred to as Neopaganism. *Neopaganism*, also known as Modern Paganism, is a collective term for new religious movements influenced by or claiming to be derived from the various historical pagan beliefs of pre-modern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. The prefix neo is denoting a new and contemporary nature of the ethnic religions whereas the suffix paganism identifies the past religious traditions in the ethnic religions. Somehow, the modern religious movements are seeing themselves building new components on the old native and natural religions. Although they do share similarities, contemporary Pagan religious movements are diverse, and no single set of beliefs, practices or texts are shared by them all. Most academics studying the phenomenon have treated it as a movement of different religions, whereas a minority instead characterizes it as a single religion into which different Pagan faiths fit as denominations. Not all members of faiths or beliefs regarded as neopagan self-identify as a "Pagan".

Adherents rely on pre-Christian, folkloric and ethnographic sources to a variety of degrees; many follow a spirituality which they accept as being entirely modern, while others attempt to reconstruct or revive indigenous, ethnic religions as found in historical and folkloric sources as accurately as possible. Furthermore, Neopaganism is not an organized religion and has no official doctrine, creed, or organization. Pagans follow a wide variety of spiritual paths and may have a variety of beliefs on religious questions like the divine, human nature and the afterlife. However, there are some common beliefs that are held by most neo-pagans.

The numbers of neo-pagans have steadily been growing in the last decades. There are different reasons for that. The three most important reasons for that phenomenon are the following three: Firstly, many neo-pagans are disappointed with

Christianity, and they either are developing or are joining modern Pagan associations. They thereby renounce their religion of childhood/family, because they seek out a religious community with a more spiritual perspective keeping in with their personal values [6, p. 7].

Secondly, the term pagan and the European Pagan religion have more or less become glorified in comparison to Christianity in the literature in the last 150 years. Especially, writings by anthropologists, folklorists and historians in the early 20th century. Neo-pagans thereby find an appealing marker in their shift in religious orientation. It signifies something non-Christian and at the same time rejects Christian authorities and authorities as a whole. Thirdly, some roots of modern paganism lead back to the New Age Movements of the 1960s and 1970s. An important element in the New Age flow is the expectation of a transformation of the world to a better universal world. Some groups believe it will happen in the near future, while others believe it has already happened. Eschatological notions of the destruction of the world are found in most religions, e.g. Biblical apocalypticism, but in certain circumstances, they are given more weight than in others, for example, millenarian movements. Such expectations are often found in new age, but the predominant topics are generally more oriented towards mysticism than apocalypticism. Thereby the so-called Political Paganism occurs [6, p. 7-8].

Perhaps the most fundamental belief of Neopaganism is the recognition of the divine in nature. Pagans revere the cycle of the seasons, which is regarded as an expression of the divine and a model for spiritual growth and renewal. The majority of Pagans regards the Earth herself as sacred, and deep ecological concerns are characteristic of most followers of Neopaganism. It is generally understood to contain elements of animism. Neopaganism tends not to be organized or dogmatic and many Pagans do not identify with any particular strand of Neopaganism, instead drawing from the beliefs and rituals of more than one tradition. Nevertheless, many do join a specific tradition that they find most meaningful as their focus, such as Wicca, Asatru or Druidism.

Some neopagans are Reconstructionist, meaning that they seek to recreate faithfully the pagan religion of a particular group, such as the ancient Greeks, Celts, or Egyptians. Reconstructionist tends to disapprove of eclecticism, personal adaptation and modern trends in favour of academic accuracy and authenticity.

A special Neopaganism in Scandinavia is Nordic Paganism. Nordic Paganism is a collective term for the religious traditions and customs practiced by the inhabitants of the Nordic countries during the Viking era up to the turn of the century – a period extending from 700 AD. and to the 1100s. The Nordic religion was a people religion where the emphasis was on rituals and social ties. It was locally oriented and appeared in many forms. This can be due to the fact that there were no normative texts, and that religious change is a basic condition for all religion. It may be of greater or lesser importance but is very difficult to detect based on the individual text, which is a snapshot. During the Viking era, mythology and ritual practice were mostly transmitted in oral form. The sources that exist for religion are a number of more or less randomly assembled sources. From the Middle Ages are preserved literary sources. Modern research is based on these texts, supplemented by, among other things, archeology. On this basis, a reconstruction of a common Nordic religion has been created. That is, Nordic religion is a generalized ideal image [3, p. 11-12].

The Nordic region did not constitute a unity in the Viking Age, but was cultural, economic and political affiliated with neighboring regions. The northerners belonged to the German-speaking group, who in the Iron Age shared many cult-religious features. The people of the South-German area were converted to Christianity earlier than in northern-German. Source material is far more extensive for the religion of the Viking age than to the older Germanic religion, and studies are based more and more on the Nordic material.

### **Differences between Ethnic Religion and Monotheistic Religion**

Ethnic religions are distinctive in their relationship with a particular ethnic group and often in the shaping of one's solidarity with an ethnic identity and ethnic religions are often distinguished from religions, which claim to be not limited in

ethnic or national scope. When we think of the concept of religion in a modern society, we typically have a concept of monotheistic religion, which is normally shaped by Christianity or one of the other big world religions. However, solely certain ethnic groups practise some localised denominations of global religions as Copts in Ethiopia [2, p. 439-440].

Furthermore, one imagines a permanent teaching, moral directions, a hierarchical structure and a monopoly of truth that defines a monotheistic religion from other religions, when you define the term religion. When you think of a religious person, you may likely think of a person who manifests devotion to a deity or a person who is addicted to a religious zealot.

Few people think about that, this is a culturally created image and that it is a picture, which does not apply to all religions. Rather than being applicable to all religion, it is an expression of a certain particular type of religion; namely the exclusive monotheism. The religious form that strictly holds that there is only one god and one truth. It is a form of religion whose oldest known expression the Egyptian Aton religion originates from the middle of the Bronze Age, but first gained its breakthrough with Christianity and Islam in the 4th to 6th centuries after Western Time. Exclusive monotheism is in many ways a counter-religion that is opposed to all other religions. Its assertion of the one universal creator's garden initially legitimizes the rebellion against the ruling power structure and when it is overthrown, legitimizes the new power that prevails on behalf of the creator.

However, humans have always dealt with the spiritual dimension of life as human beings. Before the invention of exclusive monotheism, there was no need for a definition of religion as such. That was just something you did. Therefore, when trying to describe religions that do not belong to exclusive monotheism, it makes it difficult to make comparisons with the counter-religious form that has defined itself as opposed to the original human religiosity. Religious researchers have throughout the ages called the "primitive" religion, the religions of indigenous peoples or religious religions. None of these terms is particularly good or descriptive. Among

those who, in modern times, cultivate this original form of religion or try to recreate it, it has therefore begun to talk about the ethnic nature religion.

The term "natural religion" refers initially to it being through natural processes by man spontaneous natural need to deal with the spiritual. Both through rituals and mysterious experiences. For some, the word "natural religion" refers to the belief in a wild nature. Where God, in exclusive monotheism, is outside the world, the divine in an ethnical natural religion is a part of the world. In the context of an ethnical natural religion, the word "ethnic" means that it has emerged in a limited cultural context by a mutual interaction between traditional carriers. It does not mean that it cannot absorb foreign elements, but that the tradition has its own ethnic cultural expression as opposed to a prophetic religion given by the prophet's vision.

An ethnical natural religion is not exclusive in the same way as Christianity and its related religions. That is, you do not convert into an ethnical natural religion. You cultivate the powers in the shape they now have in the tradition that follows and you can easily follow several traditions at the same time. From an ethnically natural religious angle, one day you can come to a Christian church or a Muslim mosque, for the next day to go to a Sumbel or Blot for an Asatruar (Asatru believers) or to puja in a Hindu temple. The moment you grow the Nordic powers, you are an Asatruar. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with the fact that, as a believer, you can, as a matter of principle, be a member of for instance the Church of Denmark (Protestantism) and at the same time grow the Nordic powers by virtue. It is not in the ethnical nature religion that the problem lies if there is a problem. These religions do not allow their followers to have other gods who have a problem with such practices.

An ethnic nature religion is inclusive. That means that, as an ethnic natural religion, one can readily recognize other manifestations of the divine. There is even a theological tradition since ancient times, where the gods of most religions are interchangeable. When a Dane worships Odin, a Greek can see it as the worship of Hermes. An Egyptian can see it as the worship of Thoth. A worship of Freya can be translated into the worship of Venus, Aphrodite and Ishtar. The different ethnic traditions can also exchange gods if one feels one lacks an aspect of reality. The

world is changing all the time and since the divine is a part of the world, cultivation must obviously reflect the changed state.

As ethnic natural religions, one can even be the supporter of the kind of monotheism that perceives all gods as manifestation of the same Primordial Force or deity. However, it is another type of monotheism than exclusive universal monotheism. It is monotheism where the Bible can be true to the Jews, but where it is not for those who cultivate Shiva or Vishnu as the highest deity. The various religious writings are simply too different, so that such ethnic nature-religious monotheism can be universal.

It is not for ethnic natural religions to do missionary work. Many believe that there is a ban on mission, but since ethnic nature religion is not prohibited, such as exclusive monotheism, there is also no real mission ban. However, it appears indirectly that when other people, such as ethnic groups, can be true in their own tradition, there is no reason to impose another truth on them, which they do not want. However, the emergence of missionary religions has changed the state of the world and some ethnic natural religions have therefore found it necessary to mission, as a protection against being eradicated by mission of others monotheistic religions.

### **Mari Native Religion**

The traditional *Mari Religion* or *Mari Paganism* is the ethnic religion of the Mari people, a Finnish ethnic group that inhabits the republic of Mari El near Kazan in central Russia. The Mari Religion is one of the oldest indigenous religions in Europe with uninterrupted continuity that survived Christianization, although it has coexisted for generations with Russian Orthodoxy. The Mari religion is based on the cult of the forces of nature, which man must honor and respect. Before monotheism spread among the Mari, they worshiped many gods the Jumo, a word with the same root as Jumala in Finnish, while recognizing the primacy of a "great god," Kugu Jumo. In the nineteenth century, influenced by monotheism, pagan beliefs were altered to the image of an Osh Kugu Jumo, literally "great god of light", was strengthened [4, p. 249].

There are significant differences between the pantheon of lowland mars, with about 140 gods, and those of the highlands, with about 70 gods. However many of these deities are different forms of other gods. Nine gods are the most important, and are often regarded as hypostases of the supreme god Osh Kugu Jumo. Besides the gods themselves, the Mari also believe in a wide range of spirits, some associated with the cult of the ancestors (the kughiza) and others representing the forces of evil or destructive. The traditional Mari religion includes tree worship and animal sacrifices.

Believers of the traditional Mari religion perform public rituals and collective prayers, energize cultural, educational and charitable activities, transmit their beliefs to the new generation, and distribute religious literature. Public prayers are made according to the traditional calendar, according to the position of the Sun and the Moon, and are held in sacred groves (küsoto). A hierarchy of priests (karts) organizes the ceremonies. There are currently four regional organizations embodying the Mari religion.

The conquest of the area in the 16th century by the Muslim Tatars little affected the traditional Mari religion provided they accepted Tatar supremacy, paid tributes and contributed soldiers to the wars against the Russians, the Mari continued to be governed by their traditional princes and to practice their religion. In addition, the Russians, who nominally controlled Mari El since the conquest of the Kazan Tartar in 1552, initially did not make great attempts to Christianize them.

It was not until the eighteenth century that the Russian Empire initiated a policy of Christianization of the Mari Natives: initially it consisted only of tax benefits for those who converted, but soon there were more drastic measures, such as the expulsion of animists from their villages and baptisms by force. Officially, in 1743 most of the Maris had been baptized. However, traditional rituals, such as animal sacrifices to the gods, continued to be practiced, with the Russian state and the Orthodox Church alternating between tolerance and repression. In 1897, almost one third of Mari would follow the traditional religion, according to the censuses,

possibly the true numbers would be larger, with some Animists not to declare openly their belief.

With the establishment of the Soviet Union, the Mari native religion continued to be persecuted. Even more intense than those made to Christianity, but since the 1990s, it has received official status by the Mari El government, where it is recognized as one of the three traditional religions along with Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Some activists say that believers in traditional Mari religion are under pressure from Russian authorities as part of a campaign to Russify Mari culture. Vitali Tanakov, a priest of the Mari religion, was accused of inciting religious, national, social and linguistic hatred after publishing the book “The Priest Speaks”.

Today many Mari are baptized as Christians but participate in traditional prayers rather than in the services of the Church. A 2004 study concluded that about 15% of Mari El's population claims to follow traditional Mari religion; given that the Mari are 45% of the 700,000 inhabitants of the Republic, these numbers mean that probably more of a third of these affirms to follow the traditional religion. Victor Shnirelman, who considers that between a quarter, presents a similar number and half of the Mari, follow the heathen gods, or sympathize with Neopaganism. Some Mari intellectuals consider that ethnic Mari believers should be classified into groups depending on the degree of Russian Orthodox influence, including syncretic believers who may occasionally attend the Church, followers of the traditional Mari religion who are baptized, and unmarried Mari [8].

Unlike other forms of European paganism, the traditional Mari religion had uninterrupted continuity from the distant past, rather than having been rebuilt recently – as in so-called neo-paganism. However, a recognized Russian researcher, Boris Kirillovich Knorre from the National Research University in Moscow, provides in his article ‘Neopaganism in the Mari El Republic’ an analysis of the Mari paganism as a syncretic phenomenon that combines traditional local popular elements and cultural innovations of our time. He divides the believers of the Mari religion into three groups: Chimari, the Marian believers who are not baptized by the Orthodox Church,

and reject all Christian rituals; Marla vera, baptized but attending both the Marian and Orthodox Church rituals; and Kugo Sorta, a revivalist movement [4, p. 249-265].

His article focuses on the problem of contemporary religiosity of local nations, renovation of archaic traditions, world-view and religious mythological paradigms. Furthermore, the native religion in the Mari El Republic has changed over time, particularly under the influence of neighboring monotheism. In the last decades, there has been a revival similar to the one of the Neo-pagan ones, while maintaining its traditional characteristics in the rural world.

The author's task was to discover the dynamics of an ancient mythology renaissance, to analyze its philosophy and problems of post-secularism on the Post-Soviet area. The results of his study showed that by positing a so-called new universal harmony, the Mari Native Religion is not only a historical pagan belief, but also more and more tend to be Political Paganism. By aspiring to influence a broader sphere of social thinking as well in the area of Mari El as in the rest of Russia, the role of the religion will change and inspire to other aspects of the traditions than its original pagan traditions and a national-political identity of the Mari People is growing.

In 1997 the Bishop Ioan Timofeyev of Yoshkar-Ola and Mari El Diocese pointed out that the Mari native people by changing its foundation, and by encouraging insubordination against their Christian neighbors the Mari religion more and more could tend to become a destructive cult than a serious pagan religion. The thoughts of the local bishop were supported by the fact that the intellectual Mari people in Yoshkar-Ola increasingly regarded their religion as being in opposition to their Christian neighbors [1].

The main reasons for this abovementioned problem, admits the Russian Mari anthropologist Nikandr Popov, is firstly the weak organisational skills of the pagans themselves. Secondly, the practical problem that, in accordance with Soviet law, religious rites were permitted only in worship buildings, and, since Mari pagans did not possess any worship buildings, they were unable to register, which worsened the relationship to Christians a little. Furthermore, the 1997 law of legalisation of the

native religions in Russia favours those with long-established religious structures and resources according to Nikandr Popov. Furthermore, he strikes cold water in the blood and believes that the heathens of Mari El will find their own legs to stand over the years [1].

Nevertheless with Boris Kirillovich Knorre words from his conclusion of his study: that if the Mari pagans see Christianity as an obstacle that hinders them in expressing their own uniqueness and that one of the main tasks for the Mari intelligentsia in Yoshkar-Ola is to purify their religion of Christian influence, the foundation of the Mari Native Religion is more a Political Paganism than a traditional peaceable historical pagan belief, in the eyes of the author of this article.

### **Asatru**

*Asatru* is a religion that seeks to revive the ancient religious beliefs and practices of the pre-Christian religion in the Nordic region. Particularly those of pre-Christian Scandinavia but also the related traditions in the German area of continental Europe and the Anglo-Saxons in Great Britain. The organization of modern Asatru has its roots in Scandinavia in the Icelandic association known as Asatruarfelagid (the fellowship of those who believe or trust in the ancient gods), founded in 1972. During the 1970s, groups were formed in USA, Great Britain, Iceland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, which were not in contact with each other and not even were aware of each other's existence. Each of the groups revived the old Pagan traditions for the benefit of modern people [7, p. 127-128].

Asatru is one of several denominations of a cultivation of the ancient Nordic gods in the present. In Denmark, the ascendants are often organized in Blot guilds, holding religious festivals, which alone constitute the core of the common religious life. Many of these Blot guilds are affiliated with the common Forn Siðr association 'the Old Customs' – the term of pre-Christian religion in early Christian times. The Asatruan's organizations do not have a dogmatic attitude to what gods the members believe, as it is stressed that no mission is being conducted. The Blots are held approx. four times a year in connection with the Sun's course. As a rule, participants form a circle that closes ceremonially and is perceived as sacred.

Standing in this circle, the participants are shouting their gods, committing you, inviting objects, among other things, until the circle is again opened ceremonially. Asatruars cultivate the gods of Nordic mythology. They are referred to as powers. The powers are shouted through the Blot that often takes place in an invigorated circle of practitioners who greet gods, dads, or ancestors by drinking a bowl for them. The modern Asatru rituals take place primarily outdoors. In Denmark, Asatruans have no temples. The leader of the ritual is called a Godi, a name of an old Icelandic chieftain, when it is a man or, if it is a woman, a Gythia [5, s. 20-32].

It is done as far as possible from source material about faith, but parts are reinvented. In particular, knowledge about the rituals is inadequate. Asatruars goes under many different names like the old custom, the ancient seed (or ancient moral), not least like in the old Nordic mythology. The most important written sources of the Asatru are the older Edda and the younger Edda. Elder Edda is a poem collection of stories from Nordic mythology and Nordic heroism. They were written in Iceland in the 13th and 14th centuries, but the original authors are unknown today. The poems are probably hundreds of years older and are passed through oral tradition. They constitute a central text group in the Icelandic literature from the Middle Ages.

The name Edda was originally the name of Snorre Sturlasson's textbook in documentary art from around 1220. However, when a manuscript with the older editions was rediscovered in 1643, the newly found bookmark called Elder Edda became distinctive from Snorri's work, now called Younger Edda. What the word Edda means is disputed, but it is assumed either to relate to the word grandmother (Norse language: Edda), that is, stories from grandmother's time or is a derivation of the word Odr (poetry inspiration) or the latin edo (I publish, manufacture). In particular, the queries Havamál and Völuspá are used to define the faith. There is no simple interpretation of the Norse texts within the asatru environment. Everyone has the right to interpret the myths as it makes sense to them and exercise the faith in an appropriate manner.

On 15 November 1997 the Forn Siðr association, the Asatru and Vanatru Association in Denmark, was established, in 2003 recognized, and registered as an

official religion in Denmark. In 2018 the Forn Siðr association has around 800 members. With unorganized Blot Guilds all over Denmark, the number of Danes that are worshipping the Asatru is around 1.500-2.000. The Forn Siðr association is a modern unity with own statutes and with a board consisting of seven members. However, if you are looking for a religious community where you can be saved, you have come to the wrong place, it appears from the website of Forn Siðr. They do not have the truth or a complete faith. The thoughts, questions and ideas are as valued as the original thoughts, which have been defined in 1997. A good discussion and new initiatives are always welcome. The Danish poet, Ole Godtved's poem "The end of the old gods of the north" is a poetic definition of the faith and philosophy of life of Forn Siðr [9, s. 218-220].

The lack of a traditional religious hierarchy, a solid foundation of faith and a common organization of religious members, make the Asatru associations vulnerable to external flows that also invoke their right to the Asatru. Since 2009 a racist interpretation of the Nordic Asatru belief in gods, such as Thor and Odin, has come to Denmark and creates turmoil in the Danish Asatru environment. Asatru Folk Assembly Denmark (AFADK) is the association that spreads its own version of Asatru, which is reserved for white people with the right genes. Nordic Paganism separatists divide people into races and believe that the breeders should live separately and cultivate only their own customs, faith and culture. The supporters of Nordic Paganism separatism also believe that through their ancestors – the white northern Europeans have inherited special physical and mental qualities. These attributes give them priority to specific lands, such as Denmark, and enable them to communicate directly with the old Nordic gods such as Odin, Thor and Freya. The form of Paganism had its very great rise during Nazism in the 1930s, especially in the Hitler Elite Corps, SS Corps, abusing the symbolism and gods of the Asatru to create a spiritual connection between National Socialism and the past.

Although the majority of modern Nordic Asatruars are both enthusiastically devoted to Scandinavian and German cultural heritage and by most modern Asatru believers firmly opposed to Nazism an although the minority of Nordic Pagans with

Neo-Nazi leanings are firmly denounced as members of fringe groups that they wish to have nothing to do with, it reflects the problems for this Nordic neo-paganism religion.

Firstly, the fact that the Asatru can be interpreted in several ways, and that rightists can use it in their racist propaganda, make this neo-paganism religion problematic. Secondly, the Asatru, as some right wing priests believe can protect the dignity of the Danish cultural identity against the so-called advancing Muslims, in fact, appears in reality to be an immigrated religion from the Middle East. Thirdly, this internal divide and rivalry among the practitioners of religion weakens not only the dissemination of the message but also creates a popular reluctance against the worshippers of the Asatru.

### **Postscript**

There is no doubt at all that the original spirit and traditions as well in the Mari Native Religion as in the neo-paganism religion of the Asatru are a well-meaning and pure-hearted faith. However, the roots of the two native religions are founded in a society that existed more than 1,200 years ago. In a complete different world with different customs and a different view and way of life. A renaissance of the heathenry, which at this very moment all over the world is taking place, is therefore associated with very large customization problems. The lack of a traditional religious hierarchy, a solid foundation of faith and a common organization of religious members make the paganism and neo-paganism religions vulnerable to extreme and nationalistic political influence, of the year 2018. Furthermore, for some neo-paganism religion, with the origin of for instance the Asatru in the New Age movements, the Political Paganism elements of the revived native religion will dominate the popular perception of acting purely on political grounds, because that is basically the foundation of religion. As a way of bolstering Mari nationhood and with it Mari-El's justification for relative autonomy from Moscow and for the Asatru as a way of providing shelter for extremist political ideas.

### **Bibliography:**

1. Fagan G. Republic of Mari-El (Russia) – Mari Paganism: traditional religion or destructive cult? [Web resource] // Religioscope. 12.07.2012. URL: <https://goo.gl/oPmrrn> (reference date: 20.12.2017).
2. Hinnells J.R. The Routledge Companion to Study of Religion. London, 2005. 560 p.
3. Kamp M. Modene Asetro. København: Books on demand GmbH, 2008.
4. Knorre B.K. Neopaganism in the Mari El Republic // Modern Pagan and Native Faith Movements in Central and Eastern Europe. New York, 2013. P. 249-265.
5. Larsen U.H. Vikingers Tro og Tanker. Viborg, 2000. 307 s.
6. Strmiska M.F. Modern Paganism in World Cultures. Santa Barbara, 2005. 382 p.
7. Strmiska M.F., Baldur A.S. Asatru: Nordic Paganism in Iceland and America // Modern Paganism in World Cultures, Santa Barbara. 2005. P. 127-180.
8. Twickel N. ‘Europe's Last Pagans’ Worship in Mari-El Grove [Web resource] // The Moscow Times (former Saint Petersburg Times). 30.06.2009. URL: <https://goo.gl/cWujmS> (reference date: 20.12.2017).
9. Warmind M. Asatro i Danmark – spredning og vækst a en ny religion // Tørre tal om troen. København, 2007. S. 216-229.

### **Data about the author:**

Christensen Carsten Sander – Doctor of History (PhD), curator of Billund Museum (Billund, Denmark).

### **Сведения об авторе:**

Христенсен Карстен Сандер – доктор истории (PhD), куратор Музея Биллунда (Биллунд, Дания).

**E-mail:** [csc@billund.dk](mailto:csc@billund.dk).