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***“In the name of Odin I pronounce you husband and wife”*. Neo-Pagan movements as a sign of reshaping the social and cultural order in contemporary Nordic countries**

Ideas and ideologies have their own beginning, life and end, as almost everything known to the human mind. They occur in a specific social reality, under certain circumstances, as a result of concrete cultural processes. The vitality of the ideas differs, is more or less temporarily and spatially limited, determined by many factors that shape the existence of a community (more on religion and geography, see Mikoś, 1988). The place of ‘dead’ or ‘archaic’ ideas and ideologies is taken by new ones that fill the gap in the descriptive-normative paradigm shaping a given society (e.g. rules of contact, personal and collective interactions, environmental issues, politics, education etc.).

Ideas and ideologies develop thus in definite geographical, social, cultural and political conditions and should be deconstructed within these particular frames. It also appeals to the religious sphere, in which today, apart from modernized forms of animism, we find commonly recognized practices related to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or Sikhism. Beside the mainstream religions, there are also other smaller, independent beliefs (which cannot be enumerated here) as well as currents defined as so called new religious movements like: Babism, Cargo cults,

Rastafari movement, Falun Gong, Scientology, New Age, Wicca or *Ásatrú*.¹ The last one belongs to the group of beliefs, searching for the source in pagan traditions of the Northern Europe, ingrained in the Old Norse and Old German mythologies.

The article discusses the process of revitalization of the Norse pagan rituals and traditions constituting an important part of contemporary *Ásatrú* faith. The crucial points of the discourse are based on an analysis of selected examples (artifacts and behaviors) stemming from the Icelandic and Danish practice – contemporary Pagan temple, Pagan cemetery and Pagan organizations. While elaborating on the factors prompting the Neo-Pagan movements (*Ásatrú*, *Odinism*, *Forn Siðr* etc.), the article seeks to answer a number of questions, inter alia about the profound source (or sources) of the *Ásatrú* resurgence, its influence on shaping the post-modern individual and collective lifestyle and, last but not least, about the role of the state authorities in promoting pre-Christian religious practices (the case of Iceland, where the Odin temple beside being a place of worship is also planned to serve as a place for officially respected ceremonies like: marriage, funeral, name-giving, teenagers' coming of age etc.).

The methodology applied in this study is based on desk research of primarily Scandinavian sources, complemented with European texts, supported by empirical material collected by the author during her recent visits to Scandinavia.

General social and cultural characteristics of the *NORDEN*

The term *NORDEN* in the Nordic discourse defines a geographical area and a cultural community of five states and three so-called autonomous territories. They include Denmark, Sweden and Norway, which are constitutional monarchies, and two republics: Finland and Iceland. Apart from them, the

¹An attempt to define the approximate number of beliefs/religions seems to be a daunting task. Various sources provide different numbers – from several to a dozen or so thousand; compare: *National & World Religion Statistics* <http://www.adherents.com/> (retrieved: December, 2016) and Górski, 2007.

NORDEN also covers Greenland, the Faroe Islands and the Aland Islands, which have high level of autonomy, yet they are politically dependent upon Denmark (Greenland, the Faroe Islands) and Finland (the Aland Islands). *NORDEN*, which is spatially large, sets an example of a community based on extensive international and interstate economic, political and cultural cooperation, with simultaneous internal differentiation.

Bernard Piotrowski indicates several basic features, upon which contemporary societies and Nordic states are founded. These include: a) tendency to search for a compromise in the first place rather than a conflict as a method to resolve disputes, b) recognizing advantages in the supranational and transnational relations as an effective means of establishing profitable economic and political order, c) focusing on the pragmatic aspect of undertaken actions, d) similarities in interpreting of various phenomena, which in turn increases possibility to reach agreements, e) a visible community of values also in the religious aspect (Piotrowski, 2006, p. 11).

The listed set of distinctions should still be supplemented by two important factors: a) geographic location of the *NORDEN* – on the edges of Europe, so to say, which has enabled Nordic societies to stay away from problems that affected countries of the continent over the centuries (e.g. WW I and WW II) and b) practical implementation of the vision of one Nordic community dating back to the Middle Ages. Exemplifications of the latter idea we may find as early as at the turn of the 10th and 11th century. For instance, the intention to end all disputes and work on a peaceful co-existence of the Nordic kingdoms, was expressed in 1101 in Kungahälla by the rulers of Denmark, Sweden and Norway – Erik Ejegod, Inge Stenkilsson and Magnus Barfot. The idea of establishing the Baltic-Scandinavian country was guided later by the Danish ruler – Valdemar I the Great – who governed between 1157-1182. The so-called ‘Skara convention’ made Magnus Eriksson the king of Norway, Sweden and Scania (1332). An important event in the history of not only Scandinavia, but also Europe, was the establishing of the Kalmar Union (1397), in which three countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden – from the initiative of the Danish queen Margaret I – were managed as united monarchies by one ruler, Eric of

Pomerania (it should be highlighted that the territorial coverage of the union included, apart from the mentioned kingdoms also dependent territories, namely Greenland, the Faroe Islands, the Orkney Islands and Shetland).

Peaceful attempts of uniting kingdoms and dependent territories, were however not the only form of unification processes. As in other regions of Europe, military force and weapons were used to implement visions of more authoritarian rulers like for instance Gustav Vasa or Carl XII. Nevertheless, over time with civilization progress, non-forceful forms of building social-political- and economic community started dominate the internal order of later *NORDEN*.

Ideologies, present by the dawn of the becoming united community, was Pan-Scandinavism and Nordism, dating back to common roots in remote history of the pre-Christian times. The heritage of the Old Scandinavian or Old Nordic paganism was a powerful agent that was used – and as it turns out still is – to build a strong bond between the Nordic nations. It was especially used in the period of intensive nation building processes (at the beginning of the 19th century), in which references to the common territory, history, heritage, language and culture played fundamental and formative role for the future nations. According to Johann Gottfried Herder, a German thinker and researcher of the Romanticism, especially language and culture were the most important factors for building an unity of humans – through culture and language one may reach beyond his or her individual life, becoming thus a part of the history and the future of the broader concept – the nation (Herder 2002; Heinz, Potępa, Zwoliński 2004). Similarly, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm spotted nation's building potential in language, nature (natural environment) and common history (von Schnurbein, 2016, pp. 17, 23-26).

Therefore, the researchers focused their attention on folklore, seen as a specific repository of knowledge about past generations, their experience, shared values, material and non-material works. Out of the latter, beliefs reflecting the world and the existing phenomena played an important role.

The mythology became thus one of the basic materials to which the researchers of the Romanticism referred, while searching for the genesis of the community understood as a nation.

The same method was used by some politicians in the first decades of the 20th century, as well as by the activists involved (not only politically, but also socially) in promoting an idea of exclusively understood nationalism. This indicated exclusion from the national community individuals of historically foreign origin and culturally foreign background. As a consequence, if this *Weltanschauung* combined with wrongly understood and distorted concept of Darwinism, Europe became a scene of many atrocities happening during the World War II.

The German mythology became one of the references for the extreme nationalists, who looked into it searching for elements justifying their ideology based on racial genuineness. This mythology was closely linked to the Norse one, which for a vast majority of researchers and even ordinary people, preserved original versions of old tales, beliefs, ideas about the world (and more precisely: worlds) of the Germanic peoples (Ślupecki, 2006, p. 14.)

These visions are recorded, inter alia, on runic stones, ornaments and jewelry, as well as in the old preserved written sources originating from Iceland. Especially two works are of particular value: *Poetic Edda* and *Prosaic Edda*. According to Leszek Ślupecki, the *Prosaic Edda* also known as the Edda of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241, a medieval Icelandic researcher, lawyer and writer), gives the most complete image of the Nordic mythology (Ślupecki, 2006, p. 19.) The tales written there, at the beginning passed orally and originating from various times (8th-10th centuries), were provided with a detailed commentary by Sturluson, explaining mythological images, scenes, figures and events. The objective was to prepare a certain kind of manual for the authors of the Skaldic poetry. The older Edda, in turn also known as *Poetic Edda* or Edda of Saemund, constitutes a collection of anonymous songs about gods and heroes, as well as about the history and the mythology of the Nordic peoples (Islandya, 1844, pp. 517- 520).

Apart from being the relics of Icelandic literature, *sagas* are also important in the process of reconstructing the Norse mythology. We may find among them early royal sagas (*konungasögur*) and earl sagas (*riddarasögur*) and later also bishop sagas (*biskupasögur*). Sagas describe the history of individual royal families and governing rulers of Norway, Denmark and on a lower scale – Sweden (Morawiec, Neubauer, 2005). Due to the fact that this kind of literature was aimed to emphasize merits and noble actions of the heroes, diminishing weaknesses and dark sides of the person, its value lies in the aesthetical and cultural aspects. Sagas which are beautiful from the literary perspective, cannot constitute unquestionable material to reconstruct the Nordic history.

Diversity of sagas and their abundance prove the importance of this type of narration for the Nordic people. As Folke Ström indicates, words included in sagas served as an effective form of propaganda, passed not only among people of that time, but also later over the centuries (Ström, 1981, pp. 440-458).

Christianity, implemented with difficulties since the 10th century, firstly into Denmark and Norway, a bit later to Sweden and Iceland, did not replace the old beliefs and customs. Despite the existence of the officially accepted religion – Catholicism – the people and very often the rulers, cultivated the faith of the ancestors, practicing in private old traditions (Latourette, 1938, pp. 106-43; Melnikova, 2011, on-line; Melnikowa, 2011, pp. 97- 107.)

The phenomenon of religious syncretism, observed in different parts of the world (e.g. the Latin America, North Africa) occurred also in Scandinavia. Attributes of the Norse gods like Odin, Thor or Frey respectively, marked with cultural and environmental specificity of the Nordic region, were in several cases very similar to the attributes of the main gods from the Greek and Roman mythology (von Schnurbein, 2016, p. 99). With the introduction of Christianity in Scandinavia, some features of the Norse gods and goddesses were transferred to the new religion making it more 'accessible' and understandable for the pagan autochthones (for instance: Frigg, the queen of Asgård, and the Virgin Mary, the queen of heaven).

Faith in the Norse gods – *Ásatrú*

The old Icelandic sources – tales, sagas, legends and myths – in their originally oral and later written form, contain important information about the origins of the world, its structure and inhabitants: people, gods, giants, elves, dwarfs, trolls and other creatures with supernatural power (local ghosts).

According to the Norse pagans two nations created the pantheon of gods: Aesirs and Vanirs – and from them – as Leszek Słupecki states – “the history of the world” begins (Słupecki, 2006, p. 81). However, it should be stressed that the history of the origin of the world – not only the earthly one – is more distant and more complicated. It was described in the prophecy *Völuspá*, the most preserved and well-known Icelandic song included in the collection called Codex Regius (*Konungsbók*).² The space shown there, appearing from the depths, became an arena of heavy fights of (pre)gods and giants, as well as other magic creatures. Only after resolving the opening fight, the world to the pagan Nordics started to exist. It was composed of three layers: the world of gods: Asgård, the world of people – Midgård and the world of the dead – Nilfheim, all surrounded by seas and oceans, where the snake – Midgårdorm reigned, being hostile not only to people but also to gods favoring people. The Nordic peoples imagined that the edges of the human world border with the land of the giants, Utgård, a place designed for cursed people. The link combining three worlds, the one of the gods, people and the dead, was an ash named Yggdrasill. Its branches, trunk and roots constituted parts of one universe, therefore, in the magic imagination of the pagans, the creatures from different layers could migrate and penetrate to the others.

The families of Aesirs and Vanirs, equally strong and ambitious, competed with each other in a long war, which de facto was not resolved. At the end of this conflict, the Aesirs seemed to have advantage, therefore, the later nomenclature assumed the name *Ásatrú* for the cult of the stronger gods.

² There is no space here to provide a very detailed description of the creation of the world. I refer any interested readers directly to the work, translated to many languages, inter alia *The Poetic Edda, Volume 1*, 1990, p. 2 and further.

Finally the nations decided to unite, exchange hostages and choose peace instead of conflict. It is worth to highlight that this part of the Norse mythology promotes reconciliation and stresses benefits stemming from cooperation and mutual trust.

The peaceful image of the finished dispute (that is, the dispute about people) is, however, not a classical example of resolving quarrels. The mythology described here abounds in bloody and brutal images, in a similar way as the life of the Nordic people at that time used to be – bloody and brutal.

The gods fought with each other, fought with giants and other monsters and they were mortal. The story about the end of the world, *Ragnarök* (The Doom of the Gods), depicts the final scene in which Odin, Thor and the other gods start fighting against the evil and dark powers. They die (with few exceptions) as a result of a total war in which everybody fights everyone. However, there is hope for rebirth of the world in a new and better shape.

The vision of this better world returned at the end of the 19th century and became a symbolic and explanatory element of the ideology in the next decades, in which some individuals and groups search for justification of the racial and national purity and cultural superiority. Stefanie von Schnurbein writes about it in her book *Norse Revival. Transformation of Germanic Neopaganism* (von Schnurbein, 2016, chapter IV).³ This well-developed study of the rebirth of Neo-Paganism in German, Nordic, and also non-European societies (USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) brings many important remarks for better understanding of this phenomenon.

The most relevant question here seems to be the ‘attractiveness’ of the Norse mythology. Statistics delivered by the Swedish association *Forn Sed*, indicate 26 thousand believers worldwide (Samfundet Forn Sed, Sverige, 2015). According to Karl E.H. Seigfried, an American blogger, the estimations should be more modest – about 16 700.⁴

³ It should be stressed, however, that similar motifs are found in the whole work.

⁴ Seigfried holds a doctorate in Double Bass Performance. He taught courses: Norse mythology (Loyola University Chicago) and Norse religion (Carthage College Wisconsin). Seigfried

In fact, browsing printed or electronic resources conveys the general impression that existence of reliable numerical data, reflecting the actual state of matter, does not currently seem to be probable. There might be some explanations of this situation. One of them is the difficulty in estimating the number of so-called unregistered followers of *Ásatrú*, meaning persons who are not formally associated with any organization, yet practice (in various ways) Neo-Pagan rituals. The other reason of the lack of precise numbers may be the fact that some of the individuals and groups prefer to stay undisclosed and rather private or exclusive.

Despite these doubts, we can assume that in the Nordic scale the size of the *Ásatrúan* community can be several thousand, yet this number summed up with the estimated data from Northern America, Australia and New Zealand can actually provide the result of tens of thousands of believers. An interesting fact of the described community is its masculinized profile. According to Stefanie von Schnurbein, 60 – 70 % of *Ásatrúans* are men (Schnurbein, 2016, p. 216). The German researcher indicates also a couple of other features characterizing these Neo-Pagans: heterogeneity and relative freedom in interpreting rituals and feasts, as well as, a varying degree of ideologization.

References to, inter alia, social Darwinism, national socialism, the Heimat movement, the right-wing ecologism or folklore can be found in different *Ásatrúan* communities, depending on the country, decade and socio-political circumstances (e.g. migrations, the right-wing or the left-wing governments, economic situation affecting social condition etc.). The attractiveness of *Ásatrú* resulting in beliefs and practices revival, may be the outcome of a specific combination of a) relative freedom (flexibility) and b) discipline - both necessary for each human and each community to function properly. Moreover, for pro-ecologically focused people a very important asset of this religious movement is located in the belief that all

had posted on social media a request to the global community of Norse pagans, to come forward, receiving 16 700 confirming responses. <http://www.norsemyth.org/2014/01/worldwide-heathen-census-2013-results.html> (retrieved: January, 2017).

creatures, humans, animals, plants and all the natural environment constitute one wholeness.

The modern aspects of *Ásatrú* – Iceland and Denmark

One thousand years of presence of the Christianity in the Nordic countries, originally in the Catholic and then, after Reformation, Protestant (Evangelical-Lutheran) form, has not resulted in a removal of the ancient beliefs from the collective awareness. Dormant or hibernated pagan practices in their modified form started to come back in the second half of the 20th century, inter alia, as a response to global changes.

Modernization processes observed in the Western civilization brought more freedom of customs in the social sphere. They also initiated changes in the economic dimension (shift from production of goods to production of services) and within the political area, they enabled Europe to undertake a common project giving rise to the later European Union. These transformations modified also (to different extent and in different pace) the socio-cultural, economic and political order of the Nordic countries, including Iceland and Denmark.

In the case of Iceland the need of preserving original Icelandic culture was fueled by the presence of the American troops stationing on the island since the WW II. The awareness of the presence of people who are culturally different, with peaceful intentions, although militarized, could have revived in the tiny population of the natives (at that time not exceeding 300 thousand people) the longing for a heritage, that was considered genuine, national and traditional.

The Icelandic Association *Ásatrú* (*Ásatrúarfélagið*) established in Reykjavik in 1972 by Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, later a long-term spiritual leader of the community, focused on re-cultivating of the old Norse customs and beliefs, bringing them to the younger generations. The association received in 1973 the status of a religious institution and became officially recognized by the

state as an organization of religious character (Ásatrúarfélagið, 2017).⁵ Functioning successfully over decades until present days, *Ásatrúarfélagið* demonstrates itself as a vibrant hub for other smaller informal groups united by the 'old religion' (Ásatrúarfélagið, 2017).⁶ The association tries to restore it while taking care of cultivation of knowledge about old customs. Exemplifications of this may be burials organized at the Gufunes cemetery according to the pre-Christian, Norse rituals.⁷



Fig. 1. A part of the Gufunes cemetery for the *Ásatrú* celebrations. Source: http://www.kirkjugardar.is/popup_mynd.php?texti=440&hvernig=id (retrieved: January, 2017)

The presence of infrastructural objects related to *Ásatrú* in the architectural landscape of the capital city constitutes a proof of recognizing by the city authorities the official return old pagan rituals to festive and daily practices of contemporary Icelanders. It is worth highlighting that the city authorities played here an active role in advising the association in its efforts.

⁵ See: <http://asatru.is/skraning-i-felagid> (retrieved: January, 2017).

⁶ See: <http://asatru.is/kvaedi-og-fraedi> (retrieved: January, 2017).

⁷ See: http://www.kirkjugardar.is/sida_en.php?id=2 (retrieved: Jan, 2017); also: <http://asatru.is/utfor>, the photos of a part of the cemetery, reserved for the pagan tradition, can be found here, (retrieved: January, 2017).

Another significant proof for the positive attitude of the city authorities towards Ásatrúers is the permission granted to the association in 2006 to build a pagan temple at the Öskjuhlíð hill, (currently close to the university complex).⁸ Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, a spiritual leader and a priest in *Ásatrúarfélagið*, while giving an interview to the local media in January 2015, expressed his conviction that the temple would be finished in 2016 (Iceland Magazine, 2015).⁹ However, it did not happen. We may presume that some financial turbulences occurred, as the cost of the project estimated at 37 million Icelandic crowns. For 3187 members of the Association, this sum may be too high and impossible to collect without support from external sources like grants, sponsors or donors (*Ásatrúarfélagið*, 2017).¹⁰

Despite the difficulties, initially some administrative and formal and later also financial, the construction started in 2015 (McMahon, 2015).¹¹ Its run is symbolically defined by the photo below made by Ian Stewart in December 2016. The picture shows a building of the future temple, located with the background of the dug up land. The project including interior design was prepared by Magnús Jenson and can be seen on the website of the architect's bureau.¹²

⁸ A similar idea of building a temple (officially: a cultural center) was born among the Polish New-Pagans in Wrocław, <http://wildhunt.org/2017/02/pagan-temple-planned-in-poland.html> (retrieved: February, 2017).

⁹ See: <http://icelandmag.visir.is/article/construction-a-pagan-temple-begin-reykjavik-next-month> (retrieved: Jan 2017) also: <http://www.ruv.is/frett/styttist-i-framkvaemdirvid-asatruarhof> (retrieved: January, 2017).

¹⁰ See" <http://asatru.is/felagafoldi>; also: <http://www.ruv.is/frett/styttist-i-framkvaemdirvid-asatruarhof>. It is worth to highlight that the financial crisis initiated in USA in 2007 had dramatic impact on the financial condition of Iceland. Credit crunch was quickly moved to the other economies, inter alia, to the Icelandic one, which was hit as the first one in Europe. Similar economic turbulences were experienced by Ireland, Spain, Portugal and Greece, without saving also the other European countries.

¹¹ See: <http://icelandmag.visir.is/article/construction-a-pagan-temple-begin-reykjavik-next-month> (retrieved: December, 2016).

¹² Drawings, plans and the detailed description of the project can be found on the website http://magnus.jenson.is/?page_id=172; also in form of a short film: http://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2015/01/27/hof_satruarmanna_ris_2016/ (retrieved: December, 2016).



Fig. 2. The board informing about the building of the *Ásatrú* temple. Author: Ian Stewart, source: Google maps (retrieved January 10th 2017).

The lack of the official place of cult does not constitute and obstacle for the Association to render its services respected by the state authorities such as: marriages, name giving, coming of ages rituals or funerals. According to Jóhanna Harðardóttir, a member of the Association, holding the function of *Kjalnesingargoði* (a spiritual leader, a priestess), in recent years a significant popularity increase of the *Ásatrú* wedding ceremony among foreigners has been noticed. This supports by the way the Icelandic tourism industry, one of the most important sectors of the country's economy (McMahon, 2015).¹³

The Neo-Pagan beliefs and rituals become more and more popular among the Icelanders themselves. The statistical data provided on the website of

¹³ In an interview given to Sara McMahon from the Icelandic Magazine, the leaders of the Icelandic *Ásatrú* followers explain the openness of *Ásatrú* to all who want to practice it, <http://icelandmag.visir.is/article/anyone-can-practise-heathen-asatru> (retrieved: December, 2016).

the Association indicates that between 2010 – 2016 the number of the members of *Ásatrúarfélagið* increased by 1912 persons, however, 512 persons joined the organization only in 2016 itself (*Ásatrúarfélagið*, 2017).¹⁴

This trend characterizes also other organizations, like *Ásatrúarfélagið*, associated in the European Congress of Ethnic Religions (ECER). The Danish *Forn Siðr, Asa- og Vanetrossamfundet* is also an ECER member. Established in Moln in 1997 officially got recognized by the state six years later. Nowadays, the organization undertakes religious, cultural, educational and economic activities, selling inter alia objects relating to the cult of the pagan gods (ritual candles, books, jewelries, T-shirts). *Forn Siðr* issues also a guide *Vølse hvert* devoted to the Neo-Pagan history and present. It is published four times a year: on the 1st of March, 1st of June, 1st of September and 1st of December. The guide is available online after buying a subscription or via library loan in 10 biggest Danish libraries, inter alia, in the Royal Library and the university libraries. It is financed from the member fees and is co-edited by its readers.

Forn Siðr had 600 members in 2016, actively involved in revitalization of the ancient Norse beliefs (Kristensen, 2008).¹⁵ Similar to the Icelandic *Ásatrúarfélagið* the association is entitled to conduct officially recognized weddings, funerals, name giving and coming of age ceremonies. The organization has been given a part of the city cemetery *Assistenskirkegården* (Odense commune, southern Denmark) where ceremonies arranged in accordance to the *Ásatrú* tradition can be performed. According to Lars Irenessøn Nielsen, a member of the management board of the Association, this is an important and encouraging sign for *Ásatrúans* in other parts of Denmark and Scandinavia, to undertake similar initiatives (Kristensen, 2008).¹⁶ Nielsen stressed also that the neopagan part of the cemetery may

¹⁴ Detailed data can be found on <http://asatru.is/felagafjoldi> (retrieved: January, 2017).

¹⁵ A short film about the reason to follow in the footsteps of pagan predecessors is available on <http://www.fyens.dk/article/965234:Indland-Fyn--Hedninge-faar-egen-gravplads-i-Odense> (retrieved: January, 2017).

¹⁶ The statement given by Lars Irenessøn Nielsen in the local press in March 2008 is available on <http://www.fyens.dk/article/965234:Indland-Fyn--Hedninge-faar-egen-gravplads-i-Odense> (retrieved: January, 2017).

in the future expand by taking over places of a few Christian graves located in the proximity which grace period expires in 2038. Expanding the functional area for *Forn Siðr*. will be thus a symbolic sign of gradual displacing of Christian artefacts from their current places.

This tendency can be supported by the fact of moving a neo-runic stone from Jelling (referring to runic stones from the old pre-Christian times) to the cemetery in Odense. The transfer of the stone was an important event in the newest history of the Ásatrúan community. The ceremony took place in March 2015 and was opened with a speech delivered by Linda Nørgaar, the President of *Forn Siðr*. Nørgaar emphasized the real, and at the same time, symbolic presence of the stone in such a significant place. Indeed, it was not easy due to many protests of the Christians, who understood the erection of the neo-runic stone as an act of spiritual and cultural oppression exercised by the Neo-pagans. Trying to act peacefully, Nørgaar stressed in her speech that proselytism did not constitute an objective for Ásatrúans. As a Pagan community, they welcome individuals who are fully convinced of the true values enclosed in *Ásatrú*.

Per Brandt Rasmussen, the Vice-President of *Forn Siðr* highlighted on the same occasion the timeless dimension of the event, interweaving nature with the human being, the community of the living with the community of the dead and these, who will come in the next generations. The link is the faith in powerful forces of the nature, which are managed by the pagan gods (Kristensen, 2008). The neo-runic stone, covered with runes and Latin alphabet, states the following (English translation MB):

Forn Siðr satte denne sten
til hyldest for
de mænd og kvinder
der atter knyttede tråden
til Magterne
fra den gamle skik.

Forn Siðr erected this stone
to tribute
the men and women
there again knotted wire
to Powers
from the old custom.

Source: <http://www.fornsidr.dk/index.php/om-forn-sidhr/17-runestenen-i-jelling> (retrieved: February, 2017).



Fig. 3. A neo-runic stone in Odense. Source: Wikipedia

The activity of the Association, observed in the field of religion and culture is, however, not deprived of its political and ideological color. The community of the Danish *Ásatrúans* seems to be divided as regards the legitimization a person to believe in *Ásatrú* and to identify himself/herself with the (old-)Nordic heritage. The confusion or rather ideological split was provoked by the concept of metagenetics, popularized by Stephan McNallen. In this approach, dispositions to believe in Norse gods have only these individuals, whose ancestors professed the faith and practiced it truly. Thus, all relationships built on the blood kinship and shared experience are of high value (McNallen, 1985).¹⁷

The authorities of the Danish *Forn Siðr*, in the same way as the Icelandic *Ásatrúarfélagið*, dissociate themselves firmly from the views containing

¹⁷ An explanation of the idea delivered by McNallen himself is available on <http://www.renegadetribe.com/stephen-mcnallen-metagenetics/> (retrieved: February, 2017).

elements of racism and discrimination, although in some extreme circles these kind of attitudes do exist among Nordic and non-Nordic pagans (McMahon, 2015; see also Schnurbein, 2016).

Notion of peaceful and respectful coexistence based on mutual tolerance for differences and religious diversity was expressed in the declaration of ECER (European Congress of Ethnic Religions) signed on 9th July 2014 in Vilnius, Lithuania, by the representatives of the contemporary Pagan organizations from 14 countries. The signatories included, inter alia, Lars Irenessøn from *Forn Siðr* (Denmark) and Runar Kartsen from *Forn Sed*, (Norway), as well as Staszko Potrzebowski from *Rodzima Wiara* (Poland).

The declaration ends with the following text:

(...) We object to the use of the term “pagan” by extremist political groups of any kind, as it reflects negatively on our reputation.

Finally, we urge all peoples and all nations to place the well-being of the Earth – who is, literally, our Living Mother – above any and all other priorities.

We send this message in kinship, love, and respect.” (ECER, 2014)

The message enclosed in the final part of the document constitutes the motto for acting for *Ásatrú felagið*, Iceland and *Forn Siðr*, Denmark – the ECER members since 1999. This fact, however, cannot constitute a guarantee that some individuals, fractions or even whole groups will not express hostile and discriminating attitudes.

Considerations for continuing research

Culture-related interpretation of the phenomenon enables us to stress a few significant attributes, making the *Ásatrú* an attractive form of post-modern spirituality. Practicing these Neo-Pagan rituals indicates the following:

- willingness to return to the roots of genuine Scandinavian/Nordic culture,

- intention of renewing bonds with past generations that laid foundations for the Nordic community (*NORDEN*),
- tiredness with postmodernism and its post-industrial stage,
- longing for harmony and balance which may be obtained through ecological escapism,
- looking for belonging to a small and at the same time elite group, characterized by a high degree of exclusivity,
- need to strengthen individual and collective identity build on a unique heritage.

The contemporary *Ásatrú* in similar ways as other Neo-Pagan movements, provides an excellent example that the condition and qualities of post-modern societies are too poor and/or too weak to meet individual needs, expectations and wishes. The past world constitutes here an attractive and tempting alternative especially when the world of the 21st century offers increasing pace of life, constant competitiveness imposed by the requirements of the global market, stress and – last but not least – erosion of traditional values. All together forces an individual to look for a ‘shelter’. For some people the virtual world may become such a rescue, for others participation in *survival* trips or experimenting with drugs. *Ásatrú* can also play such a role. However, maybe only for these individuals, who are equipped with adequate cultural competence, necessary to understand the essence of the old Norse religion.

Some notions of the Norse Neo-Pagan beliefs which have been presented here shortly, as well as the role of the state and society in reviving of the old practices, provide a lot of evidence to continue researching this phenomenon from many perspectives: religious, cultural, psychological, sociological and even political.

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