

Asatru as a Religion



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Asatru is a serious, modern religion inspired by historical knowledge of the past, but adapted to our current conditions. It seeks to enhance the spiritual connection of the past, present and future and to make the Gods and Goddesses of our ancestors relevant to daily life in today's world.

Asatru is not a role playing game. It is not a dress-up game. It is not an opportunity to fantasize about being a Viking or recreating a society that existed a thousand years ago. We want to avoid make-believe weekend Viking role-playing and rather bring a spiritual vision and guidance leading our people to goodness and prosperity in Midgard and to a communion with their Gods, Goddesses and ancestors. Additionally, we are preparing the way for future generations. These are solemn tasks that require focus and seriousness.

Asatru is derived from a deep understanding of the practices and beliefs of our ancestors. It is not just "made up." There is a strong historical basis for just about everything in Asatru. It has been said that "Asatru is the religion with homework" because there's so much to learn about in rediscovering the spiritual ways of our ancestors. To do this, we are learning about and reconstructing past beliefs and practices and then adapting those beliefs and practices to the modern world.

Asatru is not part of a larger "Pagan" religious grouping which includes religions such as Wicca or other foreign or eclectic paths. We do not welcome their influences. Admittedly, we have some of our modern origins with some of those groups, but our values differ significantly.

Whereas they revel in universalist pantheism, as polytheists we have set forth a path which reverently places our own gods and goddesses at the forefront while leaving foreign ways behind. Asatru is not a Universalist religion. It does not seek universal salvation for all human beings. What it seeks to do is help the individual find meaning and spirituality in their gods and goddesses in Asgard, their folk in Midgard and their ancestral roots.

Asatru is a Folk or Ethnic religion; we believe that our Gods and Goddesses have a special affection for us because we are their descendents. We believe that our gods and goddesses are our oldest ancestors, that our ancestry is good, and that we must promote our unique and special ancestral identity and culture into an enduring future. Consequently, we believe that we have a responsibility to promote a Folk existence which is more important than anything else in Midgard.

Ethically, Asatru holds high regard for both the individual and ethnic folk. It is not a self-denying religion; we want the individual to discover their personal strengths, weaknesses and insights, but to also willingly apply them for the good of the folk. Asatru is also a life-embracing spirituality which does not merely prepare the individual for an afterlife. We seek to apply ourselves to accomplish great things, to live a worthy and full life and experience the joy of our time in Midgard.

But, there are many ways of looking at Asatru as a religion. We can compare and contrast it with other religions. We can describe it as we see it today. We can describe it as we'd like to see it. We can describe it as it is practiced individually. We can describe it as it's practiced in groups. Looking at it in these

various ways will help us better understand the many aspects of modern Asatru.

ASATRU AS AN ANCIENT RELIGION

Without doubt, Asatru has its roots in Europe's earliest history and beyond. The Gods and Goddesses that are honored in Asatru are mentioned in the earliest writings across the millennia. Asatru, as an ancient religion, represents some of the earliest expressions of religious thought in Northern Europe and is probably as old as the Northern European branch of humanity itself. Concepts of holy places, feasts and sacrifices, the gods' involvement in battle, land spirits, ancestral chains, other worlds and the nature and roles of the gods and goddesses have remained similar across all of recorded time.

Across time and place, stories of Earth Gods (Vanir) and Sky Gods (Aesir) have endured. Offerings to the Earth Gods, for good harvest go as far back as we know. Requesting the blessings from the Thunder God has also been constant. Usage of such symbolism as the Fylfot goes back to the Stone Age. However, despite the fact that the Gods, Goddesses and practices of Asatru are ancient, there were many regional variations and emphases. Therefore, Asatru although ancient hasn't been static in time or place.

ASATRU AS AN INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE

Asatru can be practiced in groups or individually. As an individual, we can commune with our ancestors, meditate on the runes, and pray for blessings from particular gods or goddesses. One can seek self-empowerment, self-realization and blessings in life by directly communing with these gods, goddesses, ancestors and other powers of nature. One can also celebrate our holy days without others, privately in one's home.

ASATRU AS A GROUP PRACTICE

As a group practice, we can explore how people interact as well as the kinds of enduring social structures that people develop. Asatru provides many opportunities for group practices. The two most common rituals, the blot and the sumbel, are group rituals. Lore study groups are another way that people involve themselves in group activity. Many Asatru practitioners also belong to one or more of the several national or local organizations of various sizes.

Asatru is experienced as a group activity through its many festivals and gatherings. For some, group practice is paramount. In this way, identity and solidarity is developed while Asatru's religious values are expressed between the participants. By participating in these group activities, the religion becomes a living community and communal experience.

Some of the enduring social structures of Asatru are known as hearths, garths, kindreds, steads, sippe, skeppslag or tribe. With the exception of the word tribe, these groupings are composed of maybe up to two dozens individuals who pledge to each other certain obligations to practice, participate in and promote the religion together.

ASATRU AS A FOLK RELIGION

There are many traditions and practices that have been passed down through the generations and have survived attempts to eliminate them. Almost all of mainstream American festivals and holidays have their origins in pre-Christian Europe. Such things as Easter Eggs, Yule Trees and their decorations, celebration behaviors, adornment symbolism and other practices represent cultural patterns passed down through the generations from before Christianity dominated Europe.

Marriage ceremonies, maritime practices, time-keeping practices and calendars all represent a continued cultural outlook which has been passed between the generations.

Whereas these practices have been downplayed in the non-Asatruar sectors of American society, Asatruar have embraced them for what they are: surviving folk religion and cultural practices and beliefs. As a folk religion, Asatru adherents see themselves as promoting these surviving traditional values, cultural ideas and practices into the present day and into the future.

ASATRU AS AN ETHNICITY

For some, Asatru has come to take on an entire ethnic identity. We have come to see ourselves as a unique ethnic/national element in the world like many other ethnicities. This identity is based on a number of common identity factors such as common religion, societal values and ideals, common historical origins, descent, mythology, folklore and literature, common language, cultural symbolism and conceptual encoding. These things provide a powerful and unique identity among Asatru's followers. As a product of these commonalities a growing sense of people-hood has arisen among many Asatruar. This is the essence of Folkish Asatru. Among Folkish Asatruar, this is seen not only as empirically obvious, but an ideal which is to be promoted. To Folkish Asatruar, their ethnicity is deeply tied to belongingness based on religion, culture and ancestry.

ASATRU AS AN ETHNIC RELIGION

An ethnic religion is generally meant to be a religion, spirituality, and cosmology that is firmly grounded in a particular people's traditions and unique cultural views. It represents a religion that co-developed with a particular ethnic

group. In this way, particular ethnic groups can carry their religion with them through time.

In other ways, ethnic religions are wrapped around ethnic groups so that they become justifications and explanations for that folk's ethnic existence. By providing a common cultural outlook among a folk, an ethnic religion builds and reinforces the distinctions of that people from others as they interact with outsiders who don't share those views. An ethnic religion embodies the ethnic identity of a particular folk. In this way, ethnic religions sustain and promote the ethnic identity and the culture of a people.

Asatru, most especially, Folkish Asatru, is an ethnic religion. It has developed among the Northern peoples of Europe and expresses their unique cultural outlooks that developed throughout the millennia. It does not offer a universalizing worldview applicable to all peoples. Its stories and sagas are geographically limited to Northern Europe. Stories of ice and snow goddesses make little sense to people who've never experienced ice and snow. Asatru, as an ethnic religion, embodies the unique outlooks, ideals, behavior patterns and values of the Nordic and Germanic peoples of Europe as they developed through history. It developed as they developed and speaks of their unique spiritual way of seeing and explaining the universe.

ASATRU AS A CULTURAL WAY

There are many who bask in the glory of modernism. A viewpoint where anything old is outdated and anything new is better. Among modernists, it is sufficient to explain an idea as old to label it as bad. These people seek to become empty slates which are continually rewritten as new goals and ideals

are offered them.

However, there are many who hold that culture, as an enduring set of viewpoints that develop and meet the tests of time, offers many solutions to life that can not be answered in any other way. To many, Asatru represents the wisdom of an ancient culture which can be applied to solving personal, ethnic, and social issues. These cultural patterns also become blueprints for directions for a society to develop.

ASATRU AS AN ATHEISTIC CULTURAL VIEW

Although it is automatic to equate gods and goddesses with Asatru, there are small numbers of practitioners of Asatru who do not believe in them as actual and living beings. These people do not believe in our Gods and Goddesses as real manifestations in our universe yet still practice Asatru as a strong historical and cultural pattern demanding continuation. They see the values and rituals as vital and worthy because they represent enduring cultural patterns from their European heritage.

ASATRU AS A CONTINUED CIVILIZATION

For some, it is believed that although it is a religion, Asatru also represents the resurgent civilization of Nordic Europeans. In many ways, Western civilization has emphasized its Judaic, Greek and Roman cultural ideals while downplaying Nordic civilization's ideals and influences. But the Nordic peoples have their own sophistications and ways which were laid aside. Some view Asatru and the extended culture around it as representing a re-assertion of the ideals and patterns of pre-Christian Nordic Europe. In this way, as Asatru develops, it develops a resurgent society and civilization which will grow through time.

ASATRU AS A NATURE RELIGION

With the Vanic family of gods and goddesses, Asatru has a very strong nature religion component. In this case, the cycles and patterns of nature are deified, ritualized and sanctified. Such things as wights, or local nature spirits, represent another core of Asatru as a nature religion. Many of the gods and goddesses have direct correlations with forces and patterns of nature.

In this way, forces of nature, including human nature, are things that are to be accepted and coexisted with. Since there are wights and spirits in local areas, one must work with and seek the approval of these spirits if one is to be prosperous and successful. Often, the nature deities are called upon to provide prosperous harvests and animal fecundity.

ASATRU AS A WARRIOR RELIGION

Asatru also has strong warrior ethics embodied in it. Nearly all of the gods and goddesses have battle proficiencies of one sort or another. Ancient warriors called upon these war gods and goddesses to bless them in their battles.

Odin, sitting on Hlidskialf, proficient with the spear, magic and deception, represented intelligence warfare. Thor and his mighty Mjolnir represented fierce hand-to-hand combat. Many of the goddesses also exhibited martial virtues. Frigga also shared Hlidskialf with Odin and was proficient in magic and deception. Freya garnered half of the fallen warriors to take back to her hall. The Valkyries, women warriors serving Odin, were known as fierce fighters as well. Without doubt, Asatru embodies a strong warrior ethic.

Perhaps most obvious of Asatru's warrior spirit is embodied in one of its most recognized and used symbols: the hammer. The

hammer represents Thor's Mjollnir with which he smites the foes of the Aesir and Vanir. This symbol is almost universally recognized as Asatru's symbol and shows that Asatru sees conflict as a key theme of the universe and being prepared for it and dealing with it are central obligations.

ASATRU AS ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Asatru has a deep ancestor worship component as well. In the most basic way, our gods and goddesses are seen as our most distant ancestors, whom we revere and retell the old tales about. The spirits of our ancestors are revered and are believed to watch over us and involve themselves in our lives. By making blot to these spirits, we recognize their commitments to us and thank them for their blessings.

ASATRU AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

To some degree, Asatru represents dissatisfaction with the meaningless and lack of spirituality offered us by mainstream society. In this way, Asatru can be seen as a social movement seeking increased ethnic identity, spirituality, and meaning in our lives. Whereas greater society seeks to impose a universalism where our own cultural and religious identities are seen as meaningless, adherents of Asatru reject those views by embracing the religion of their ancestors and making it a meaningful presence in their lives today.

There's no doubt that Asatru saw a resurgence as a romantic movement through the 1960's and 1970's, but contemporary Asatru, although embracing many aspects of romanticism, has sought to be a practical, spiritual and visionary statement about where our lives should be and where they should go. We are seeing ourselves become better organized and mobilized as a

religious movement.

ASATRU AS A MODERN ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

Asatru also has a strong romantic aspect to it. There are many who elevate the culture of the past, the symbolism of the Vikings or patterns of past agricultural lifestyles as paradigms to copy and re-experience. Many of the aesthetic practices developed throughout the generations are recreated and made relevant to today.

Whether recreating the folklore of the past, practicing the crafts of our ancestors, or recreating the dress and manner of our ancestors the common thread is romanticizing of that past culture and art. Although it's easy to downplay the importance of these activities, they can be strong identity-developing undertakings which emphasize our unique cultural past and make it a guide for tomorrow. These activities sanctify our culture and religion and make us separate from those who don't value them in the same way that we do. These activities raise our culture, art and folkways from the mundane to the spiritual.

ASATRU AS A PHILOSOPHY

Classical philosophy generally recognizes there being several significant ways of organizing what we know about things: an ethic, defining how one should live; a metaphysics, which defines the nature of the universe, its components and their interactions; an epistemology, which describes what counts as genuine knowledge; and a logic, which provides principles about how to reason about the things we know. Finally, an aesthetic defines rules for preferred forms and perceptions. Modern Asatru includes each of these components.

There are definite ethical aspects of Asatru which describe how

we should live as individuals and together. There are many enduring views in Asatru about how we should interact with our gods, goddesses, ancestors, the landvaettir, fellow folk members and outsiders for our own good and for the good of the folk. Embedded in Asatru is a unique metaphysics describing the nature of the universe, who we are, the nature of things in the universe, and how they are all causally linked. This metaphysics is millennia old and describes a universe very different from that described by other religions. Given the metaphysics of Asatru's universe, we also encounter a unique epistemology. This describes how we can know things about ourselves and the universe. A unique logic also exists to describe how we can think about these things. Finally, Asatru has a unique aesthetic descended from a mix of the principles expressed in our historical art forms combined with a modern romanticism and practicality.

ASATRU AS A COSMOLOGY

Asatru has a unique and advanced view of the universe which has developed over the millennia. This cosmology details a universe of Nine Worlds tied together by Yggdrasil and it details how all things interact within and between these realms and through time. This universe is rarely harmonious and these cosmological tensions define the interactions of gods and human alike. In this universe, numerous independent agents interact, sometimes in conflict, sometimes in harmony, to create all the manifestations and events we see. Understanding and working with this cosmology will help you understand the various rituals and practices of our way. Understanding this cosmology will also help you understand the evolution of the universe, its cycles and its ultimate destiny.

ASATRU AS A MAGICAL WAY

Although Asatru is a practical folk religion, it does include strong elements of magical or mystery elements. These practices are not necessary for the practice of Asatru, but some aspects, such as runes, are used often. The Ynglinga Saga details many of these capabilities that Odin expressed in his magic. Many in Asatru use the runes as divinational and meditational tools. Seith is practiced by some, as is galdr.

ASATRU AS A SPIRITUAL WAY

Spirituality arises from our knowledge of our self and the universe and our place in the universe while attaining a comfort with this reality. It is the feeling one gets as one sees meaningful patterns, completeness and purpose in ones life and actions.

Asatru, with its many different facets offers a strongly spiritual way. It can bring meaning and significance to our life through its lore and rituals. From these, we gain realizations about and experience enduring patterns of time. We gain better understanding of ourselves by understanding these cycles of time and through knowing the intergenerational realities of ancestry and folk. As we venerate and accept these cycles of life we see purpose in our existence. As we understand ancestral and folk patterns, we come to understand that we have a place and a role in time.

The seriousness and reverence of our rituals and ceremonies can be strong tools in helping us experience our spirituality. Whether through our own runic meditations, community blots, observing the growth of the young, studying our cosmology and psychology or through a myriad other activities, we gain deeper understanding of the enduring patterns in the universe and bring

about a spiritual peace.

In this way, as we study the lore, ourselves, and understand our role in Asatru, we come to know the nature of the universe and find deep meaning in the center of our soul.

ASATRU AS A LIFE-EMBRACING RELIGION

One characteristic of many other religions is the fact that they see life on Earth as messy and something to get away from. Christians reject their Earthly life as base and full of evil and temptation to be avoided; Buddhists seek to get off the wheel of life once and for all. The key activity in most of these religions is the rejection of enjoyment in life while preparing ones soul for the afterlife. Often, one sacrifices in this life for ensuring a better afterlife. In this way, they are life-rejecting.

Asatru is not life-rejecting; it does not say that our life is base. Rather we embrace life, its triumphs, trials and conflicts and see that a person who meets all of these things in high spirits is truly worthy and deserves reverence. We don't think that weakness is better than strength. We do believe that success and victory in life are worthy things to strive for. We are not born into a life of sin which we must overcome; rather, we are descendents of gods who can achieve great things with our lives if we but set our mind and will to do so. In this way, Asatru is life-embracing.

ASATRU AS A MODERN RELIGION

Despite its historical origins, Asatru is a modern religion. Its modern practice is a product of a resurgence through the late 1960's and early 1970's. As a modern religion, it seeks to inform and guide us in our modern, daily lives. It provides a vision of spirituality, community and identity that is relevant to

today. It seeks connection to our ancestors, gods and goddesses. It embraces the concept of culture as a peoples' embodied wisdom and seeks to improve our lives today by giving us ideals to strive for. Whether it is described as a reconstruction or a reinvention or a rediscovery of our ancestors' religious and folk views, it is modern and adapted to the world today. Its ethics provides lessons that are just as relevant today and tomorrow as they were through the millennia. Asatru is embodied in a rapidly growing community wherever Northern Europeans are found.

As a modern religion we are adapting our practices to face the realities of life in a more crowded world. If Asatru is said to have a mission in Midgard, it is to help the Folk live in peace with the Holy Spirits, and to help us thrive and grow, to have the greatest degree of self-identity, self-respect, strength and self-determination in the world today. Its mission is to keep alive the beliefs and ideals which have kept our Folk alive through the ages. Asatru, as a modern religion, is about life.

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