Contemporary Heathenism in Norway

Narratives and reflections from members of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how contemporary inclusive Heathens in Norway find inspiration in the Old Norse traditions and myths and construct a modern and inclusive religion. This is a qualitative research project where individual in-depth interviews have been conducted with members from the two faith communities Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge. Through this research project, I seek to answer the following research question: *How are inclusive Heathens in Norway constructing their modern version of Åsatru and what does their notion of inclusivity entail?*

The study is also approached by foregrounding the complex historical, political, and religious context in which modern Heathenism is situated. This includes the religious landscape of new religious movements, and Paganism in particular, as well as the utilisation of Old Norse symbols and myths in Nazi- and other racist political agendas, both historically and presently. Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge have both overtly taken a stance against this use of the Old Norse tradition and strive instead to be inclusive religious communities. Seeking insights from the members of these faith communities enables an investigation into how this inclusive religion is constructed and an exploration of what this inclusivity looks like and entails.

The interview data is processed through thematic analysis, where reoccurring themes and sub-themes from the interviews are identified. This resulted in four main themes which uncover various aspects of the construction of a contemporary Åsatru and several features of their inclusivity. The findings suggest that the Heathenism in Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge is largely heterogeneous, as members experience a strong individual freedom in terms of religious practice and belief and engage with the Norse tradition (and at times other religious traditions) in a variety of ways. Additionally, a shared willingness to make the religion compatible with the modern, multicultural, and religiously pluralist world, combined with an awareness not to romanticise ‘the past’, was also identified.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

> "… first of all, no, I'm *not* a Neo-Nazi or any hogwash like that, [….], and secondly, no, I'm not any 'Viking Age-romanticist' who wants to turn back time a thousand years. Well okay, I got long hair and a long beard, but it stops with that. And thirdly, no, I don't go around believing that thunder is caused by an angry bearded guy driving across the sky and swinging around a hammer" (Vebjørn, member of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost)[1].

These are the three things Vebjørn, one of the informants in the qualitative study I conducted for this thesis, is prepared to add whenever he tells someone new that he is Åsatru. Vebjørn is a member of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost, one of two officially registered Åsatru or Heathen faith organisations in Norway, the other one being Forn Sed Norge. Vebjørn's experience of having to be prepared to explain, or perhaps *disclaim*¸ these three things along with sharing that he identifies as Åsatru, is quite an indicator of what kinds of stereotypes and perceptions people often might have of this religion.

Before entering this research project, I knew close to nothing about modern Åsatru, and I likely held some variations of these prejudices myself. Especially the first assumption, regarding Nazi-ideologies or 'any hogwash like that' had, perhaps subconsciously, come to dominate my associations of modern usages of Old Norse symbols, myths, and stories. However, as I got introduced to the field of Paganism, and learned about Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge, who both make an effort to distance themselves from these associations, my curiosity was sparked. Undertaking this project has radically opened my eyes and mind, as I have come to learn about the new religious movement of Heathenism and been fortunate enough to meet practicing Heathens in Norway and learned about their religion, their self-understanding and their strive towards an inclusive religion.

[1] The informants in this study are all anonymised, and the names used in this thesis is therefore not the informants' real names. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian and direct quotes are translated by me. This will be further accounted for in the method chapter.

In this research project I explore how members of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge construct a modern and inclusive Åsatru and investigate what this 'inclusivity' means and looks like. Additionally, I approach this study by also foregrounding the historical and political context in which contemporary Åsatru falls within, both globally and locally. This is something which I find to be of critical importance as it contributes to a deeper understanding of these communities and their members.

This context includes the international emergence of Paganism, also called Neopaganism, which gained momentum in the mid-twentieth century, as well as the more local context of the Norwegian religious landscape of new religious movements that were thriving particularly during the latter decades of the twentieth century. Additionally, as suggested by Vebjørn's quote above, modern Heathens have to navigate their religiosity around the troublesome history and contemporary political and violent usages of symbols and elements of their religion. Through qualitative research, where in-depth interviews have been conducted with members of the two Åsatru or Heathen faith organisations in Norway, Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge, this study highlights the conscious reflections and innovation that goes into constructing an inclusive modern Heathenism.

After introducing the research question and accounting for my research interest and rationale behind undertaking this study, the following chapter offers a contextualisation, where contemporary Heathenism is placed into its wider historical and religious context. This includes a contextualisation of the prejudice regarding a connection between modern usages of Norse myths and symbols and being a 'Neo-Nazi or any hogwash like that'. This will be followed by a chapter outlining and discussing the theoretical concepts that have been employed in this project, both at the research-stage and for the analysis. Particularly, I engage in a discussion regarding the complexities of 'modernity' and 'tradition', leaning on Talal Asad's (2009) conception of religion as discursive tradition. I further introduce a development of Roy Wallis' (2019/1984) category of 'world-affirming' new religious movements, and Michael Strmiska's (2005) suggested polarity between 'Reconstructionist' versus 'Ecclectic' Paganism, typologies that both offer fruitful analytical vistas. In the method chapter, I describe my research-method of qualitative in-depth interviews and offer reflections regarding the entire process, from sampling to interviewing to data-processing. Finally, I engage and discuss my research question by way of introducing the main themes identified through a thematic-analysis of the interview-material and offer a critical analysis of key findings.

1.1 Research Question

This study investigates contemporary inclusive Heathenism in Norway, with a particular focus on the ways in which practitioners strive for inclusivity when constructing this modern religion. This will be done by attempting to answer the following research question: *How are inclusive Heathens in Norway constructing their modern version of Åsatru and what does their notion of inclusivity entail?*

This two-folded research question, allows me to explore how a small and rather marginal new religious movement in Norway, draws on Norway's shared ancient religious and cultural heritage to inform a religion compatible with, and a part of, today's multicultural and religiously pluralist Norway. By undertaking several qualitative in-depth interviews, this research project opens up for a focus on contemporary Heathens' own perception of their religion by investigating how they engage the Old Norse traditions in order to construct their modern religion. In this connection, I also explore themes such as religious eclecticism, and questions of where and to whom the religion belongs to. This allows for discussions regarding the role (or lack thereof) of 'ethnicity', which is a highly controversial issue within the wider Pagan scene. The research question is being asked based on a wish to take their religion seriously and on a willingness to similarly take seriously the faith organisations' articulated stance against any form of discrimination. Hence, this study is entered from a critical vantage point, however, it is also entered with admiration. These themes all feed into a larger discussion regarding modernity, a discussion which includes how this religion can be read as a critique of certain aspects of 'modernity', but at the same time indeed an expression of a version of modernity.

1.2 Rationale and motivations

Norse mythology and the Viking history are vital components of the Scandinavian people's cultural heritage and have been used in a variety of ways in the identity-construction and nation building of the modern Scandinavian nation states and peoples. In Norway, the Viking heritage was actively used when constructing the independent democratic state (Solli: 2008: 193), and it continues to hold a prevalent presence in Norwegian culture. Today, both the Viking history and the Old Norse legends are still important for Scandinavian culture and are very much prevalent in both the entertainment- and tourism industry. However, as pointed out by Solli (2008: 194) "the Viking heritage is a troubled heritage". Racist intellectuals have drawn on Norse mythology and a Viking imaginary to enhance Nazi-ideologies prior to,

during, and indeed after the Second World War, both in Norway and elsewhere. Norse symbols and Viking imagery are often taken on to represent and justify racist radical right-wing ideologies. Hence, the 'troubled heritage' is not just a heritage, but rather an ongoing troublesome reality.

After the emergence of Paganism in the mid twentieth century, the academic field of 'Pagan studies' developed during the 1990s, and modern practices of the Old Norse religion, often referred to as Åsatru or Heathenism, have received increased scholarly attention. Nonetheless, for many people, explicit fascination with Viking-heritage and Norse mythology will quickly cause uncomfortable associations to neo-Nazi ideology and white supremacy. This creates quite a paradox, as the Viking and Old Norse heritage is still a constitutive part of Scandinavian and Norwegian cultural identity, as mentioned above. This paradox is what motivated me to delve into a study of modern Heathens in Norway. Might insights from those who practice Old Norse traditions in an inclusive manner, compatible with a modern globalised world, and who actively distance themselves from neo-Nazi and racist usages of their religion, give a deeper understanding of this paradox?

There is a dearth of previous research done on Paganism in Norway, and especially on the sub-section of Heathenism. If one looks to international research, the picture is a little different, however, the scholarly literature on modern Heathenism is dominated by a focus on the racialist or ethnicisist versions, despite the fact that it is reasonable to assume that the non-racialist Heathens outnumber the racialists (Gardell, 2003: 153). However, as I hope to demonstrate with this project, paying attention to this new religious movement of inclusive Heathenism is indeed of interest for a scholar of religion and will enrich the field of religious studies. Firstly, as already alluded to, the Old Norse heritage has been and still is influential for Scandinavian nation-building and cultural identity. In this sense, contemporary Heathens in Norway hold a very intricate position when it comes to questions of minority versus majority positions. While they do indeed represent a religious minority, and to an extent identify as such through opposing the hegemonic position of Christianity, they nevertheless also represent the cultural heritage shared by the majority population. Additionally, researching these religious groups contributes to a growing body of scholarly literature that challenge past dominant assumptions of religious life, and can contribute to a nuancing of the image of new religious movements and contemporary religion. Lastly, as will become evident in the contextualisation chapter, Heathenism is a largely heterogeneous and non-dogmatic religion. Conducting interviews with various members of a Heathen faith community

therefore offer insights far beyond what is presented at the organisation's website. Hence, I hope that this qualitative research project, where in-depth interviews have been conducted with members from the two Norwegian faith organisations, Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge, can offer a humble contribution to the field, with narratives and reflections from within these small communities.

Chapter 2: Contextualisation of modern Heathenism – terminology and previous literature

As already established, this project falls within the interdisciplinary field of Pagan studies and contributes to the literature on contemporary practices of Old Norse mythology and traditions, often referred to as Heathenism or Åsatru. If one is to place Paganism and Heathenism into a wider religious landscape, it can be placed within yet another broad and heterogeneous category, namely new religious movements (NRM). In order to better understand the scholarly relevance of this study, as well as the religious groups in focus, I will in this chapter offer a contextualisation and clarification of terminology. I will provide an overview of the religious landscape of Paganism, as well as of the local religious landscape of new religious movements in Norway, in which the inclusive Heathenism of Bifrost and Forn Sed developed. This will be followed by an overview of the troublesome heritage and the ongoing troublesome reality of how Old Norse myths and symbols are utilised in racist political agendas. This intricate religious, political, and historical context is important to account for, as it has informed the way I have approached this project and guided my research interest and question. This contextualisation chapter will therefore clarify the relevance of the research question asked in this study and demonstrate why the religion of the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed is indeed interesting for a scholar of religion.

2.1 The emergence of Paganism as a New Religious Movement

Due to its heterogeneity, 'Paganism', can be difficult to neatly define, however, some attempts have been made. Chas Clifton and Graham Harvey (2004: 1) use Paganism as an umbrella term that refers to religions and spiritualities where practitioners are "inspired by the indigenous, pre-Christian traditions of Europe" and are engaged with "other indigenous religious traditions, to evolve satisfying and respectful ways of celebrating human relationship with the wider, other-than-human world". Anthropologist and folklorist Sabina Magliocco (2012: 150) defines it as an umbrella term for new religious movements whose aim is to "revive, reinterpret, and experiment with pre-Christian polytheistic religions", and include not only the European pre-Christian religions, but also those of the Near East and North Africa. Despite the diversity of Paganism, Magliocco (2012: 150) suggests that there are certain common traits such as "a desire to reconnect with nature, community, and the sacred, a view of the divine as immanent, and a search for religious experience that is personal, direct, and embodied" and that modern Paganism is rooted in an idea of an "enchanted universe common

to all ancient and indigenous religions" (Magliocco, 2012: 151). Additionally, she points to the shared tendency of an absence of sacred scripture in favour of leaning on folklore as inspiration for the development of rituals. Hence, a turn towards ancient pre-Christian traditions for religious inspiration, and an emphasis on nature and the other-than-human can be seen as key features for Pagan religions. However, beyond this, Pagan religions are largely diverse, and as suggested by Pagan scholar Barbara Jane Davy (2009: 1), it is more fitting to refer to Paganisms in plural.

How did ancient pre-Christian traditions come to inspire these new religious movements, and why are the terms 'Pagan' or 'Heathen' being used by these practitioners? The etymology of the term 'Pagan' can be traced back to the Latin words *paganus*, which described rural dwellers who resisted Roman dominance (including the Christian religion) and preferred instead the *pagus*, their local government. Later, the term was used to generally refer to those who did not adhere to Christianity or any other monotheist religion (Davy, 2007: 2). The term 'Heathen', which is often preferred by modern Pagans who draw on Germanic or Scandinavian traditions, has a similar history of having negative connotations. It has been suggested that it derives from a way of labelling those who lived in the 'heath' and kept the older traditions and religious practices alive. However, Magliocco (2012: 151) argues that this is "folk etymology". Instead, she suggests that it derives from a Gothic word for those who did not follow Christianity. In any case, the two terms, 'pagan' and 'heathen', were given new meaning by the nineteenth century, as they "acquired nostalgic, Romantic associations with nature and the rural world left behind by the Industrial Revolution" (Magliocco, 2012: 151). This shift to nostalgic and romantic associations occurred through Romantic poetry and literature where 'pagans' were used as symbolising a remedy against the alienating trends of modernity, such as urbanisation, emergence of dominant state structures, and the hegemony of monotheism (particularly Christianity). Hence, modern Pagans' and Heathens' usage of these terms can be understood as a reclamation of an old and often derogatory term, which is based on a response to certain aspects of the modernity of the industrialised world.

While these ideas were featured in Romantic literature, scholarly literature on religion would further spark the development of modern Paganism. Scholars all the way back to the Renaissance have suggested that folk customs and rituals stem from ancient religions, however, in the nineteenth century, these assumptions were strengthened through the works of (among others) Sir Edward B. Tylor (1871), and Sir James George Frazer (1890). These anthropologists articulated theories of the origins, and an evolutionary development of

religion. These theories enabled the imagination of an ancient religion and strengthened the idea of folk customs being "fossils of old religion" (Hutton, 2009: 49), which made efforts to reconstruct these old religions possible. Both Tylor's and Frazer's theories are largely criticised, and as argued by Hutton (2009: 49), are clearly "motivated by a distaste, rather than an admiration" and served the purpose of conceptualising a unilinear evolution of religion, where the final progression was 'rationality'. Nevertheless, their theories were very much embraced by folklorist enthusiasts and would inspire theories that would later be utilised to develop new Pagan religions.

To understand how these scholarly developments are linked to the emergence of Neopaganism, one must turn to the concept of 'witchcraft' and the debates that arose in the eighteenth century concerning the Great Witch Hunt. As a consensus regarding the inexistence of magic was established in Europe, a new narrative was developed in order to be able to perpetuate a justification of the persecution of alleged 'witches'. Instead of attributing magical powers to the witches, they were now seen as someone who held on to practices of an old pagan religion (Hutton, 2009: 50). In response to this, the French historian Jules Michelet, who was a strong critic of the Catholic Church, published in 1862 the book *La Sorciere,* where the pagan religion of the witches was portrayed as "having been the repository of liberty all through the tyranny and obscurantism of the Middle Ages" (Hutton, 2009: 50). He portrayed this (imagined) pagan religion as being feminist, and led by a priestess, nature-loving as well as "joyous, democratic, and peaceful", and he suggested that the Renaissance "had been caused by the natural wisdom of the witch religion working its way upward to artists and writers" (Hutton, 2009: 50). Similar ideas arose in England, and with the writings of Margaret Murray, the theory gained (at least for some time) more legitimacy, before it was later scholarly refuted (Noble, 2009: 54). Murray was originally an Egyptologist, but after the First World War she shifted her scholarly focus to her local history. She was an admirer of Frazer's thesis, and her work presented a European pre-Christian "joyous fertility religion" that had been eroded by Christianity and eventually quenched through the witch-hunts (Noble, 2009: 55). Her influential works on the subject were published in 1921 and 1933, and it is therefore hardly accidental that the first groups of people who embodied a religion similar to the one described by Murray, can be traced back to England in the 1930s. These groups consisted of a range of people but were typically educated intellectuals (often with a colonial background) and students (Hutton, 2009: 51).

This is where we need to turn to Gerald Gardner, the man who is considered to be the founder of the largest Neopagan religion, namely Wicca. Gardner was a British civil servant who had spent much of his life abroad, in Borneo and Malaysia, before coming back to England in the 1930s, where he was a member of various esoteric groups, such as the Freemasons, and the Druid order (Magliocco, 2012: 152 and Hutton, 2009: 51). Gardner was heavily influenced by Murray's thesis, and he claims, in his books, *Witchcraft Today* (1955) and *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (1959), that the witchcraft described by Murray had survived and was still being practiced by a coven of witches of which he has discovered. However, as he was already active in esoteric groups, "it is entirely possible that their members had formed a society devoted to practicing magic before Gardner came upon it and interpreted it as a witch cult" (Magliocco, 2012: 152). Gardner's claim of historical lineage back to the pre-Christian European religion has, similarly to Murray's thesis, been debunked (Kelly, 2009: 12). Nevertheless, he was successful in promoting this religion, and what is often referred to as 'Garderian Wicca' spread widely. By 1963, when Gardner passed away, several witch covens were established in England, and the new religion had also migrated to the United States, where it would continue to flourish and served as a highly compatible religious alternative to the counterculture movements of the 1960s and thrived especially among college and university students (Magliocco, 2012: 153). The emergence of Neopaganism went hand in hand with the expanding environmentalist movement, with its emphasis on nature, and with the second-wave feminism of the 1960s, with its emphasis on goddess-spirituality and the opposition to the patriarchy of other established religions.

During the 1980s, there was a shift within the Paganism movement, which coincided with a shift in the academic study of witchcraft (Magliocco, 2012: 153 and Waldron, 2009: 116). While the scholarly focus had previously been on universalist understandings of 'the primitive' and evolutionary concepts of magic and rationality, the historical study of witchcraft shifted its focus to local histories. This shift led to a re-examining of the witch-hunts which demonstrated that "[t]he social class, gender and cultural background of those persecuted varied immensely in location and time" and that "the nature of the charges laid against those accused of witchcraft and the socio-cultural identity of those charged varied immensely from place to place and over time" (Waldron, 2009: 116). Murray's thesis of a pre-Christian religion universal to Europe, and Gardner's claims of continuity were therefore effectively debunked. This led to shifts and various responses within the Pagan movement.

Jone Salomonsen (2002: 90), who offers a rich study of the 'Reclaiming Witches', describes one of the responses as "orthodox", which refers to those who ignored the new scholarly literature and held on to the belief of historical lineage, and another response as "modernist", which entails accepting the new scholarly literature and moving away from the idea of historical continuity of their practices and spirituality and viewing this as "unimportant to legitimate contemporary paganism". She further identifies a third strategy where "a hermeneutical distinction between content (spiritual roots) and form (historical roots)" is made. Starhawk, who is the founder of the 'Reclaiming Witches', falls within this third strategy. While Starhawk's concept of witchcraft is not dependent on a continuous and 'authentic' practice, but rather based on practitioners' experience, she nevertheless "does not completely give up the idea of historical lineage, since the pagan spirit was obviously kept alive by something or somebody until it resurfaced" (Salomonsen, 2002: 90). The focus on the past is therefore limited, yet it is present and used to 'root' a contemporary religious identity.

Waldron (2009: 118) demonstrates how the development of postmodern thinking also influenced the Neopagan movement: "Instead of arguing the veracity of historical interpretations empirically, Neopagans could deconstruct and re-read historical narratives on the basis of their underlying assumptions". Waldron describes this as a move from 'foundationalism' to 'post-modernism'. Nevertheless, he stresses that influence of post-modern thinking does not mean that the neopagan movement let go of "underlying meta-narratives and universalistic and symbolic interpretations of nature, the feminine, pre-industrial society and the significance of symbols in forming human identity and creative human expression" (Waldron, 2009: 119).

Magliocco (2012: 153) points to another development that arose in response to both the collapse of the claim of historical lineage, and to a "disillusion with the eclectic nature of modern Pagan Witchcraft" which caused a "yearning among some practitioners to reconnect with the historical religious practices of pre-Christian European peoples". This led to, again, a move away from the universalistic focus to a more local focus, and the development of examples of Witchcraft practices with an ethnic component, such as 'Celtic Witchcraft', or the Italian 'Stregheria'. Additionally, Neopaganism grew to be more than a witchcraft-based new religious movement, as more and more practitioners sought "instead to reconstruct as accurately as possible the practices of specific ancient religions within the parameters of a modern sensibility", including "various branches of Heathen traditions focused on revitalizing

the religions of Scandinavia and Northern Europe, based on practices in the Elder Edda and the Norse sagas" (Magliocco, 2012: 154). Magliocco further points to how several Neopagans, both those following witchcraft traditions and the more reconstructionist branches, started exploring shamanic-inspired spirit-communication, and that with the help from the growing accessibility to the Internet in the 1990s, Neopaganism became the fastest-growing new religious movement.

Being mindful of these historical developments of Neopaganism, I am curious to explore the ways in which themes such as locality versus universality, reconstructionism versus eclecticism, the role of the 'post-modern' developments of centring individual experience and interpretations versus the universal meta-narratives, as well as the role of historical or spiritual lineage are relevant for the Heathen communities in my study. Thus, the various developments and reactions outlined above are useful to keep in mind when approaching the question of how members of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge are constructing their modern version of Åsatru, as well as when investigating what their notion of inclusivity looks like and entails.

2.2 Heathenism, Åsatru, and Forn Sed

As already established, Heathenism is an example of Paganism where one has moved away from the witchcraft-aspect and are instead drawing on traditions and mythologies from the Nordic context. Blain and Wallis (2009: 414), refer to Heathenry as "a polytheist paganism" which draws on two main strands: "the presentations of cosmology, deity and mythology, and cultural practices within medieval writings of northern Europe, together with archaeological interpretations of northern European 'pasts'; and personal experience based in part on these understandings". For most Heathens, Old Norse mythologies and literature inform or inspire their religion, and the Poetic Edda with its cosmogonic poems is particularly important (Blain and Wallis, 2009: 416). Modern Åsatru developed parallelly in England, USA, and Iceland during the 1970s (Gregorius, 2008: 71), and would only later emerge in the other Nordic countries.

Many practitioners use the term Åsatru, either instead of or in addition to Heathen. Preferred terminology seems to differ from individual to individual, from group to group, and from country to country, and is often used interchangeably, both by scholars and practitioners. I will be using Åsatru and Heathenism interchangeably, as many of my informants used both of

the terms (Åsatru and *hedning* in Norwegian) when they referred to their religion or religious identity.

In the Scandinavian context, there is an additional discussion regarding terminology which concerns the difference between the terms 'Åsatru' and 'Forn Sed'. The term 'Åsatru' was established in the 19th century. It means 'faith in the Æsir', which refers to "one of the major divine families of gods in Old Norse religion" (Gregorius, 2015: 65). The term is somewhat contested among practitioners, due to its 'unauthenticity' and favoring of the Æsir over other divine beings. Thus, some have instead taken on the term 'Forn Sed', which means 'ancient customs', and is a wider term that "points to a belief in a custom based on older forms of practice rather than to a new religious movement" (Gregorius, 2015: 65). However, Gregorius points out that this term does not adequately include all the different ways in which the Old Norse religious concepts are being used in various Heathen movements. These terminology-issues are reflected by both Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge. While Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost does use the term 'Åsatru', they nevertheless clarify on their website that their religion is not limited to a faith in the Æsir, and even propose the term 'Forn siðr', simply a variation of 'Forn Sed', as an alternative term for their religion. Forn Sed Norge explicitly states on their website that calling their religion 'Åsatru' is misleading. However, when meeting some of their members, I learned that many of them do, nevertheless, use the term 'Åsatru' when referring to their religion, but that this was implicit often 'for simplicity's sake' and with an underlying understanding of its limits. Hence, when using the term Åsatru, I will be using it in an inclusive manner, which does not refer only to a belief in the Æsir, but rather as something which describes the modern version of a religion inspired by the Old Norse myths and traditions.

While there is not a large body of scholarly literature of modern practices of the Old Norse religion in the Nordic countries, some influential research has indeed been done. Fredrik Gregorius (2008) has provided great contributions to the field with his PhD thesis *Moderna Asatro, Att konstruera etnisk och kulutrell identitet* (Modern Asatro, To construct ethnic and cultural identity), based on empirical research in Sweden, and Mathew H. Amster (2015) has conducted ethnographic research on modern Heathenry in the Danish context. Most of the literature on Heathenism, and especially that which is focusing on the Scandinavian context, demonstrates the controversial issues of ethnicity, nationalism and racism which are issues that Heathen communities struggle with, both internally and in terms of how they are being perceived by others.

In their ethnographic studies of Heathenism in Sweden and Denmark, Gregorius (2008 and 2015) and Amster (2015) both identify tensions within the community regarding connections to far-right milieus, questions of authenticity, and the inclusivity versus exclusivity of the different organisations. Amster (2015: 53-54) points to conflicts that arose when the biggest Danish heathen organisation, Forn Sidr, experienced increased expressions of anti-monotheist, and right-wing political views to be expressed within the organisation, something which led to secession and establishment of other heathen groups. Additionally, in 2009, a subgroup called Hefjendur joined Forn Sedir, which caused controversy, as this group used the term 'ethnopluralism', which is often used to advocate for ethnic separatism. However, being well aware of the potential of political issues, both Amster (2015) and Gregorius (2015) demonstrate how several of the Heathen organisations in Denmark and Sweden take explicit stances against racism and anti-democratic attitudes. Their research will be drawn on for comparative purposes in the discussion of the findings from this project.

It is also worth mentioning the relatively new research project *Back to Blood: Pursuing a future from the Norse Past*, which is a collaboration between the University of Stavanger, in Norway, and the University of Linköping, in Sweden[2]. It is a transdisciplinary research project that studies the increased interest in both spiritual and cultural products related to the Old Norse era. This demonstrates an increasing research interest in this particular phenomenon and thus the relevance of my master's project.

2.3 Contemporary Åsatru in the Norwegian religious landscape of new religious movements

While it is important to situate this study of modern Heathens in Norway within a larger international context of the emergence of Neopaganism, which has been accounted for above, it is similarly important to understand the local context of new religious movements (NRMs), in which the two communities Bifrost and Forn Sed emerged. In this section, I will therefore leave the international context and return to the Scandinavian, and particularly the Norwegian context.

Siv Ellen Kraft (2011: 36) describes how in the 1970s a range of new religious and spiritual practices emerged in Norway, which during the 1980s would come to be known under the

[2] Back to Blood: Pursuing a future from the Norse Past https://www.uis.no/nb/backtoblood Accessed 20.07.2022

rather ambiguous terms of 'New Age', new religious movements (*nyreligiøsitet),* or simply 'the alternative-movement' (*alternativbevegelsen).* She draws parallels to elements from Blavatsky's theosophy that emerged in the previous century, such as the aversion to dogmas, conformity, and subordination, and argues that theosophy was a highly important precursor for the flourishing of NRMs. Gilhus (2016: 307-8) points to the massive influence that NRMs deriving from predominantly Asian religions (eg. Hare Krishna, Tibetan Buddhism, and various yoga and meditation practices) had on Norway's religious landscape during the 1970s. These influences opened up for a new way of understanding religion, as more and more people were made aware of religious and spiritual alternatives to the dominant Christian religion, which allowed for religious innovation and syncretism and attracted many young and countercultural people. While these trends had some presence in Norway already during the 1960s and 1970s and flourished greatly elsewhere, such as in England in the USA, it was only during the 1980s and 1990s that these trends properly emerged in Norway (Kraft, 2011: 37-40).

Typical traits of the new alternative religious ideas could often be contrasted to traits typically attributed to Christianity, or 'mainstream science'. One example of this is the notion of 'holism'; whether a holistic notion of the universe, where all things share a common origin or are connected through universal networks, or holistic notions of humans, where body and soul is connected, or holistic notions of the relationship between the spiritual and the material (Kraft, 2011: 41). For adherences of NRMs with these traits, this worldview serves as an alternative to the more dualistic worldview (associated with Western Christianity and science). A holistic worldview could therefore serve as a liberator from the dominant Cartesian understandings of gender, nature, the sacred, and as a result liberate the practitioner from the idea of subordination. Elements from this worldview can be exemplified through the ecological thinking that Gilhus (2016: 308) points out as a central element in the counterculture and the alternative religious movements in Norway. Kraft (2011: 44) refers to another common trait, namely 'self-spirituality' or 'self-religion', which is closely related to the holistic worldview. The individual self is centralised, either as being sacred, or in terms of a focus on self-development, where the individual must find their individually specific 'right path'. This again, is often contrasted to Christianity's set path to 'truth' (Kraft, 2011: 46-47).

These developments testify for an emerging interest in new religious practices and reflect a more and more religiously pluralistic Norway, where Christianity's hegemonic position is challenged. This religious landscape is where Heathenism is situated, as it opened up, not just

for fascination of religion from elsewhere, but also religion of the past. According to Kraft (2011: 52) Paganism occurred rather late in the landscape of NRMs in Norway, not until the 1990s. Uldal and Winje (2016: 367), however, tell a slightly different story. They divide Norwegian Paganism into four main groups: Asatru, Wicca, The Goddess Movement, and Neoshamanism, and demonstrate how several of these movements emerged in Norway during the 1980s. They point to influential personalities, some of whom had been members of Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) and were influential for both Wicca and Åsatru in Norway in the 1980s and 1990s. However, Kraft is not necessarily wrong, as it was only in the 1990s Paganism in Norway became established at the organisational level, as seen through organisations such as *Nordisk Paganistforbund* (Nordic Pagan-foundation), which was founded in 1992 (Uldal and Winje, 2016: 373).

However, according to Uldal and Winje (2016: 367) "Aatru is the only Pagan religion that has been visibly present in Norway before the 1980s". While it depends on how one defines Åsatru, as it can be argued that the Åsatru that emerged as a subgroup of Neopaganism during the 1980s and 1990s is not the same religious phenomenon as the Åsatru that existed prior, they are certainly correct in pointing out the unique position of Åsatru in Norway and Scandinavia. As alluded to above, the cultural heritage of the Norse Mythology and culture found largely in the *Eddas*, was influential for the nation-building of the nineteenth-century, as Romantic writers sought insights from these sources to establish Scandinavian national cultures. This, however, was "more of a literary endeavour" (Uldal and Winje, 2016: 368) than an attempt to revive an old religion. They point to the Danish writer and theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) as an example of this endeavour, with his writings on the Norse gods and the Norse Mythology. Nevertheless, while Grundtvig's writings can certainly be seen as a 'literary endeavour' with the Norse history, it is too simplistic to fully separate it from Grundtvig's 'religious endeavours' as a Christian theologian. Grundtvig brought the Old Norse traditions and myths into dialogue with Christianity, as he proclaimed that Christianity should be understood and practiced in line with the local culture's religious heritage. With this, Grundtvig's theology transgressed and challenged the binary between 'pagan' and Christian, and offered a Scandinavian-specific Christian theology, in which local culture and language is embedded and even a precursor to truly receive God's words (Salomonsen, 2021: 146). This suggests that there is a long history of religious and theological interpretative work of the old mythology and folk tradition available in the *Eddas*, where this tradition has been

given religious value, and been of influence both for Scandinavian Christianity, culture, and nation-building.

Despite the presence of the Old Norse myths and symbols in the Norwegian cultural identity, Åsatru as a NRM was, as mentioned, one of the later additions to the landscape of new religiosity in Norway. This, however, is perhaps not surprising, as the Norse symbols and myths also carry with them the legacy of being utilised by the radical wings of the national socialist political movements, both in Germany and in Norway. In the following section, I will demonstrate how some of the national romantic sentiments found in the 'literary endeavours' came to influence a radical pagan wing of the Norwegian national socialists during the Second World War and the years leading up to it, and that this was not unique for Norway, but that there existed pagan allies also in the German Nazi-milieus. Additionally, I will demonstrate how these political and religious ideas did not die out after the end of the Second World War but have indeed survived and flourished again within radical and extreme right-wing groups in Europe and America. While the primary purpose of my qualitative research project is to investigate the religion of Norwegian modern Heathens who represent an inclusive new religious movement, it is, nevertheless, important to be aware of the uncomfortable history and current reality of racist political usages of Norse myths and symbols, as this is a part of the context in which the members of Bifrost and Forn Sed have to navigate within. Additionally, as demonstrated above, this intricate context and tainted associations with modern usages of Norse myths and symbols, have been largely influential for my research interests, namely, to understand how the modern heathens who distance themselves from this construct an inclusive version of Åsatru, and what this inclusivity entails.

2.4 Heathenism's troubled reputation – *völkisch* religion, associations with Nazism, racism, and ethnic separatism

As described above, the Paganist movements that emerged particularly around the 1960 and onwards were highly compatible with the counterculture against the industrialised modern western world and functioned as a critique of elements of modernity such as the favouring of rationalism, patriarchal structures, and an experienced alienation from nature. These sentiments, together with the influences that came with the colonial experience of some of the central figures (such as both Murrey and Gardner), and the development of new scholarly ideas of religion, enabled the practice of 'looking backwards' in history to find pre-Christian

religion to be informative and inspirational for the way forward. This practice, however, especially when combined with an ethnic or racial component, has a massive potential pitfall, something which the Paganist movements today are highly aware of.

It is no secret that modern Åsatru, or Paganism more generally, carries with it some rather grim associations. In Scandinavia, wider Europe, as well as in America, elements of Norse Paganism are being used to bolster racist political agendas. In the following sections, I will give a brief historical overview of how a racialist version of Norse Paganism was developed and informed Nazi-, white supremacist-, and white separatist ideologies. This will clarify why my research interest is relevant and offer a contextualisation of the wider Heathen scene (particularly its racialist parts) which the inclusive Heathens in Forn Sed and Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost must navigate within.

2.4.1 Norse Paganism and Nazism

Links between Norse Paganism and Nazi ideologies can be traced back to some of the ideologues who influenced the politics and visions of German Nazi leaders in the years leading up to Second World War. A theory of a common Indo-European origin was used to back up the claim of Europeans being the original "Aryans" and hence "the originators and rightful inheritors of ancient Indo-European culture and heritage, including their religious elements" (Strmiska, 2005: 24). Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (2004) demonstrates the vital role of the mystics who enabled a vision of an alternative world, which greatly inspired the Nazi ideology of the Second World War. He argues that in addition to more obvious and tangible material interests, fantasies are also important factors for political and historical changes as they can act as highly contributing factors once ideas and values are established among the people (Goodrick-Clarke, 2004: 1). This is naturally a long and complex history, but with an attempt to stay within the scope of this thesis, I will give a brief overview of how elements of Old Norse myths, and a 'Viking imaginary' were influential for parts of the national socialist ideologues in both Germany and Norway.

Stefanie von Schnurbein (2016) gives a historical account of what she refers to as a "The Search for a National Mythology in European Romanticism" (2016: 18), with a focus on the German context. She points to how of the ancient Norse myths, among others, were utilised in the 18th century and early 19th century to create a national mythology in an attempt to create a German *Volk* (Schnurbein, 2016: 25). The interwar period in Germany constituted the perfect

condition for an emergence of "myths and ideologies concerned with the restoration of the supposed halcyon past or at least the removal of those influences deemed responsible for Germany's terrible downfall" (Goodrick-Clarke, 2004: 153). A central thinker in this process was Rudolf John Gorsleben (1883-1930) who based his racist mystery-religion on runes, occultism and the Edda, and emphasised "the priceless magical heritage of the Aryans and justified their spiritual and political world-supremacy" (Goodrick-Clarke, 2004: 155). His doctrine's ultimate objective was "the creation of a racially pure humanity and the spiritual advancement of the Aryans; the precondition of such advancement was the re-activation of occult powers inherent in each Aryan individual" (Goodrick-Clarke, 2004: 156). Additionally, it propagated the dawn of a new era where one would 'return' to an imagined past world of Aryan superiority (Goodrick-Clarke, 2004: 157). His doctrine was presented as a 'rediscovered' ancient Aryan wisdom, where the Edda and other old Icelandic literature were considered the most valuable source of "Aryan intellectual history" (Goodrick-Clarke, 2004: 159). In 1925 Gorsleben founded the Edda Society, which would later pledge allegiance to the National Socialist worldview and deem the German Nazi revolution to be aligned with higher cosmic laws. This shows that an 'Aryan spirituality', where Old Norse literature is central, and a political Nazi project, are in Gorsleben's case, one and the same.

2.4.2 The *Ragnarok*-circle

The Norwegian National Socialist milieu similarly consisted of a (minority) radical pagan-wing, who attempted to drive the political party *Nasjonal Samling*, in a more radical and racist direction during the Second World War and the years leading up to it (Emberland, 2003: 15). While the pagan-wing constituted only a minority of the national socialists, their presence and religious-political ideologies have proved to be influential also in a post-war era and need therefore to be taken seriously.

The Norwegian historian of religion, Terje Emberland, has written extensively on the *Ragnarok*-circle, which refers to the pagan-wing of the Norwegian national socialists. This wing consisted of a group of people who were adhering to the ideology and religion reflected in and spread through the journal *Ragnarok*. The journal was first published in 1935 and was a result of internal conflict within the Quisling-led *Nasjonal Samling* (NS), which had been present already from its incipient years. The conflict was between the (majority) Christian-conservative wing, which Quisling himself adhered to, and the even more radical and racist pagan-wing. As the pagan-wing lost more and more power within the party, some members

left and soon after, the *Ragnarok* journal was established by one of the leading pagan-figures, Hans S. Jacobsen (Emberland, 2015: 120-121).

The members of the *Ragnarok*-circle considered themselves as representing a "true and genuine National Socialism" (Emberland, 2015: 120), which, to them, was incompatible with both the Christianity and the Hitler-friendly ideology of NS. They were in many ways more radical than the Christians in NS, as they envisioned "a fundamental and far-reaching change in the social, political, cultural and religious makeup of society" (Emberland, 2015: 122), a change which was only achievable through a return to the 'root'. Here, the 'root' refers to race, as race was in the centre of both their pagan religion and their national socialist ideology. Their goal was "to reawaken the Germanic racial consciousness in the Norwegian people, and, by doing so unleash the dormant forces of the racial soul" (Emberland, 2015: 122).

Their concept of race allowed for a focus on the Germanic race, but also more specifically on the 'Norwegian race'. The pagans of the *Ragnarok*-circle were inspired by the religious-evolutionary 'law of mortal danger', articulated by the Norwegian author Erling Winsnes, where the 'Norwegian race' was seen as even more advanced and evolved than other Germanic races, as Norwegians continued their evolution and advancement due to the harsh climate and conditions of the North of Europe, while the Germans and the Danes for instance, had experienced racial denigration due to their comfortable living conditions (Emberland, 2015: 123). The "racial wisdom" of the Norwegians was kept intact in their blood, due to their continuous need to "refine and develop their racial qualities", as a result of their living conditions (Emberland, 2015: 123). This conception of race influenced *Ragnarok'*s version of National Socialism and allowed for criticism of the imperialist attitudes of Hitler's Nazi-Germany, and in turn the Hitler-friendly Norwegian NS. Their theory of race additionally allowed for criticism of Christianity as it was seen as the "prime agent of racially alien influences in Norwegian society" (Emberland, 2015: 124).

Since Christianity was seen as alienating and destructive of the Norwegian race, the *Ragnarok* proclaimed a return to (a modernised) Norse religion. The religious matter constituted large portions of the *Ragnarok* publications and was central for their version of National Socialism. Just as race was in the centre of their version of National Socialism, race was in the centre of their religion. 'God' was conceptualised as the "immanent 'divine racial law' governing nature, history, and human life" (Emberland, 2015: 125), and salvation was achieved "by

realizing ones racial potential and in doing so live in harmony with the 'divine law'" (Emberland, 2015: 125).

The members of the *Ragnarok*-circle never organised religious rituals (Uldal and Winje, 2016: 368). It is therefore questionable whether or not they can even be classified as a religious 'pagan-wing'. Nevertheless, using the term 'pagan' is fruitful in order to distinguish them from the 'Christian-wing' of the Norwegian National Socialist. Additionally, as demonstrated above, religious ideas and the concept of a racialised spirituality were integral for their version of National Socialism. Hence, their religious ideas and their political ideas cannot be understood in isolation from each other. This racialist and political version of the Old Norse religion is a phenomenon that has survived and has certainly given contemporary usages of Norse pagan symbols and ideas a tainted reputation.

2.4.3 Post-war developments of the use of Norse Paganism in racist political agendas

After the end of the Second World War, *völkisch* religious groups continued to exist and further develop in Germany (Schnurbein, 2016: 48-49). Racialist spiritual sentiments remained after the war and were influential for parts of the modern Åsatru in Germany which developed towards the end of the 20th century. While many of the groups would overtly distance themselves from fascist and racist ideologies, they perpetuated a "strongly ethnicist line" (Schnurbein, 2016: 57).

The construction of a "German *Volk"*, based on the constructed "national mythology" spread, ironically enough, also to other parts of the world. The idea of a 'native' culture and spirituality, which had been lost due to Christianisation, "became crucial for the conceptions of pre-Christian mythology and culture in the Scandinavian countries, and – in the case of Anglo-Saxonism – England and America, as they all saw their roots in Germanic culture as well" (Schnurbein, 2016: 24). The efforts to develop a racialist Norse Paganism to support a vision of white supremacy has, as we know, continued and racialist versions of Norse Paganism are very much present in racist and racial right-wing groups both in America and Europe today. It is, of course, important to note that there is no such thing as a transnational homogenous racialist Åsatru, as the political and cultural climate of the various geographical contexts will naturally influence the character of the religious communities, especially when the religious communities are also rather political themselves. However, as pointed out by Egil Asprem (2008: 42), even though one cannot generalise the international racialist

heathenism, much of the "ideological production of modern Ásatrú stems from an American context". Therefore, a brief overview of some of the main developments of racialist Åsatru in America will give an idea of some common and important characteristics.

2.4.4 Racialist Åsatru: Odinism and Folkish Åsatru

The Swedish religious studies scholar, Mattias Gardell, has written extensively on the topic of racialist Paganism, with a focus on the American context in particular. He argues that since the 1990s, racialist Paganism has surpassed the more "traditional racist vehicles, such as national socialist parties and the Ku Klux Klan(s), in terms of numbers and influence" (Gardell, 2003: 1). His studies reveal that the most prevalent element of Paganism within these circles is "reconstructed Norse Paganism – Asatrú or Odinism – and the dim underworld where heathendom meets racist Satanism and occult national socialism" (Gardell, 2003: 1). Gardell (2003: 152-153) views the upsurge of racialist Åsatru as a continuation of the white-racist counterculture's increased refutation of Christianity that took place in the 1980s, as many racialist heathens blame Christianity for what they perceive as a loss of white power and Western civilisation. With a wish for "deeper spiritual content in these racist creeds, Aryan heathens turned to history in search of an alternative, opting to replace Christianity with reconstructed ancient traditions as the white man's "true" religion" (Gardell, 2003: 153). Hence, it is clear that this version of Norse Paganism is, similar to its function in forming the political visions of Nazi Germany and the Norwegian Ragnarok-circle, very instrumental for a wider political vision, also in this context.

As alluded to above, a distinction if often made between 'Odinism' and 'Åsatru'. Jeffery Kaplan (1997) is one of the scholars who have made this distinction and argues that Odinism is the racialist counterpart to the non-racialist Åsatru. I will later demonstrate that this is a flawed distinction, as there are also examples of a racialist Åsatru. However, it is fair to say that Odinism is often a more overtly political and racist version of Heathenism. I will in the following section give an overview of some of the developments of this strand of racialist Heathenism, which have developed mainly in the USA, but influential also elsewhere.

2.4.4.1 Odinism

Kaplan (1997: 15) emphasises that racialist Odinism is characterised by an "imaginative blend of ritual magic, ceremonial forms of fraternal fellowship, and an ideological flexibility which

allows for a remarkable degree of syncretism with other white supremacist appeals – National Socialism in particular". Odinists are often explicit in their dreams of "battle, of Valhalla, and of a world restored to the ancient virtues of folk and of tribe" (Kaplan, 1997: 85), and glorification of violence prevalent, and the warrior aspects of Odin and Thor are emphasised (Kaplan, 1997: 92). Kaplan also points out that Odinists are often conspiratorial when it comes to their constructed enemies (Kaplan, 1997: 85). It is therefore evident that the combination of "National Socialism, the occult, the Viking mystique, and the quest for community" (Kaplan, 1997: 17) has survived and continues to foster white supremacist movements.

The explicit political character of Odinism becomes clear when looking at the origins of the most dominant Odinist organisation in America, namely the Odinist Fellowship. The Odinist Fellowship was founded in 1969 by the Danish woman Else Christensen, whose husband had been active in the Danish National Socialist Worker's Party, and who moved to England after the end of the Second World War, and later to Canada. She continued to pursue the ideology of "class-based racial radicalism" (Gardell, 2003: 167) and would find inspiration in the works of the Australian Odinist Alexander Rud Mills, as well as the American Anti-Semitic fascist Francis Parker Yockey.

Mills was a Nazi sympathiser and had connections to National Socialists in Britain and Germany in the years prior to the Second World War. He believed "in a form of racial mysticism which posited pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon society as the Golden Age of the British people" (Kaplan, 1997: 15), and he viewed Odinism as the answer to 'overcoming Jewish Christianity'. In the 1930s, Mills founded the Anglecyn Church of Odin and published books which would extensively influence Odinists movements in the years to come (Schnurbein, 2016: 48). Yockey was also largely influential with this theory of a 'white race' in the midst of a crisis of modern civilisation, where 'the Jews' took advantage of this alleged crisis "by promoting dangerous and distorting ideas such as democracy, equality, feminism, humanism, capitalism, and communism" (Gardell, 2003: 170).

These were the ideas Christensen was influenced by when founding the Odinist Fellowship. She followed Mills' line of thinking when arguing that the antidote to the decay of the Aryan race, as described by Yockey, was Odnism, and propagated a Jungian understanding of a collective racial unconscious among Aryans (Gardell, 2003: 170-171). The Odinism of the Odinist Fellowship is hence a religion which is an explicit political tool for a white

supremacist political agenda, and this Odinism is evidently only accessible to members of a perceived 'Aryan race'.

Examples of groups who call themselves Odinists are found also in the UK. These include for example, The Odinic Rite and The Odinist Fellowship. These groups have similar racist and political ideologies, as described above. Ethen Doyle White (2017) identifies several similarities between the British groups and those in the US in their politics and sources for ideological inspiration. For instance, the influential Odinist Mills, as mentioned above, was presumably also a source of inspiration for John Gibbs-Bailey, who founded the Odinic rite in 1973. Similar to Christensen's political engagements in the interwar years, also Gibbs-Bailey was likely engaged with the right-wing nationalist movements in the 1930s (White, 2017: 251-253).

2.4.4.2 Folkish Åsatru

With a thorough overview of the development of different American Åsatru organisations, Kaplan (1997: 32-33) nuances the image of a strict division between racialist Odinists and non-racialist Åsatruers, as he points out the emerging divisions between the universalist interpretations of Åsatru and the racialist Åsatru. White (2017: 242-243) is one of the scholars who contributes to correcting this categorisation by arguing that such a distinction is too simplistic, as also some of whom identifies as Åsatru can hold overt racialist perspectives. In this section, I will demonstrate that this is the case, something which again will further highlight the relevance of my research interests and questions, and the rationale for going into this qualitative research project.

In addition to the Odinist Fellowship, another dominant Heathen organisation was founded in America in 1969, namely the Viking Brotherhood, which later became the Asatru Free Assembly and renamed again to the Asatru Folk Assembly (AFA) (Gardell, 2003: 152). AFA was founded by Stephen McNallen who wanted to create an alternative to the explicit political and racist Odinist Fellowship. AFA therefore claims to be a more purely religious alternative, yet with a clear "ethnic" interpretation of their religion. However, Gardell (2003: 152) makes an apt comment about McNallen's vision of "a future stateless American confederacy based on decentralized tribal units" as he argues that this is not exactly a vision "bereft of political implications". Gardell also argues that although the two organisations are different, their shared focus on ethnicity and race suggests that the previous understanding of a division

between Odinism as a racialist and political religion and Asatru as a non-racialist counterpart is flawed (Gardell, 2003: 152).

The theory of so-called 'metagenetics' clearly demonstrate the racialist character of AFA. This theory was first articulated by McNallen and suggests that "tradition (i.e., culture) is a matter of genetic inheritance" (Kaplan, 1997: 80). With this understanding of tradition, McNallen is able to explain the racial exclusivity of the revival of the Old Norse religion. According to the logic of metagenetics "the religious heritage that the gods personify never died" but has been passed on through the genetics of a particular "national or racial stock" (Kaplan, 1997: 80) and eventually been revived. McNallen's idea of spirituality and religion is hence clearly connected to ethnicity and he holds a "folkish separatist ethnonationalist worldview" (Gardell, 2003: 260), which is reflected through the name change from Asatrú Free Assembly to Asatrú *Folk* Assembly.

Folkish Asatruers often perceive the Northern European people as a "divine race", and the chosen "children of Odin", which creates an exclusive identity, with a clear ethnic-religious character (Gardell, 2003: 269). However, by claiming that also other human races might be divine, as they adhere to *their* ethnic religion, they claim to have a non-hierarchical, and hence non-racists understanding of race, but instead celebrate diversity and pluralism (Gradell, 2003: 271). This, however, is not difficult to contest, as such an essentialist and separatist view of ethnicity and race is inherently racist in and of itself; "if racism is defined as an ideology that asserts that members of a specific race "by nature" share not only racially distinct physical but also mental features" (Gardell, 2003: 271). Additionally, the strong aversion against racial mixing certainly comes with clearly racist connotations and consequences.

This line of thinking suggests that while McNallen did claim to offer a more 'religious' alternative to the 'political' Odinist Fellowship, AFA holds a strongly racialist and folkish line, which cannot be understood in isolation from its political and identarian implications. As demonstrated in this section, and as already pointed out by both Gardell (2003: 125) and White (2017: 242-243), a distinction between Odinism as racialist and Åsatru as non-racialist, is therefore too simplistic. White (2017: 243), offers an alternative division, where he distinguishes between: "'Folkish Heathens', who deem Heathenry to be a religion geared for a particular racial or ethno-cultural group (whether conceptualised as 'Nordic', 'white,' or 'Aryan'), and the 'Universalist Heathens' who hold to no such restriction".

2.4.5 Neo-Nazi usages of Old Norse imagery in Scandinavia

The Scandinavian context stands out as it is, in contrast to the contexts discussed above, "the historical homeland of the traditions that contemporary Norse Paganism seeks to revive" (Asprem, 2008: 43). As already accounted for, Old Norse myths and symbols therefore hold quite a paradoxical position in the Nordic context, as it is important both for the Nordic cultural heritage at the same time as it is often strongly associated with racist political agendas, also today. Just as the *Ragnarok*-circle of the 1930s and 1940s constructed a particular Norwegian National Socialism, Kølvraa (2019: 275) identifies similar tactics in today's Nordic Resistance Movement, which is mainly active in Sweden, but has branches also in Norway, Iceland, and Finland. This neo-Nazi movement constructs a 'Viking imaginary' to mobilise a particular Nordic National Socialism. While this movement is not a religious group, the organisation is certainly relevant for the context of heathenism in Scandinavia, as it uses Old Norse imagery and terminology, an obvious example being their logo, the *Tyr*-rune[3], and hence perpetuates the troublesome usages of the Old Norse symbols.

In addition to the Nordic Resistance Movement, the grim associations of racism and violence evoked by Old Norse symbols and terminology have been kept alive and further perpetuated in Norway by several neo-Nazi actors and right-wing extremists. The most prominent Norwegian neo-Nazi Norse Pagan is the black metal musician Varg Vikernes, who after being convicted of murder, established the organisation *Norsk Hedensk Front* (Norwegian Heathen Front) from prison. He had previously been a part of Satanist milieus, however, from prison, he became an inspirational figure and "persuaded many "Satanists" adherents to follow his footsteps, shaving their heads and now hailing Odin and Hitler instead of Satan" (Asprem, 2008: 59). Another prominent neo-Nazi organisation which utilises Viking and Old Norse imagery is Vigrid, founded by Tore Tvedt. Asprem (2008: 61) notes that one cannot trace any connections between Vigrid and the previous *volkisch* Paganism in Norway from the 1930s and 1940s, nor to the influential Odinists such as Mills and Christensen, mentioned above. However, their political projects overlap to a great extent, as they are all versions of ethnonationalist ideology, based on an alleged Norse religion (Asprem, 2008: 61).

It is also worth mentioning that Anders Behring Breivik, the right-wing extremist who carried out the atrocious terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya in 2011, mentioned Odinism as a potential religious strategy in his manifesto prior to the terrorist attack, but concluded that it

[3] The *Tyr-rune* or the '*Tiwaz* rune', is the rune connected to the Norse god Tyr, a god "who is associated with law and heroic glory" (Kølvraa, 2019: 277).

was not an adequate strategy and that using Christianity would ensure a wider reach (Asprem, 2011: 25). He did, however, name his weapons *Mjølner,* after the Norse god Thor's hammer, and *Gugne*, after the Norse god Odins's spear (Salomonsen, 2015: 251). From prison, the terrorist has changed his mind regarding religion and in 2016 he shared in court that he had converted to Odinism (Slettholm et al., 2016).

This gives a clear understanding of the rather troublesome context of Heathenism that Bifrost and Forn Sed have to navigate within and demonstrates why it is interesting to investigate the ways in which the members of the two faith communities attempt to construct a religion and a religious community that strive for inclusivity and overtly distance themselves from racist or ethnicist ideologies.

2.5 Introduction of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge

The first efforts to establish an Åsatru-organisation in Norway took place in the mid-1980s. This was the precursor to today's Bifrost and started out as a student association in Oslo, with the name Blindern Åsatrulag (BÅL). Already at this point, the group sought recognition for Åsatru as an official religion in Norway, however, this was unsuccessful (Asprem, 2008: 49). A decade later, the efforts were revived and a new group of young Åsatruers joined forces with representatives of the old BÅL and achieved official recognition of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost as a religious community February 1996[4]. In 1998, Foreningen Forn Sed was established after a secession from Bifrost due to a "schism" (Asprem, 2008: 50) between some of the members. Forn Sed Norge was later officially recognised as a faith community as well.

Asprem (2008: 50) notes that the emerging interest in Åsatru that took place during the 1980s and 1990s in Norway should be seen as an example of eclecticism, as the interest "grew out of a subculture with general interests in Paganism and the occult". Asprem (2008: 50) points to examples of early members being interested in "ritual magic, shamanism, and rune magic" and others being interested in wider occult currents such as LaVeyian Satanism. Asprem (2008: 50) also suggests that Bifrost's openness to other Pagan currents, such as for example Wicca, was part of the reason for the schism that led to the small secession and, in turn, the establishment of Forn Sed.

[4] Om Bifrost: https://www.bifrost.no/om-bifrost Accessed 24.05.2022

Today, Bifrost is the biggest of the two organisations, with its 457 members, while Forn Sed has 137 members (Barne- og familiedepartementet, 2022), and both organisations receive state funding. Both Bifrost and Forn Sed offer various rites of passage, and as recognised faith communities, they have the right to conduct official marriage ceremonies. The two organisations are both examples of faith organisations based on the Old Norse traditions, and several references are made to 'the old tradition', 'the Norse tradition', and the 'pre-Christian religious traditions' on their websites. Bifrost writes that they "wish to maintain the heathen cultural heritage and keep it alive and updated"[5], and Forn Sed writes that they wish to "lift to dignity the custom and cultural heritage again"[6]. Nevertheless, there are also many variations between the two organisations. In the following sections, I will give a short overview of the two organisations, mainly based on their websites and official public documents[7], but supplemented by previous research. This introduction will highlight some of the aspects of the two faith organisations that I was interested to further investigate through the individual interviews, and again, is vital for the context of my research interests and questions asked in this project.

2.5.1 Åsatrufellekapet Bifrost

The name Bifrost, is taken from Norse Mythology, where it refers to the bridge that connects *Åsagard* (the world of the gods) to *Midgard* (the world of human). Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost is an umbrella organisation for their local *blotslag*, which is where most of the religious practice take place. The organisation has a democratic structure, where everyone who holds a position is elected at their annual *Ting.* These positions include the *Høvding* (Chief), the *allgode/allgydje* (leader of the local *blotslag* and hence, typically a ceremonial leader), members of the *råd* (council), and *lovsigere* (members with internal jurisdictional responsibility). While the *Høvding* is responsible for the bureaucracy of the organisation, the *allgoder/allgydjer* are in charge of carrying out the ritual *blot* (sacrifice) which takes place in the different local *blotslag*s. However, members are also free to hold individual *blots* by themselves. Members and *blotslag* are free to hold *blot* at any point, but many follow "the large solar equinox and solstice festivals" (Uldal and Winje, 2016: 370).

[5] Om Bifrost: https://www.bifrost.no/om-bifrost Accessed 30.06.2022
[6] Forn Sed Norge: https://www.forn-sed.no/ Accessed 30.06.2022
[7] When direct quotations from websites and official documents are cited, the original quote is Norwegian and has been translated to English by me for the purpose of this paper.

On Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost's website[8], it is made clear that there are no strict rules for how a blot should be carried out, however, there is a suggested model of blot containing four elements: 1) *kvadlesing* – typically a reading from the *Eddas*, 2) *velysing* – sanctifying the location of the ceremony, 3) *bloting* – the actual offering, which can be anything, but what is sacrificed should be something of value to the individual who offers it, and lastly 4) *skålerunde* – a round of toasting to the gods, ancestors, friends or others. Despite this general suggested structure, there is much room for variation and alteration to what works for each individual or each *blotslag*, as will become evident in the presentation of the findings from the qualitative interviews of Bifrost-members.

As point 1.3 in their *Lovsett*[9] (set of laws), the faith organisation presents what they refer to as *eden* (the oath). As pointed out by Asprem (2008: 56) this, or a variation of this, is required in order for the organisation to be recognised as an officially registered faith community in Norway. This is a rather lengthy text and begins with the statement: "I believe in a better life through the life and teachings of Åsatru". Further, several central elements of their Åsatru faith are listed. These include an emphasis on the force of nature and human, several mythological creatures and gods, such as *jotner* and *vetter*, *æser* and *vaner*, as well as the *norner* Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld. The powers of the sun and the moon are mentioned, and so are ancestors and heritage. However, under the 'About Åsatru' section of the website, it is stated that "We have no sacred books or doctrines (*læresetninger)*". Additionally, point 1.2 of their set of laws states that members are allowed to practice their faith whichever way they wish to, as long as it is in accordance with Norway's and Bifrost's laws. This indicates, something which is also pointed out by Asprem (2008: 56), that the requirement of formulating a creed or doctrine in order to be recognised as an official faith community, might be "contrary to a religion which considers itself fundamentally non-dogmatic". How the members of Bifrost might relate to the organisation's articulated 'creed' is something which will be elaborated on through the analysis of the data material from the interviews that I have conducted for this research project.

When it comes to membership, point 1.6 in the set of laws makes it clear that anyone who can follow Bifrost's set of laws are welcome to join the organisation. Under their more general 'About Bifrost' section on their website, they state that they wish to be "a forum for those

[8] Seremoniene: https://www.bifrost.no/seremonier/seremoniene Accessed 24.05.2022
[9] Lovsett: https://www.bifrost.no/om-bifrost/lovsett Accessed 24.05.2022

who are interested in åsatru"[10], which arguably suggests that there are no strict membership-requirements in terms of personal faith or religiosity. Nevertheless, under the section 'Become a member'[11], one can learn that the organisation wishes to meet you, or at least hear what makes you interested to join the organisation before being granted a membership.

Another prominent section of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost's website is their 'religiopolitical platform'. This was passed in 2012 with the purpose of enabling the organisation to work more dedicatedly and to make it clear to outsiders what they stand for. Their religiopolitical platform is mainly concerned with issues regarding the relationship between the state and religion, such as the position of the Norwegian Church, content of religious education in public schools, freedom of religion and religious dialogue, but also issues concerning freedom of speech, a welcoming of a multicultural society, and tolerance.

2.5.2 Forn Sed Norge

The term *Forn Sed*, as already mentioned, means 'ancient customs'. The organisation differs from Bifrost for instance in terms of its organisational structure. It is not organised with *blotslag*, nor with the structure of a *Høvding* and *allgoder* or *allgydjer*. In their guidelines, it is explicitly stated that priesthood is unwanted, and something that they see as not being a part of the tradition (Forn Sed Norge, 2015). However, similarly to Bifrost, they are a democratic organisation with an annual *Ting*, where a board and a *forstander* (superintendent) is democratically elected. The main religious activity of the organisation is, similar to Bifrost, the ritual *blot.* The organisation holds four *blots* a year, but states that members are welcome to hold their own *blots* locally at other times. The organisation only states a short description of a *blot* on their website. The description includes only two elements of the blot: the actual offering (where it is emphasised that this is a personal ritual gift), and the round of toasts with mead[12].

In Forn Sed Norge's official guidelines, paragraph 5, the basis of their faith is stated. This is a much shorter statement than the oath found on Bifrost's website but includes an acknowledgement of "all gods and *vetter* within Norse mythology and Nordic folklore" and several examples of these are listed. Similar to Bifrost, Forn Sed's guidelines also include a

[10] Om Bifrost: https://www.bifrost.no/om-bifrost Accessed 24.05.2022
[11] Bli medlem: https://www.bifrost.no/om-bifrost/bli-medlem Accessed 24.04.2022
[12] Seremonier: https://www.forn-sed.no/sermonier Accessed 24.05.2022

statement (under paragraph 5) where it is made clear that each member can decide by themselves how to practice the religion, as long as it falls within Norwegian laws.

When it comes to membership in Forn Sed Norge, it is made clear under their 'Become a member'- section[13] that the organisation is open for anyone with an interest for the old traditions, history, religion, and it is explicitly stated that this interest needs not to be of a "religious basis". Unlike Bifrost, there is no requirement of an initial meeting or chat prior to being granted membership. Forn Sed Norge differs from Bifrost also when it comes to their stance on politics; paragraph 3 in their guidelines states that "Forn Sed Norge is an apolitical (*upolitisk)* organisation".

2.5.3 A shared rejection of explicit racist, discriminatory, and anti-democratic attitudes

Despite their differences, both of the organisations represent a version of Heathenism and Åsatru that I categorise as inclusive. In Forn Sed Norge's guidelines, one of the statutes (under paragraph 7 on membership) states that those who identify as national socialists or fascist-left-wing-extremists do not have the right to membership (Forn Sed Norge, 2015). Additionally, on the front page of their website, there is a section declaring that the organisation strongly distances itself from "Nazi, racist and other anti-human attitudes and interpretations of the Old Norse, as well as any form of discrimination"[14].

Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost has a longer section dedicated to a disassociation from racism[15], where it is made clear that they disapprove of any form of discrimination and wish to be a counterexample to those who use the Old Norse symbols for neo-Nazi purposes. They warn the readers of their website of groups who claim to be Heathen or Åsatru but are instead groups of right-wing extremists. They state in this section that "Åsatru is not based on race or heritage but founded in religious acts. […] Honourable conduct and hospitality are of high regard in Åsatru.". The section ends of with a clear message: "If you are oriented towards Nazism or racism and think this fit well together with Åsatru, you are NOT welcome to Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost". Additionally, in their set of laws[16] (2.4), the organisation includes a list of actions that are considered 'undignified' and can result in expulsion from the *Ting*.

[13] Bli Medlem: https://www.forn-sed.no/innmelding Accessed 24.05.2022
[14] Forn Sed Norge: https://www.forn-sed.no/ Accessed 24.05.2022
[15] Rasisme: https://www.bifrost.no/om-bifrost/rasisme Accessed 24.05.2022
[16] Lovsett: https://www.bifrost.no/om-bifrost/lovsett Accessed 24.05.2022

Some of these include taunting others based on any part of their identity (such as faith, heritage, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or age).

While Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost is more overt in their distancing from racialist Åsatru, both faith communities certainly stand in stark opposition to the racist and folkish versions of Heathenism described above. This is why I have included informants from both organisations in this research project, as members from both faith communities can offer a variety of insights into the construction and self-perception of the inclusive version of Åsatru, beyond the information available on their organisations' websites.

2.6 Clarification of terminology: 'racialist' versus 'inclusive'

As demonstrated in the overview of groups who call themselves Odinists and groups who call themselves folkish, a shared defining character of these groups is their emphasis on race and ethnic lineage. Therefore, I will be using the term 'racialist Åsatru' or 'racialist Heathens' to refer to these groups, their members, and their version of Heathenism. Above, I have accounted for how Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge both reject a racialist focus, and in this sense constitute a counterpart to the racialist heathens. This counterpart is referred to as "Universalist Heathens" by White (2017: 143) and as the "antiracist wing" by Gardell (2003: 153). After having met some of the members of Bifrost and Forn Sed, I landed on using the term 'inclusive heathens' or 'inclusive Åsatru', as 'inclusive' was a term many of the informants themselves used when describing their version of Åsatru, especially when described in relation to the 'non-inclusive' version. This term clearly indicates a rejection of an ethnic and racial exclusivity, but at the same time it opens up for a deeper exploration of what inclusivity entails for these two faith communities.

2.7 Defining the scope of the study

As indicated above, while there are definitely certain variations between the two faith organisations in this study, the primary purpose of the project is not to offer a comparison of the two. Instead, members from the two faith organisations will all be treated as examples of inclusive modern Heathens. The scope if this project is limited to investigating the thoughts, experiences, and reflections of the inclusive Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed, in order to understand how they construct their religion and identify what the inclusivity of their version of Åsatru entails. I will therefore not go into theological discussions or analysis of their faith,

nor will I engage in assessments of their interpretations and usages of ‘the sources’ – be it archaeological or mythological. Neither will I attempt to pin down or narrow down ‘what kind of religion’ modern Åsatru is, beyond the contextualisation of the religious landscape in which it falls within that I have accounted for above. In the interviews various terms were used such as ‘animistic’, ‘polytheistic’, ‘nature religion’. I will not prioritise to go into a discussion of these terms, but instead note and discuss the diversity and heterogeneity of the ways in which the members understood and constructed their religion, as diversity and heterogeneity are important components of the religion in and of itself.

Chapter 3: Theoretical tools and concepts

As with many qualitative research projects, also this project is approached through a synergy between theory and empirical data. From the contextualisation provided above, several central theoretical concepts have emerged, some of which also came to guide my research question and came up in my empirical interview data. One of these concepts is 'modernity' or 'modern', another one being 'tradition'. While both of the terms 'modernity' and 'tradition' are much used in our day-to-day language and often with an implied or taken-for-granted meaning, they are, however, concepts of much complexity and often infused with ideological matters. In order to be able to discuss the findings of this study, where I seek to explore *how inclusive Heathens in Norway construct their modern version of Åsatru and what their notion of inclusivity entails,* I will in this chapter introduce a theoretical discussion of the concept of 'modernity' and 'tradition'. This will clarify how I conceptually approach particularly the first part of the research question regarding how inclusive Heathens in Norway construct their *modern* version of Åsatru based on *old* Norse myths and traditions.

Another central concept that the research question foreground is the concept of 'inclusivity'. In order to analyse the inclusivity imagined and practiced by the members of Bifrost and Forn Sed, I will introduce a set of theoretical typologies that I find to be fruitful when analysing the findings from the interview material. These include Wallis' (2019/1984) typology of new religious movements, where I will lean on and further develop his concept of 'world-affirming' religious movements, and Strmiska's (2005) analytical framework of a polarity between what he calls 'Reconstructionist' and 'Eclectic' Paganism.

3.1 Modernity

As noted in the previous chapter on the emergence of both Paganism and NRMs in general, many references are made to 'modernity'. While treating the NRM of Paganism as a *modern* version of pre-Christian religions, it has also been made evident that the emergence of these new religious communities and practices have been a reaction to or critique of *modernity.* Additionally, Waldron (2009: 118) suggests that during the 1980s the paganist movements were influenced by the emerging *post-modern* thinking. However, pinpointing what exactly *modernity* or *post-modernity* is, and when it begun, is no straightforward task. Therefore, I will in this section offer a brief theoretical discussion on the complexity of 'modernity' which will clarify how the concept will inform my analysis in this study.

Some scholars tie the emergence of modernity to the European expansion of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while others tie it to the increased industrialisation (Davie, 2007). Heelas (1998: 2-3) suggests that modernity is characterised by a range of differentiations, where efforts were made to organise the world into dualisms and classifications and by overarching universalistic meta-narratives, or grand narratives, something which naturally affected the realm of religion. An increased differentiation between God and human, as well as between God and nature, that came with the Reformation, is an example of this (Heelas, 1998: 2). Additionally, the 'World Religions Paradigm', which is a "matrix of constructs […] evolved in the modern Western world through the influence of scholars and missionaries, among others, attempting to make sense of the data that came to be classified as "religions"" (Hedges, 2021, 46), exemplify the increased differentiation *between* and classification of different religions. This matrix was created from a Protestant Christian vantage point, something which affected what came to be classified as a 'religion'. Elements such as faith and internal rather than external experiences were centred, so were creeds, sacred scripture, and hierarchical structures such as priesthood (Hedges, 2021: 46).

The so-called 'enlightenment paradigm' and the favouring of rationality is also often associated with 'modernity'. This is reflected in the emergence of the secularisation-thesis, which constructs a meta-narrative of the evolution of religion and its eventual disappearance. Several theories about how and when "modernity would have triumphed over faith" (Stark, 1999: 249), were articulated, all of which follow a logic of cultural evolutionism where religion would be overcome by 'rationality' and science. However, as we know, this thesis would be falsified and what instead has been proposed in recent years are ideas of a 'Desecularization of the World' (Berger, 2005) and that 'God is Back' (Micklethwait and Wooldridge, 2009), or notions of a 'Re-enchantment' of the world (Graham, 2007).

It is not only the unilinear meta-narrative of secularisation that has come to be challenged and criticised, so has the unilinear and monolithic meta-narrative of modernisation. The idea or condition of a 'post-modernity' have been influential, either as life 'beyond modernity' (Giddens, 1990: 163), or as a condition of life "reflected upon and a response to the accumulating signs of the limits and limitations of modernity" and as a "more modest modernity, a sign of modernity having come to terms with its own limits and limitations" (Smart, 1993: 12). As already mentioned in the sub-chapter on the emergence of Paganism, Waldron (2009: 118) suggests that 'post-modern thinking' affected the development of the Paganist-movement, at least to a certain extent. This 'post-modern thinking' typically refers to

a move away from the privileging of rationality and that the strict rules for production of knowledge are also challenged: "rather than authority and legitimacy resting with established orders of knowledge, authority comes to rest with the person" (Heelas, 1998: 4). 'Post-modern thinking' entails an increased focus on relativism and a celebration of diversity, rather than monolithic meta-narratives (Heelas, 1998: 6) and an inclination to transgress the previous classifications and differentiations.

This testifies for an increased individualisation and a resistance against "institutional determination of life choices" (Heelas, 1998: 5) which makes 'post-modern religion' more individualised, less tied to religious institutions and religious boundaries, and post-modern religious individuals to "raid the world, drawing on whatever is felt desirable" (Heelas, 1998: 5). Heelas further points to how an increased relativism, where the goal is not to seek out universal and objective truths, but rather find truth through a 'what works for me'-approach. People can therefore attribute a form of 'spirituality' to their experiences without holding religious beliefs, which leads to an understanding of religion where "religion beyond belief is religion where 'truth' is relative to what one takes to be involved in satisfying one's requirement" (Heelas, 1998: 5). However, also the concept of post-modernity is contested, and Heelas (1998: 9), for example, argues that the tendencies attributed to 'post-modernity' should not necessarily be seen as distinct from modernity, as they are not particularly *new* phenomena. Similarly, he emphasises that traditions are in fact not losing its relevance.

Another response to the monolithic conception of modernity (and post-modernity), is seen in the *multiple modernities* thesis, first articulated by Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000), and further developed by the influential sociologist of religion, Grace Davie. She criticises how scholars of religion, even after the death of the secularisation-thesis, tend to conceptualise religion "first and foremost as a way of coping with the vicissitudes of late or postmodern life, not as *a way of being modern*" and points to a continuous tendency of approaching "modernity (past, present or future) is a *single* thing" (Davie, 2007: 102). The multiple modernities thesis exposes how previous ideas of modernisation have been highly ideological, and closely connected to a type of European 'civilising-mission' of the rest of the world, as ideas of modernisation have often been coupled with a notion of so-called 'traditional values' standing in the way of 'proper modernisation'. With the multiple modernities thesis, European modernity is "simply one modernity among many in the modern world and, like all the others, in the process of continual reconstruction" (Davie, 2007: 109). When it comes to how to apply this thesis to the study of religion, Davie argues that scholars need to take religions seriously,

which should be “greatly facilitated by the assumption that you expect it to be there, as an integral, normal part of modern as well as modernizing societies” (Davie, 2007: 109).

This is precisely what I wish to do in this study, taking the religious life of Norwegian heathens seriously, not as an ‘irrational’ and ‘backwards’ or ‘reactionary’ religion, but as a religion which is a part of modernity and is in itself modern. Instead of taking the ‘re-enchantment of the world’ or the ‘return of god’ as a sign of or proof of *post*modernity, I find it more fruitful to approach modernity as a plural, rather than a monolithic concept. Firstly, because the idea of a re-enchantment or a *return* of religion is a highly western-centric idea and ignores the parts of the world which have never been ‘de-enchanted’. Secondly, the multiple modernities thesis allows for a more nuanced and less dichotomous idea of modernity, which is highly fruitful when dealing with a *contemporary* religion that *looks backwards* while simultaneously embracing and criticising the modern world and develop their own vision for the future.

3.2 Tradition

As demonstrated previously, Bifrost and Forn Sed’s organisational presentation of their own religion suggests a conception of religion which is highly intertwined with the concept of *tradition,* and they present an overarching vision of keeping alive or lifting a cultural heritage. In order to approach the Åsatru of Bifrost and Forn Sed “as an integral, normal part of modern as well as modernizing societies” (Davie, 2007: 109), I therefore need to also engage theoretically with the concept of tradition.

In this connection, I find it pertinent to turn to Asad’s (2009) critique of previous anthropological approaches and conceptualisations of Islam, as his critique challenges us to rethink both the concepts of *religion* and *tradition*. While Asad is concerned with developing an anthropology of Islam, his conceptualisation of Islam as a *discursive tradition,* nevertheless offers a conceptual contribution that is indeed transferable and relevant also for the religious phenomenon of modern Heathenism.

Asad contests the simplistic and dichotomous understanding of tradition as a reaction to modernity. Instead, he proposes the following: “A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history” (Asad, 2009: 20). However, this exercise is not about seeking an ‘authentic’ practice from the past. Instead, “These discourses

relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)" (Asad, 2009: 20). Hence, tradition is not a static inverse of modernity, but, like modernity, it is constantly being negotiated. Nevertheless, the vantage point of this negotiation will always be rooted in a conception of the past.

This definition certainly offers an interesting approach to the analysis of how the Heathens in Forn Sed and Bifrost are constructing their modern inclusive version of Åsatru. However, as Asad is concerned with Islam as a discursive tradition, his conceptualisation cannot be blindly applied to the entirely different religion of Heathenism. Islam is a religion where its clearly defined sacred scriptures make a rather obvious vantage point for the discursive tradition. Additionally, it is a religion with established ways of reasoning and interpreting these texts. As such, it is rather easy to conceptualise Islam as a *discursive tradition*, "precisely because one can speak of a set of well-defined and universally accepted foundational texts and interpretive techniques in Islam" (Anjum, 2007: 659). This is certainly not the case of the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed, as they make a point of *not* having any sacred scripture, nor any established doctrines or dogmas. Nevertheless, they do have 'a past' which they take as a vantage point. As demonstrated previously, this 'past' is found in the available source material regarding the Old Norse way of life, the Old Norse mythology, and folklore. Additionally, the 'past' is perhaps also at times an imagined past. Instead of building on an established interpretive technique, they are, as a young religious community, in the process of establishing these and drawing the boundaries for what can be accepted and what needs to be rejected – they are in the process of creating their discursive tradition, a process which will be further explored in the discussion of the findings of my study.

Another important take-away from Asad's conceptualisation of religion as a discursive tradition is his critique of the dichotomous understanding of 'tradition' and 'reason'. According to Asad (2009: 22-23), arguments and reasoning are not to be excluded from our understanding of 'tradition', as they are indeed intrinsic for the development of a tradition. According to this logic, "any developed tradition of discourses has its own styles of reasoning" (Anjum, 2007: 662). Again, while this is rather established in the religion Asad is concerned with, namely Islam, the heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed do not belong to a neatly defined style of reasoning. However, as they are in the process of negotiating and establishing

their discursive tradition (their religion), establishing their style of reasoning is also a part of this process.

Asad's conceptualisation of religion as discursive tradition will be fruitful for this study as it helps us analyse how the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed construct their inclusive Heathenism: what 'past' do they turn to and what does this past help create? Who do they argue or debate with? Who do they invite in and who do they reject? Approaching this new religion as being a development of a discursive tradition will in this sense also elucidate how they strive towards an inclusivity and certain aspects of this inclusivity.

3.3 Being World-Affirming

As already established, Heathenism falls under the category of new religious movements. Over the past decades, many scholars of religion have developed a keen interest in NRMs, and a sizable body of scholarly literature has emerged. Nevertheless, there is no scholarly consensus regarding what exactly the category of NRM entails, and several attempts have been made to further organise and categorise this extremely diverse group of religious communities. In what follows, I will introduce one of these attempts, namely Wallis' (2019/1984) typology of new religious movements: world-rejecting, world-affirming, and world-accommodating. From this, I will further develop his concept of world-affirming new religious movements and utilise this as a theoretical tool when discussing Bifrost- and Forn Sed-members' notion of inclusivity and relation to modernity.

In his book *Elementary forms of New Religious Life*, Wallis (2019/1984) proposes a typology of new religious movements which is based on how the different movements perceive the 'outside world', that is, the social and material world in which the new religious movement evolves. He argues that:

> "[a] new movement may embrace that world, affirming its normatively approved goals and values; it may reject that world, denigrating those things held dear within it; or it may remain as far as possible indifferent to the world in terms of its religious practice, accommodating to it otherwise, and exhibiting only mild acquiescence to, or disapprobation, of, the ways of the world" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 4).

From this, he proposes the trichotomy of world-affirming, world-rejecting, and world-accommodating new religious movements. While these types are not "mutually exclusive

empirical categories" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 5), he proposes this threefold typology as representing three theoretical types. However, he views the third type, world-accommodating, as less significant and of less prevalence, and therefore puts more emphasis on the first two types, and in many ways, his contribution is more of a dualistic distinction than a threefold typology. Here, I will therefore similarly focus mainly on the distinction he makes between the world-rejecting and the world-affirming NRMs.

According to Wallis' typology, the world-rejecting NRMs are often more "*recognisably* religious" and hold a "clear conception of God" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 9). What makes them world-rejecting is their perception of the "prevailing social order as having departed substantially from God's prescriptions and plan" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 10). Examples of this are the developments of urban industrialised societies, materialism and increased consumption. "Such movements may anticipate an imminent and major transformation of the world" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 11), where a new and better world-order will prevail. The Children of God movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the Unification Church, a syncretism of Judeo-Christian traditions and "Asian religious conceptions in Korea" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 9) were syncretised, are examples of NRMs Wallis use to demonstrate the features and mechanisms of the world-rejecting category. Wallis points out the often close connections between political aspirations and religious ideas of members of world-rejecting NRM and a rejection of the distinction between the secular and the religious (Wallis, 2019/1984: 13-12). These types of NRMs often develop a strong collective-identity and due to their perception of the outside world, contact with non-members can become limited and problematic (Wallis, 2019/1984: 13), and can in this sense be regarded rather non-inclusive.

A world-Affirming NRM, on the other hand, typically "lacks most of the features traditionally associated with religion" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 20), such as a church, or a defined theology. Additionally, it typically has a "more secularised and individualised conception of the divine" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 22). The Transcendental Meditation programme, brought to the West in the 1950s by the Indian yoga guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and the Soka Gakkai movement, which is of Japanese origin, are movements Wallis use as examples of the world-affirming category. In contrast to their world-rejecting counterparts, members of world-affirming NRMs perceive the "prevailing social order less contemptuously, seeing it as possessing many highly desirable characteristics" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 21). While being a part of a world-affirming NRM does not mean that one blatantly affirms all aspects of the world, however, one does not join the movement to "escape or withdraw from the world and its values, but to acquire the

means to achieve them more easily and to experience the world's benefits more fully" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 23). Wallis underlines the essentially *individualistic* characterisation of world-affirming NRM, which is reflected through the conception of spirituality, as it is a "matter of individual experience and individual *subjective* reality rather than social reality or even social concern" and "[i]f God is referred to at all it is primarily as a diffuse, amorphous and immanent force in the universe, but present most particularly within oneself" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 26), hence the key to change lies within the individual.

It should be noted that there are several pitfalls of this typology. Wallis has been criticised for favouring social orientation at the expense of doctrine, which allows for entirely different groups to be categorised together and the value of this type of typology can therefore be questioned. Additionally, the typology is in danger of essentialising different NRM and ignoring internal diversity within the particular movements (Fox, 2010: 346). Therefore, I wish to clarify that Wallis' categories of NRMs are not meant to offer a universally applicable typology. His aim, however, involves "an attempt to make some sense of the forms and dynamics of new religious movements in the West in the period since the second world war" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 5). In this study, I will therefore utilise the concept of 'world-affirming' accordingly. I will not approach it as a strictly defined category and test whether or not, or to what extent Åsatrufellessakpet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge falls within this category, but instead utilise it as a concept that can highlight some of the dynamics of these faith communities and use the concept to approach an analysis and assessment of the members' envisioned 'inclusivity'. How do the members in Bifrost and Forn Sed relate to 'the outside world', what do they affirm of, and what do they reject?

In order to best do this, however, I wish to supplement Wallis' idea of the category of 'world-affirming' movements, and further develop what it might mean to be 'world affirming'. While Wallis' categorisation is highly centred around how NRMs relate to the outside world, I will propose that an affirmation of the world can be found also within a movement's or individual's religion. This is something which Wallis touches upon as he points to how world-affirming movements often have a concept of an immanent God and rejects the dualism of a transcendental realm and the 'here and now' (Wallis, 2019/1984: 26 and 28). This can therefore be read as a world-affirming quality, not because of the lack of hostility towards the 'outside world', but because of the centring of the this-worldly rather than the transcendental in their concept of God.

The way I see it, another example of being world-affirming can be seen in Kathryn Rountree's (2012) theory of Pagan animistic 'kinship with nature'. Rountree suggests that indigenous animism, such seen among Kamea, Maori, and Aborigional Australians is an animism that constitutes "an orientation to the world and specific tracts of land, which systematically determines every aspect of daily living" (Rountree, 2012: 313). However, the animism seen among modern Pagans is selective, as it does not determine all aspects of life, but is instead a concept that "mostly pertain to the domain of religious belief, ritual, and recreational activity" (Rountree, 2012: 313). This animism is seen through a pantheistic worldview and notion of society "as a network of conscious, agentic, related, mutually dependent, and responsible beings, of whom only some are human" (Rountree, 2012: 306).

This Pagan kinship with nature represents a worldview that differs from most the majority of the Western societies they are a part of, and often offers a critique of some aspects of the dominant society such as:

> "key ideas and values which underpin them: the high value placed on 'progress', materialism, and consumerism; familiar dualisms, such as animate/inanimate, body/spirit, mind/body, natural/supernatural, nature/culture; and the belief that humans are categorically different from, and superior to, all other species and possess a God-given right to dominate and exploit the environment for human gain and pleasure" (Rountree, 2012: 306).

She argues therefore that "Neo-Pagan religion reflects a world-as-wished-for rather than the world-as-it-is" (Rountree, 2012: 306). Developing a kinship with nature involves an alteration of boundaries and identity and underpin a connectedness between human and other-than-human elements in this world. Rountree (2012: 317) approaches this animistic element of Paganism as having the potential to influence "a shift in the dominant Western worldview towards nature, to suggest a different way of thinking about and acting within and towards the world and all its people".

While this is contrary to some of Wallis' characteristics of 'world-affirming movements' as it includes a critique of many aspects of the world-as-is and instead offers a belief that reflects a world-as-wished-for, I hold that a development of kinship with nature presents a radical world-affirmation, as it goes beyond affirming the social world of humans but extends to include also the other-than-human elements of this world. So, contrary to Wallis' idea of affirming and embracing the social world, it could be argued that the Pagan animism

described by Rountree is in a sense *more* world-affirming, by rejecting certain elements of the status quo. With this extended conception of being world-affirming, a conception which refers to a world-affirmation that includes embracing certain parts of the status quo of the modern world, while at the same time rejecting other aspects of the status quo of the modern life, I will be able to engage in a nuanced analysis of some of the facets of Bifrost- and Forn Sed-members's notion of inclusivity.

3.4 Reconstructionist or Eclectic

When it comes to analysing other aspects of the notion of inclusivity that Bifrost- and Forn Sed-members seek to achieve I will turn to a typology coined by Strmiska (2005). Strmiska offers an analytical framework of a polarity between what he calls 'Reconstructionist' and 'Eclectic' Paganism. While he recognises that "[a]ll modern Pagan religious movements mix and match old, traditional elements with new ideas and practices from other sources" (Strmiska, 2005: 19), he nevertheless holds that it is fruitful to distinguish between those who "aim to reconstruct the ancient religious traditions of a particular ethnic group or a linguistic or geographical area to the highest degree possible" and those who "freely blend traditions of different areas, peoples, and time periods" (Strmiska, 2005: 19). The Reconstructionist Pagan "regard older traditions as better established, more authoritative, and more authentic than those that are newly created or vaguely imagined" and while the Eclectic Pagan also seek to understand the traditions of the past "they do not feel bound, as do the Reconstructionist, to the past religious traditions of a specific region as their ultimate frame of reference; instead they see the traditions only as a provisional gateway into deeper spiritual experience" (Strmiska, 2005: 19-20).

While this polarity in itself is useful for an analytical discussion of what the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed include in the construction of their religion, and how they relate to both 'tradition' and 'modernity', it offers yet another level of analysis with regards to notions of inclusivity. Strmiska (2005: 20) further suggests that those who value ethnic identity tend to favour the Reconstructionist Paganism, while those who deem ethnicity irrelevant, tend to favour the Eclectic Paganism. Strmiska's polarity, or continuum, therefore adds another component of inclusivity, namely inclusivity of ethnic diversity.

While Strmiska (2005: 21) acknowledges that the Reconstructionist/Eclectic polarity is not an absolute, the concepts of 'Reconstructionist' and 'Eclectic' Heathenism can, nevertheless, be

useful tools for analysing the construction of Bifrost and Forn Sed's inclusive Heathenism and investigating what their notion of inclusivity entails.

The theoretical concepts and tools outlined and discussed in this chapter will help me engage with the findings from my qualitative interviews and assist in a critical analysis in order to address the research question of *how inclusive Heathens in Norway construct their modern version of Åsatru and what their notion of inclusivity entails.*

Chapter 4: Research Method

Completely new to the field of Heathenism, I entered this project with a keen curiosity, and perhaps a fair bit of ignorance. A well thought through research method was therefore necessary. Navigating the field, identifying, and recruiting potential participants, preparing and conducting the interviews was both challenging and exciting. This chapter will present and discuss the methodological approach used in this project. I will discuss the method of semi-structured in-depth interviews, the preparation stage, sampling and recruitment-strategies used, the interviewing stage, and the data processing stage. Further I will discuss my positionality as a researcher and how this is indeed something which is important to be aware of, perhaps especially in qualitative research projects. The chapter will also lay out the limitations and ethical considerations and implications of this study.

4.1 Semi-structured, in-depth interviews – intersubjective knowledge production

As this project seeks to gain insights into the experiences and reflections of inclusive, modern Heathens in Norway, relying purely on textual or content analysis would not be sufficient, especially considering my position as an outsider to the communities. Qualitative interviews can help researchers to "understand and interpret people's thoughts, beliefs, ideas and conceptions" (Bremborg, 2011: 311). The empirical data for this project is therefore obtained though semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals who belong to and practice contemporary Åsatru in Norway. The individuals were all part of either Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost or Forn Sed Norge, two Norwegian faith communities for modern inclusive Heathens. The sampling and process of recruiting participants will be elaborated on below.

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 54) one can understand a research interview as a "production site of knowledge", as the knowledge is "socially constructed in the interaction of the interviewer and interviewee", hence, the product is "co-authored" by both parties in the interview. In order to further highlight this process of knowledge production through research interviews, I find Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009: 48-50) analogy of the miner and the traveller useful. According to this metaphor, an interviewer can act either as a miner, where "knowledge is understood as buried metal and the interviewer is a miner who unearths the valuable metal", or as a "traveler on a journey to a distant country that leads to a tale to be told upon returning home" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 48). When the researcher acts as a traveller, knowledge is produced through relations, and knowledge production is understood

through a postmodern constructive epistemology. The nature of this intersubjective knowledge production calls for self-reflexivity regarding the positionality of the interviewer, something which will be revisited later on in this chapter.

4.1.1 Preparations

Both in preparation to and parallel with the interviews, I spent a fair bit of time on the two faith communities' webpages and social media profiles. With my outsider status and unfamiliarity with the communities and their religion, this was a highly necessary part of the incipient research process. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009: 105-106) outline; a substantial portion of the interview project takes place before the actual interviewing finds place, and the researcher should acquire substantial knowledge about the subject matter in order to be able to produce more knowledge on the topic. Therefore, alongside reading widely about pagan-studies, and Heathenism in particular, I made myself familiar with the two faith communities to the best of my ability. To get a sense of what Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge were, and who their members were, I started following their Facebook profiles, studied how they presented themselves online on their websites and familiarised myself with their code of conduct. This was essential firstly to make sure that the two faith organisations constituted a suitable 'sampling universe' for the purpose of this project, and after establishing that, using this background knowledge to prepare a fruitful interview guide.

Another part of the pre-interview stage is, as mentioned, the development of an interview guide. The method of semi-structured interviews allows for pre-planned interview themes and questions, while also leaving room for new questions and themes to arise during the interview (Bremborg, 2011: 312). My interview guide consisted of certain main themes that I wanted to cover in the interviews, and each theme was supplemented with more specific questions. These themes were informed by the faith organisations' presentations of themselves (through their websites) and central themes and tensions identified when delving into previous literature of Pagan studies. I kept in mind, however, that the interview guide's purpose was not to be a *script* that I would follow closely and strictly. Instead, it was indeed an interview *guide* and would be utilised accordingly.

4.1.2 Sampling and recruitment of participants

Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007: 106) highlight the cruciality of sampling and argue that this aspect of qualitative research has been somewhat neglected in the literature on qualitative research methods. I will therefore include a short section on how I went about the sampling for this project.

Unlike quantitative research, the goal of qualitative research is not to find a sample that is representative of a bigger population and where the findings can be extrapolated and generalised. In qualitative research there are several ways to go about the sampling of informants, but according to Bremborg (2011: 313), a qualitative researcher should always strive to recruit informants that would enable analysis and develop a theory. Sampling with this type of strategy is called 'theoretical sampling' and the respondents are recruited "based on the assumption that he or she can contribute with relevant knowledge" (Bremborg, 2011: 313-314). Theoretical saturation is achieved once no new significant information emerges from the interviews. I would argue that in the field of religious studies one should be careful to view theoretical saturation as something definite and absolute. In this study for instance, while I am indeed exploring two faith communities, the interviews are used to collect personal narratives. These will always be diverse and multifaceted, and one could argue that one will never be able to reach a point where "nothing new of significance emerges from the interviews" (Bremborg, 2011: 314). With this in mind, I will move onto how I went about the recruitment process.

Honigmann (1982: 80) differentiates between judgment sampling and opportunistic sampling. While judgement sampling is based on a desire to recruit participants with distinctive qualifications, such as a particular age, sex, or specific experiences, opportunistic sampling does not follow a strict plan. Opportunistic sampling is more of a strategy where you work with "whoever turns up and shows a readiness and ability to provide information" (Honigmann, 1982: 80), a strategy which can also be referred to as "chunk sampling" (Honigmann, 1982: 81). I had little access to my sampling universe prior to the project, partly because I hold an outsider position, and partly because Norway has closed membership-lists for faith communities. Additionally, the limited timeframe of this project did not allow me to spend much time to map out the sampling universe before recruiting participants. I therefore ended up with a variation of the opportunistic sampling strategy, as I reached out to the faith communities using their official contact information available on their websites. I sent the two faith communities an email where I informed about the research project, and asked if this

might be something any of their members would be interested in participating in. Both Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge responded positively. An information letter about the project as well as what participation would involve was later circulated among their members and those interested contacted me directly. It is therefore fair to say that the individuals who stepped forward and contacted me showed a "readiness and ability to provide information" (Honigmann, 1982: 81).

This sampling strategy poses both advantages and limitations. One can perhaps assume that only people with a keen interested to talk about their religious practice and their religious identity, were recruited with this strategy. While this was highly welcomed, as these participants were all indeed able to provide relevant and rich information, there is a chance that they constitute a sample that more actively engages with and reflects on their religion than the 'average Heathen'. For example, board members from both faith communities were part of my sample, which testifies for this assumption. Nevertheless, while being aware of this, I do not view this sampling strategy as a disadvantage for this particular project.

If my opportunistic sampling had resulted in recruitment of *only* board-members, or *only* very new members, or a similarly homogeneous sub-group, I would have had to alter my sampling strategy. However, in the end I had seven informants from the largest faith community, Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost, three men and four women, and four informants from the smaller one, Forn Sed Norge, one man, two women and one who identifies as non-binary. The informants were generally in their thirties, forties and fifties, and they were geographically spread across the country. Some of the informants had been active members of their faith community for many years, well over a decade or even two, while others had joined over the past few years. Additionally, different nationalities were represented in the sample. While most participants were Norwegians, one participant was from Sweden and another from a country in South America. The informants also represented various ways of entering the Åsatru religion. For some, the interest in Åsatru came alongside a hobby Viking-re-enactment and they had perhaps come across Bifrost or Forn Sed through friends, while others held strong philosophical and/or spiritual interests and actively searched for a faith community in which they felt 'at home'. There were also variations in the informant life-situation in terms of work and family life. The informants held a variety of levels of education, had various occupations, and some were currently outside of the labour market. Similarly, some lived alone, while others lived with their family or partner. As this was the result of my

opportunistic chunk sampling strategy, I did not deem it necessary to expand or alter my sample, as the respondents gave me a variety of perspectives and narratives.

One of the informants was, however, more actively recruited. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007: 112) refers to the phenomenon of "Critical Case Sampling" which is the phenomenon of actively recruiting an individual or a group "that bring to the fore the phenomenon of interest". Honigmann (1982: 80) would call this judgement sampling, and he point out that this is something which is often combined with the opportunistic sampling described above. This was the case for one of my informants, as they were recruited on the basis of their outspoken criticism of the aspects of the 'Viking-community' where there was a presence of what they perceived to be racism and nationalism. As this certainly is a "phenomenon of interest" for my research, I chose to actively recruit this participant. However, the informant was also a member of one of the faith communities, and despite this incident of 'critical case sampling', the informant's particular experience did not end up being of particular importance for the research project, and the informant was therefore treated similarly as the rest of the sample.

4.1.3 Conducting the interviews

Due to the then ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, and the geographical distance, most of the interviews were conducted digitally. Participants in the Oslo-region were given the choice between physical and digital interviews. This resulted in eight interviews being conducted digitally and three physically. While it is true that digital interviews do pose some limitations for a qualitative researcher as observations of the participant and its surrounding is limited, and it might be more difficult to establish rapport as introductory small-talk is often compromised on a video-call, I will, however, share some reflections of the advantages I experienced with the digital interviews.

Firstly, thanks to the option of doing digital interviews, I did not have to geographically limit my sample. With the digital interviews I was able to (virtually) meet inclusive Heathens from across the country. Additionally, it made me as a researcher much more flexible in terms of time, as I was able to plan the interviews around the participants schedules and neither of us had to spend any time on travelling. Hence, digital interviews are simply time efficient. Another potential advantage with the digital interviews is the experienced safety that might come with having a screen between yourself and the complete stranger that is asking you

personal questions. Yes, the small talk that contributes to establishing rapport between interviewer and interviewee is compromised, but in return, you get a sort of 'comfortable distance' which might make it easier for some participants to open up. Nonetheless, I certainly appreciated the physical meetings I had with the three participants who so generously agreed to meet me. One participant invited me to her home, where she could show me more thoroughly how she lived with her religion. This enriched my research as I was able to also do some small-scale observations and interact with the lived religion in a more direct manner. The combination of digital and physical interviews in this project was therefore rather successful.

Prior to the interview, the informants had all received and read the information letter. However, when we met, I made sure to inform the participants about the project and what they could expect from the interview again. I also welcomed them to bring in anything they wanted to share, or saw as relevant, even if I did not cover this with my questions. Before starting, they were also asked to confirm their consent. Sticking to the plan of not following the interview guide rigidly, I tried to achieve a comfortable and rather informal tone with the participants and made sure to make room for them to contribute to the direction of the conversation.

The interviews varied both in terms of duration and in terms of content. While the shortest ones lasted for about an hour, the longest one exceeded two hours. The physical interviews were generally a little longer than the digital ones. The themes covered in the interviews varied from stories of how the participants found their religion, description of religious practices, and personal reflections on the relationship between their religion, politics, and ideologies. Hence, the interviews were often a mix of elements from so-called 'biographical interviews', 'exploratory interview' and 'descriptive interviews' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 106). The very first interview I conducted was with a woman who had been a practicing heathen and active member of Bifrost since its early days. Additionally, she now held a position of leadership in the organisation and was therefore able to give me a thorough introduction to how the organisation was structured, their religion, some of its main principles and some of its history. It was highly beneficial to conduct this interview first, as it left me more equipped for the following interviews as I was now able to ask better questions and better engage in conversation with the other participants. This first interview can therefore also be considered 'background material' for further research (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 106).

All the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. This enabled me to be fully present in the conversation, and not worry too much about notetaking, or remembering details. The interviews were all conducted and transcribed in Norwegian. The direct quotations used in the presentation of findings below have been translated by me to the best of my ability, which is something the informants were made aware of.

4.1.4 Processing interview data

The recorded interviews were transformed from oral to textual form through transcribing the recorded interviews. Converting the data to a textual from makes it more suitable for analysis and is essentially the first step of the analytic process (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 180). The material was then approached through the analytical strategy of thematic analysis. In a thematic analysis, the researcher identifies the recurring themes and subthemes in the data material, which emerge as a "product of a thorough reading and rereading of the transcripts or field notes that make up the data" (Bryman, 2012: 579). Repetition is therefore the most important criteria for establishing a 'theme'. This includes repetition within the data collected from the interviews as well as themes from previous research (Bryman, 2012: 580). Familiarity with previous research within the field is therefore vital. The interview transcripts were coded manually, and separate word documents with collections of quotes and accounts that all touched upon an overarching theme were created and further coded into smaller codes.

When analysing qualitative interview material, a common challenge is balancing the "within-case and cross-case" (King, et al., 2019: 200), meaning that one must balance the context of the full account of each individual narrative, and the context of the sample as a whole. This was something I was mindful of, going into the coding-process. Coding the interview material was a lengthy and curvaceous process. Throughout the research process (both at the preparation stage, but mostly during the interview-stage), I had made sure to write down potential codes. However, after all the interviews were completed, I attempted to take a step back and read through the transcripts without being too influenced by any pre-determined codes or themes in mind. Hence, I attempted to engage in an inductive coding approach, where the "[t]hemes emerge from and are grounded in the data" (Lapadat, 2012: 126), and not pre-determined by the research questions or interview questions. I made note of the many diverse and important recurring codes that arose across and within the interviews, however, organising these into coherent and meaningful themes was rather challenging. After this initial coding process, I revisited my research interest and initial research question, read through the

interview material again and with this vantage point, was able to make more fruitful codes. This process also included a re-thinking of the wording of my research question, and after familiarising myself with the empirical data, I found it fruitful to open up the research question and broaden the focus of the analysis. I have therefore engaged in a combination of inductive and deductive coding approach (Lapadat, 2012: 126) in order to identify the final themes. The themes identified through this coding process was, nevertheless, still very diverse and some of them were therefore further coded. This resulted in four themes, some of which also consists of sub-themes.

4.2 Situatedness – my role as a researcher

Any researcher, and perhaps especially those engaged in qualitative research ought to exercise self-reflexivity regarding their situatedness. Neumann and Neumann (2015: 799) argue that the more the researcher is able to be situated, which means "being mindful or aware of the relationship between oneself and one's context", the better the research. They propose that researchers should engage in three stages of situatedness during a research project. The first one being a so-called "Autobiographical Situatedness" (Neumann and Neumann, 2015: 803). This belongs to the pre-data-production stage, where the researcher should be aware of *why* they are interested in the topic at hand and be able to acknowledge how one's autobiographical context might have affected the choice to investigate this. The second stage is referred to as "Field Situatedness" (Neumann and Neumann, 2015: 805), which is the stage of data production, in my case; the interviews. Here, the researcher needs to be aware of how one's characteristics, what type of language is used, how you approach the field or material and how you meet interview subjects, will affect the production of data. Thirdly, there is "Textual Situatedness" (Neumann and Neumann, 2015: 811), which refers to the critical ethical evaluations of how to present the data material and how to communicate with implied readers. Revisiting Kvale and Brinkmann's metaphor of the interviewer as a traveller discussed above, knowledge is something which is produced in relations. While a researchers' self-situatedness will always be of relevance, it is evidently very relevant in an interview project, where the process of knowledge production is so explicitly intersubjective.

Naturally, this interview project is no exception. The preparatory stage, the interviewing stage, and the analysing stage will all be affected by my vantage point and the way I experience the world. I have therefore provided a rationale with my motivation for initiating this project. However, in addition to transparency regarding my rationale, transparency

regarding the pre-conceptions I carried with me into the project is also important. As most Norwegians, the Norse Mythology and histories of the Viking period have always been present and a taught part of my cultural heritage. I have encountered it in school, in museums, in place names, in Scandinavian brands and logos, and through popular culture such as tv-series and movies. However, I have never had a particularly active or proud relation to this part of my identity, instead it has simply been something I have considered to be 'just history' or 'just entertainment'. My image of those who *do* have an active and proud relation to the Old Norse Religion was largely informed by those who utilise Old Norse symbols and names in a radically right-wing political agenda. This very one-sided image was certainly quickly adjusted at the preparation-stage of this project, when I read widely about Neopagan religion and acquired an increased understanding of what inclusive Heathenism is, and as already mentioned, I was curious to further explore this version of Heathenism, and perhaps counter a one-sided image of modern practices of the Old Norse religion. Both my underlying preconceptions about the community and my wish to counter this, certainly affect the knowledge production of this project. Even from the outset of this project I made a clear value judgement simply by choosing who to invite to be my co-authors in the knowledge production, and who to leave out.

4.2.1 Insider/outsider problem in the study of religion

I have so far in this chapter referred to myself as holding an outsider-position in relation to the community and religion I study. However, the binary understanding of insider/outsider positions in the study of religion has been widely challenged, and several scholars call for a move beyond this dichotomy (McCutcheon, 1999; Chryssides and Gregg, 2019; Knott, 2010).

Looking at the history of religious studies in the West, the majority of scholars have been Christian, and Christianity has therefore often been studied from within, while other religions have been studied 'from the outside', often by Christian missionaries (Chryssides and Gregg, 2019: 4). The strict division between outsider and insider can be seen in relation to the Christian distinction between believers and non-believers, as study of religion has traditionally been largely Christian-centric and privileged the cognitive aspect of religion. The never-ending problem of defining the very concept of religion itself also points to the problem of defining who qualifies as 'insiders' and who is on the outside. The question we need to ask, is therefore "What precisely is the insider inside?" (Chryssides and Gregg, 2019: 9).

This is a particularly interesting question in this case. I have so far chosen to refer to myself as an outsider, simply because I do not belong to the religion in focus in this project, modern Åsatru. Within the field of Pagan-studies, there are several scholars who hold a dual position of being both a practitioner and a scholar. Examples of this are the anthropologist and shamanic practitioner Susan Greenwood[17], and the scholar Jenny Blain, who identifies as a Heathen herself, and has written on contemporary Heathenism and on the Old Norse shamanistic practice of seidr, in particular, in her book *Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic*, published in 2002. Compared to these scholars, I am certainly more on the 'outside' of the religion in focus. However, if we are to delve into the deconstruction of the insider/outside binary in the study of religion, it becomes evident that I hold a rather ambiguous position. While I do not belong to my participants' religion, the sources and stories they base their religion on are nevertheless a part of my cultural heritage. Additionally, all the participants and I share a concern regarding the radical right-wing usages of the Old Norse religion and are in that sense all 'insiders' vis-à-vis the radical right 'outsiders'. Hence it is clear that while we have different ways of experiencing the world, and do not share religious belonging, there are several examples on shared belongings between the participants and me and in that sense, I am therefore neither an outsider nor an insider, or perhaps I am both.

Despite this, I want to demonstrate awareness of the potential risk of 'othering' the participants, as they do nevertheless belong to a small minority-religion. There are certainly several prejudices against modern Heathens, which I do not wish to uncritically perpetuate.

4.3 Ethical Assessments and limitations

As much of the empirical data collected through the interviews are of a highly personal character, there are several ethical implications to consider. Prior to conducting the interviews, the project was approved by NSD (Norwegian Centre for Research Data) with clear guidelines regarding ethical and secure data collection and storing. All personal data was handled accordingly.

In order to obtain informed consent from the participants, all the interviewees received, as mentioned, a written information letter and consent form. The letter informed about the

[17] Susan Greenwood has contributed largely to the literature on magic with the books *Developing Magical Consciousness: A theoretical and Practical Guide for the Expansion of Perception* (2019) and *The Nature of Magic: An Anthropology of Consciousness* (2005).

purpose of the project, how their participation will contribute and how the collected data will be used. I strive to keep all my informants anonymous and will not use any of their real names. However, complete anonymity might be challenging, as the two faith communities are both rather small, which makes it possible for the participants to be identifiable by other members of the community. This limitation was accounted for in the information letter and all informants were aware of this when consenting to participation.

Since the data material in this project is obtained through individual interviews, I as a researcher heavily rely on my informants' narrative and have very limited opportunity to ensure that what is being shared corresponds with their actual practice. However, since I have conducted eleven different in-depth interviews, a level of compliance across the different narratives is a god indicator for the validity of the data. As the participants in this project belong to official faith organisations, and are recruited through gatekeepers of their community, the individual participants might feel a responsibility to represent their organisation, and not only themselves. However, both of the faith organisations seem to value the heterogeneous character of their faith as well as individual freedom as one of their core values. Additionally, this potential limitation will be remedied by the anonymisation of the informants.

Chapter 5: Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this research project was to investigate how contemporary inclusive Heathens in Norway find inspiration in the Old Norse traditions and myths and construct a modern and inclusive religion. As already accounted for, some of these aspects are touched upon on the two faith organisations' respective websites. Through the interviews, I was able to explore how, if at all, the declarations on the websites were manifested, reflected, or elaborated in the members' religious beliefs and practices, and their conception of their own religion. From the interviews, I gained a deeper understanding of what a modern and inclusive religion based on the Old Norse religion looks like and what function it serves for the individual members, and how the development of this modern religion takes place. In this chapter, I will present the most significant findings from the thematic analysis of the interview-material, and present four themes that highlight *how inclusive Heathens in Norway construct their modern version of Åsatru and what their notion of inclusivity entails.*

The four themes that will be presented are: 1) a *new* religion, 2) a universalist religion, 3) individual freedom in religion, and 4) a holistic religion. The themes are further divided into subthemes that highlight various aspects within each theme. Each theme is presented through several quotes from the interviews that underline different aspects and nuances on the overarching theme.

As already accounted for, the purpose of this study is not to provide a comparison between Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge, as the two organisations both represent versions of inclusive Åsatru. The primary focus is therefore not to account for differences between the two organisations. However, striking differences relevant for the themes presented below, will be noted and presented accordingly.

5.1 Theme 1: A *new* religion

As was made evident in the overview of the emergence of Paganism, the question of continuity has been a central concern for many Pagans and Pagan-scholars, and there are various takes on this issue among the different Pagan religions. The question of whether or not there is continuity from the ancient Old Norse religion to the religion practiced in Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge today, was something that I wished to explore

and also something that was often brought up by the informants themselves. In this section I will present some examples of the informants' reflections on this matter. The examples will underline the extent of a conscious awareness of a lack of continuity, and a general notion of welcoming new elements into the modern Åsatru religion, which was dominant among my informants.

On Bifrost's official website, it is made clear that the fellowship bases its religion and practice on the sources available about the Old Norse myths and traditions. The Poetic Edda is emphasised, and other sources such as Snorre's Edda, *skaldekvad,* the Icelandic sagas, and the royal sagas are also pointed to as sources of inspiration. However, it is made clear by the informants that they, at the same time, find inspiration in other "present-day nature religions and neo-heathen experiences, so that we get a religion that is adapted to the modern life"[18]. Through the interviews I got a deeper insight into how this potential tension between being a *new* religion, based on the *Old* Norse religion is experienced and reflected upon by the members.

Solveig, who has been a member of Bifrost for more than twenty years, and now holds a position of leadership in the organisation shares with me her thoughts on the matter:

> "It was a faith that died, right? Yes, I guess you could argue that there is *some* sort of folklore where *some* elements have been kept and stuff like that. But we try to be very aware of the fact that we do not see ourselves as actual Vikings. We don't think we believe the same as they did a thousand years ago. So, we are very conscious of that. We belong to the new religious movements (*nyreligiøsiteten)*. We have made our own religion, which is *based on* Norse myths."

Vebjørn, another and newer Bifrost member, who joined the organisation in 2017, but tells me he has had a strong interest in Åsatru since he was a child, is similarly clear on the 'newness' of his religion. The way he perceives his religion is that: "this is neither a continuation nor a revival of the Old Norse religion. I can go as far as saying that it is a reinterpretation. To say it is *completely* new, since it is so strongly inspired by the old sources, I don't know. But this is definitely neither a revival nor a continuation".

Another newer member of Bifrost, Karl, has a slightly different take on it, as he believes it is suitable to call his religion a revival of an ancient religion. Nevertheless, in order to explain to me how he views it, he refers to Einar Selvik, the front figure of the Norwegian music group Wardruna. Wardruna makes music inspired by or based on Norse traditions using largely old traditional and historical Norse instruments (Wardruna, 2022). This music group was often

[18] Om åsatru: https://www.bifrost.no/om-asatru Accessed 25.05.2022

mentioned in the interviews and seemed to be popular among many of the informants. Karl explains that when talking about Wardruna's music, Selvik describes it as follows: "We are not re-enacting. The old songs are gone, we have to make new ones". This is something Karl seems to apply to his religion as well, as he acknowledges that there is very limited knowledge about how the old religion was practiced, and hence, they have to 'make a new one'. With this, he also lifts the aspect of constructing a religious practice, and points to how there is very little documentation of how 'most people' in the Old Norse period practiced their religion, as most of what has been written down is focused on kings and other 'big men'.

Another similar, however slightly different, take on the subject was shared by Pia, a woman who had been a member of Bifrost since its early days. When asked about how she perceives her own religion in relation to the religion of the Old Norse period, she replies: "Well… the gods are the same, the forces of nature!". However, she also says that naturally, nature changes, so perhaps they also change the god-figures a little, but that they still exist in the same forces. Additionally, similarly to Karl, she acknowledges that there is no way of knowing exactly how the religion was practiced 'back then', as the sources are so limited. She also explains that since the contemporary way of living is completely different to the way of life in the Old Norse period, and hence our needs are completely different, the religion is naturally practiced differently. However, despite this, she says that: "*I* feel like we have the same vantagepoint, we got nature".

Anna, another woman from Bifrost, shares a similar idea of their religion as she points to the lack of continuity of the religion, due to the Christianisation of Norway. She further explains that you can find inspiration and build on the sources that are actually available about the old faith, however, even these you should "take with a pinch of salt", as they were mostly written down by Christians. She also underlines that even though their religion is based on the available sources of the Old Norse faith they have to adapt it to 'the modern world': "'cause it has to work with the life we live today. We don't live in the 900s anymore. it is a different world today".

This shows that there are certain variations in how the members of Bifrost understand the relation between their modern Åsatru and the Old Norse religion, as some view it as a revival, while others refute any type of continuity, and others again emphasise a spiritual continuity in terms of the consistency, yet changeability, of the nature forces. Despite these differences, they all agree that the societal conditions have changed greatly, and thus they all stress the

modern and adapted character of their faith and express a willingness and desire to have a religion that is part of 'the modern world' and is suitable for a 'modern life'.

On Forn Sed Norge's website it is referred to the Eddas and Nordic folklore as the primary vantage point of their religion. *Håvamål* and *Voluspå* are emphasised as especially important. The website says that the organisation "wishes to create a viable forum for all who wish to continue old traditions, *sed* and *skikk,* as well as an understanding and interest for the Norse cultural heritage"[19]. Unlike Bifrost, there is no explicit mention of adaptation to 'the modern life'. However, the Forn Sed members I met held a largely similar position regarding the 'newness' of the religion, as the one identified among the Bifrost members. Nevertheless, as suggested by the information on their website, there was more openness to the idea of a certain continuity of particular elements.

Jorunn, a woman who has been a Forn Sed-member since 2011, and now holds a leadership position in the organisation, explains to me that she is "not particularly fussed about it being similar to what it was like in the old days", referring to how she practices her religion. She refers both to the limited sources, which would make this an impossible task anyway, at the same time as she emphasises that this is a modern religion which should be adapted to the modern way of life: "we are a modern organisation, it is a modern faith! It is a faith which is *based on* the old, but it *is* not the old". However, Jorunn does not believe that her religion is entirely new either, as parts of her religion are also rooted in Norwegian folklore. She points to the stories and traditions that have been kept alive, such as stories about the *fjøsnisse,* and the Norwegian *jule*-tradition of *julebukk.*

Iben, another member of Forn Sed also explains how many elements from Norwegian folklore has lived on:

> "You know, all those peculiar things an old aunty or grandma can say, like 'ai ai ai, don't pour the water over there' or 'don't spill hot water there…' or 'watch out for the *Huldra',* or.. yeah things like that. It has lived on! These are things we up until this day still hear as children! Or like 'over there lives *Haugkallen,* don't pass him when it's dark.' Well, these are things that have been passed on and are actually a part of Åsatru as well, this belief in *vetter*."

This tendency of emphasising the continuity or 'survival' of certain folklore creatures and some of the practices that comes with them, as being a part of the religion, is stronger in

[19] Litt om seden, foreningens formål og aktiviteter: https://www.forn-sed.no/foreningen Accessed 25.05.2022

Forn Sed compared to Bifrost. Nevertheless, the members I met from Forn Sed all agree that their religion is not *the same* as the one held in Old Norse communities.

Alexandra, who had found the Åsatru religion in South America, where she is from, and later joined Forn Sed Norge after moving to Norway, reflects upon the matter:

> "I think that, in a way… we will never have a faith that follows exactly the same as the Vikings did a thousand years ago. […] So... the smartest thing to do is, yes, we do have this which has survived [referring to the written sources "Snorre bothered writing down"], but the world now is not what the world was then. So, we have to adjust to what is happening now."

This sentiment is very representative of how the Forn Sed members I met balanced the appreciation and dedication to the sources available about the Old Norse period with the devotion to being a 'modern religion' compatible with and functional for a 'modern way of life'.

This self-perception of their religion as a *new* version of the Old Norse religion, and a high level of conscious awareness regarding this, is something I view as central to how Bifrost and Forn Sed manage to construct their modern version of Heathensim and, as will become evident, central for enabling certain aspects of their inclusivity. By actively and very willingly adapting their religion to the contemporary world they can easily be read into Wallis' category of being 'world-affirming'. This is further highlighted by how the Heathens I met are conscious not to romanticise or glorify the past, which suggests that they do not seek to 'return to' a lost world order or look to the past to find a radical alternative to how to organise the future. A commitment not to glorify the past or strive towards an exact reconstruction of the ancient religion, materialised through the process of constructing their religion. This process consisted of a type of selectivity, as certain parts of the Old Norse religion and customs were actively cut out. Additionally, inspiration from other religions and traditions was welcomed, something which brings their Heathenism elements of eclecticism.

5.1.1 Selective revitalisation

A selectivity regarding practice, beliefs and values found in the sources of the Old Norse period was present for instance when it comes to how to carry out the *blot.* The practice of animal-sacrifice (and even human-sacrifice), which is often associated with the sacrifice ritual *blot* held by Vikings and followers of the Old Norse religion, was not something the Heathens I met wished to revive. As Jorunn puts it, this way of practicing blot is something which

"belongs to the past". Similarly, Iben explains that they have no interest in sacrificing animals. They explain instead that:

> "[I]n the past, that [animal meat] was considered most valuable. In today's society the most valuable thing we got, and the most valuable thing we can sacrifice, is time. Because in the society we live in now, there is one thing which we're always short of, and which is placed above everything else, and that is time."

This suggests a way in which the old ideas and practices are chosen selectively. While Iben rejects the practice of sacrificing animals, they maintain the idea of sacrificing something highly valuable to them, namely time. While rooting the practice in the ancient ritual *blot*, Iben is at the same time innovative by materialising the concept of time as something valuable which can be sacrificed. To Iben, it is not about what is actually materially being sacrificed in the ritual *blot,* instead the fact that they actively make time to attend or hold the *blot,* is in itself a *sacrifice of time,* which in itself gives the ritual meaning and value.

Another example of selectivity is seen in how Solveig views her religion as rather "experimental", referring to the way in which the Heathens in Bifrost are continuously and actively constructing their own religion and asking the questions: "who we are, why we do the stuff we do, what is important, and what can be thrown away?". Solveig shares the following example:

> "Some of those ideas they had a thousand years ago, I have no problem getting rid of. I don't find it cool or tough that Odin rapes a woman, you know? I have no problem saying that *Allfaren* was a jerk and that this is not something we can be doing either, right? So, there is no contradiction in throwing away parts of it [the myths and practices] and only use like, what I find relevant for me."

Solveig's reflection suggests that this selectivity can be highly individualistic, as 'what is relevant for me' should decide what to 'throw away' and what to keep. This willingness to get rid of elements that are not compatible with certain norms and values that are attributed to the contemporary, suggests that while being able to be inspired by some parts of the old religion, the Heathens are also able to stay critical and avoid a romanticisation of the past.

5.1.2 Openness to 'outside' influences

The process of constructing the modern Heathenism of Bifrost and Forn Sed also materialises through their openness to finding inspiration from other religions and traditions. Jorunn, for example, tells me about a friend of hers which is Cherokee. She says she has learned a lot from this friend and that she sometimes brings elements from the Cherokee religion/tradition into her own religious practice. Jorunn tells me, for example, that she once sacrificed sage

(*salvie)* at a *blot*, which was directly inspired by her Cherokee friend. “So, I’m not scared of mixing”, Jorunn tells me.

I also learned that in Bifrost, they have been through a process of developing a burial-ritual, and that they have been granted their own burial-site. As they are a rather newly established faith community, who started out with a rather young membership-base, the community has not yet had much experience with how to approach a burial ritual. However, a conscious effort to develop a burial practice is present in the community. Anna tells me that there is a ‘burial committee’ in place that is responsible for carrying out the work regarding this matter. I also learned that some years ago, a seminar was held on the topic of burial, where the local Parish Priest was invited to share some experiences of funerals and how to best meet mourning relatives and close ones. This shows a conscious effort to reach out and seek inspiration from another faith community when constructing their version of Heathenism. It also reflects active innovation in response to a growing need within their community, namely the need for a burial ritual as part of their religion.

This further demonstrates that they do not see the ‘outside world’ as impure or as a threat, as they are not hesitant to be inclusive of practices and ideas from other traditions, in Jorunn’s case; Cherokee traditions, and Christianity in the case of the burial-committee. It should be noted, however, that many of my informants were certainly critical to many aspects of Christianity. Not only were they critical of the hegemonic position of Christianity in Norway, but also of certain parts of how they perceive Christian theology. Nevertheless, their willingness to collaborate and their acknowledgment of the value of the Perish Priest’s experience, show that Christianity or Christians are not viewed as ‘the enemy’ or as a threat, as they could have been in a “world-rejecting” new religious movement, and as they often are by those who turn to Åsatru for racist political purposes. Hence, also this is a central feature in terms of how they work towards inclusivity, which in this case is materialised through a compatibility with a religiously pluralist society and entails elements of inter-religiosity and eclecticism.

This openness to the ‘outside world’ can also be identified through the informants’ openness to multiple religious belongings. While this was not the case for any of the Heathens I met, as they were all grounded in Norse Paganism, it was present on a conceptual level, as none of them found it problematic to combine other religions with Åsatru. As Iben puts it: “If you want to be both Hindu and Åsatru, sure you can! There is no rule against that.” A similar sentiment is shared by Alexandra: “Well, of course Forn Sed is focusing on increasing

knowledge and to maintain faith in the Norse gods, but what you do in your own house, that's your business! So, if you want to have a… Virgin Mary *and* pray to Frigg, it's up to you!".

5.1.3 Summarising discussion of theme 1

The accounts presented above demonstrate a conscious awareness among the informants regarding the newness of their religion. This is materialised through a selective revitalisation, an openness for inspirations and elements from other traditions, and an openness to multiple religious belongings. This further suggests a willingness to be a part of the contemporary world, where people, ideas and practices are increasingly interconnected, which again testifies for Bifrost's and Forn Sed's world-affirming character. While there were naturally certain variations of the informants' reflections on this matter, they were all unanimous in saying that their contemporary religion is by no means the exact same religion as the one practiced in the Old Norse communities, and that this was neither a goal nor an ideal. Their religion was generally perceived as a new religion, which is inspired by the stories and myths found in the sources available regarding the Old Norse religion and way of life.

It is worth noting that this willingness to change, adapt, combine, and find inspiration from elsewhere than 'the sources', can be read as both an expression of embracing the modern, multicultural and religiously pluralistic society, while at the same time challenging typical traits of modernity, such as the strict religious boundaries and tradition as the dominant legitimator. There is a 'pick and choose' and 'mix and match' approach present among some of the informants, which for some is considered a postmodern trait, but which I see as paving the way for Bifrost and Forn Sed's version of modernity and their vision of a way forward. These innovative tendencies demonstrate some of the ways in which the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed construct their version of Heathenism, and similarly allude to elements of their inclusive character. In this connection, their inclusivity entails the welcoming of new elements and the inclusion of perspectives, experiences, and even practices and ideas from other traditions and faith communities.

5.2 Theme 2: A universalist religion

As already indicated in the contextualisation chapter, where I account for the difference between racialist and inclusive Heathenism, the universalist approach to the religion is central in making the religion inclusive and non-racialist. In the following section I will elucidate how accounts from the Heathens I met from Bifrost and Forn Sed are reflective of a

universalist approach to their religion. The universalist character of the religion was made visible in the interviews mainly through two sub-themes: 1) that the religion is open for anyone and that 2) the religion can be practiced anywhere.

5.2.1 The religion is open to 'anyone'

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, none of my informants saw any connection between genetics and adherence to Åsatru. Solveig from Bifrost explicitly expressed that: "We don't view ourselves as an ethnic religion". In most of the interviews this was brought up by the informants themselves, often in combination with an expression of great frustration over those who take Åsatru to be an 'ethnic' or 'ethnicist' religion. All the informants were of the opinion that this is a religion that anyone can join, and anyone is welcome to join their faith organisation, as long as they follow the organisations' guidelines. In what follows I will demonstrate how Rune, who has been a Forn Sed member since 2007, and Pia, from Bifrost, both explain the universality of their religion, but have slightly different ways of rationalising it.

Rune shares with me his reflections on why it would make sense for anyone, regardless of your background, to turn to the Norse gods:

> "the Norse gods have, in a way, created Ask and Embla, the first humans, so they are the creators of *all* humans, since they created the first humans. So that makes them something anyone can turn to. And if everyone turns to something which is good and right, and brings them close to nature, and which is something they can learn from, I think that it would be very good if it became a big thing all over the world."

This shows that according to the way Rune views the Norse gods, not only is it a possibility for anyone to turn to them, but it is in fact highly welcomed.

Pia in Bifrost has a different, but still universalist, take on the matter. To her, the gods are representations of the forces in nature, and since nature is universal, so are the gods. She sees similarities between all 'nature religions' (which is how she describes Åsatru) and understands the different nature religions' gods as local variations of the same nature forces. For example, Pia sees the ancient Greek god Zeus and the ancient Norse god Tor as the same god, which has been given two different names: "in Greece they gave them [the gods] different names, but those are also [names for] the nature forces!"

This clearly shows that the idea that is often found in *volkisch* or racialist versions of Åsatru, where a Scandinavian bloodline is regarded a prerequisite for being Åsatru and in contact

with the Norse gods, is strongly disputed by Forn Sed and Bifrost members. Instead, their religion is seen as being universally available. These ideas also suggest a presence of a meta-narrative regarding humanity and religion, however, both Rune and Pia were also reflective of a strong relativism as they both shared an idea of 'what is right for me, is not necessarily right for everyone'. Rune described it the following way:

> "For me, it's the Norse faith that is the contact and a portal into something right, but that doesn't mean that it needs to contradict many other things. It's not necessarily only one thing that excludes everything else, you know. There can be several things that are good and right".

This intricate combination of a meta-narrative and a relativism makes an interesting form of inclusivity. Not only are they welcoming 'all humans' to their religion; they are also inclusive in the sense that they do not reject 'other things' as being 'right' for someone else.

A dedication to avoid being an ethnicist or racialist religion can also be identified in some of the informants' reflections regarding the aspect of their religion which involves honouring one's ancestors. Through the interviews I learned that for example in a *blot,* participants are welcome to dedicate a *skål* not only to the gods or other forces and mythological figures, but also to one's ancestors. However, many of the informants express an awareness that this aspect of the religion is often prone to being misused and shift the focus over to genetics or bloodlines, which is something they want to avoid.

Vebjørn tells me that in Bifrost, they sometimes hold *minneblot* (commemoration blot), but that there has been internal discussion regarding the focus on ancestors: "There has been an internal debate about it not evolving into an ancestral cult, but that you focus on commemoration-*blot*, and not *worshipping* the ancestors". However, he also says that personally, he views the commemoration *blots* as rather innocent, but that it is good to be conscious about how it *could* be misused by others. A similar awareness is demonstrated by Jorunn, who clarifies that: "you know, I think you should be proud of your ancestors regardless of where they are from, that's what this is about! It's not about… you being proud of your ancestors because they were white and lived in Norway!". These accounts demonstrate an awareness of the potential pitfall of honouring one's ancestors, which Norse Heathenism is likely more prone to compared to other religions, and an effort to actively avoid this pitfall by moving the focus away from ethnicity and bloodlines.

Another way in which the Heathens I met strive to achieve an inclusive religion, is visible through the way in which they use 'the sources' to justify an inclusivity and universality. This

includes both archaeological findings of who the Vikings were and what they might have looked like, as well as the myths and stories about the Norse gods. Vebjørn finds it particularly ironic that there are many racists and Nazis who calls themselves Odinists and focus largely on the god Odin. One of the reasons why Vebjørn finds this ironic is the fact that "Odin, he is of mixed ancestry [...]. So, if you are one of those who care about 'racial purity' and those kinds of things, Odin is *not* the god for you". Anna is similarly frustrated about how the 'typical Viking' is often portrayed as having blond hair and blue eyes and claims that according to archaeological evidence, "there were people with darker skin colour here back then! [in the Old Norse period]". This is a sentiment that is shared by several of the informants, and many of them keenly follow new archaeological and historical discoveries that challenge the dominant portrayal of a 'typical Viking'. Anna also refers to how the 'source material' "says that you should be hospitable and treat people right", but that this is "something you should do regardless". This concept of hospitality comes up in several of the interviews and is used in regard to welcoming all people into their religion and faith community, but also in regard to being hospitable and tolerant towards people of other religions.

This suggests that while all of the informants are against racial discrimination and segregation to begin with, they also tend to back this up by using 'the sources' that their religion builds on. Hence, they use and interpret 'the sources' in a way that substantiates a religion where ethnic background and ancestry is deemed irrelevant. This then highlights yet another facet of their inclusivity, namely an inclusivity of all people, regardless of ethnicity and ancestral heritage.

Another aspect of both Bifrost and Forn Sed's inclusivity is the absence of initiation rituals or programmes. During the interviews, members from both Bifrost and Forn Sed gave examples of how people who are not members have still been welcomed to partake in their *blots*. In this sense, there is no strict division between the insiders and the outsiders of the practice, and the ritual *blot*, which is their main religious practice, appears to be an inclusive practice. However, when it comes to membership, the line between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' naturally becomes more definite, and here, the practice differs between the two organisations.

Through the interviews I learned that there are examples from both faith organisations of memberships either being rejected or revoked due to discriminatory views or statements. The way the two organisations go about handling this, however, differs. In order for a new membership in Bifrost to be accepted, whoever is interested to join the organisation needs to

have a mandatory, however often rather informal, chat with a representative from Bifrost. The purpose of this is to 'filter out' those who do not follow their guidelines regarding discriminatory attitudes, and those who hold a racialist approach to Åsatru. Additionally, new members are not allowed to vote on their first *Ting*, where the organisation's statutes, budget, leaders etc. are being elected. In order to have a vote on the *Ting*, members need to have been 'endorsed' by a previous *Ting*. I learned that this mechanism is in place in order to prevent what many called a 'coup', referring to an incident, years back, where Vigrid-adherences had attempted to 'infiltrate' Bifrost. Most of the informants from Bifrost were very happy that these mechanisms were in place and saw them as (perhaps unfortunate) necessities in order to maintain Bifrost's inclusivity and to avoid becoming an organisation for racist and radical right-wing politics.

While Forn Sed as an organisation, similarly to Bifrost, overtly distance themselves from any discriminatory attitudes and make it clear in their statutes that such attitudes are incompatible with a membership in Forn Sed, there was a prevalent scepticism among informants of Forn Sed to the practice of pre-filtration of new members. The practice was generally perceived as hindering inclusivity rather than enhancing inclusivity, as it was experienced as an unwelcoming practice that could lead to a *too homogenous* membership-base in terms of political and ideological views. In this sense, both Bifrost- and Forn Sed-members strive for an inclusivity, but do not have the exact same idea of what this inclusivity looks like, and how to best achieve it. Nevertheless, also Forn Sed Norge reserves the right to revoke memberships if anyone goes against their statutes and does in this sense find it necessary to 'draw a line' between who is welcome and who is not.

The examples above demonstrate that the informants from both Bifrost and Forn Sed hold that the Åsatru religion can be practiced by anyone, regardless of nationality or heritage. The examples also show that this is a feature of inclusivity that the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed actively attempt to uphold when they construct their religion. However, the attempts to protect this feature of inclusivity, which is enabled through their universalistic approach, lead to the difficult task of having to 'exclude the excluding', something which the two faith organisations and their members have different approaches to.

5.2.2 The religion can be practiced anywhere

Another way in which the universalist approach can be identified is through the informants' openness to (inclusive) Åsatru being practiced elsewhere than in Scandinavia. Firstly, some of the informants could share stories about *blots* they themselves had attended outside of Scandinavia, and they could tell me that they achieved the same function, or the same connection to the gods also in these *blots.* This was, again, sometimes fortified by referring to the historical sources about the Vikings. Rune explains that: "historically speaking, the Vikings, they held blot in the Middle East and other places too". A connection to the Norse gods, independent of geographical location is in this sense justified both by personal experiences and histories of 'the past'.

Additionally, all of the informants were rather enthusiastic about the increasingly global character of inclusive modern Åsatru. Karl tells me about the International Asatru Summer Camp, which he had attended digitally in 2021. He explains enthusiastically how this is an international meeting spot for inclusive Heathens, and shares stories about the heathens he met from across the world. He brings up especially one experience, where he had attended a lecture held by a leader in 'Asatru Catalonia'. Karl found it highly fascinating to learn how they go about bringing the Old Norse religion into the Catalonian context and nature.

I also learned that Bifrost has an Åsatru 'friend group' in Costa Rica, which one of my informants has visited. While talking about how fascinating it is that there is an active Åsatru community so far away, Vebjørn says that:

> "if you think about it, it's not any stranger that there is Åsatru in Costa Rica than that there are Christians in Norway! Like… when Christianity could travel from the Middle East to here, then obviously Åsatru can travel from here to Costa Rica, right?".

A third example of this positive attitude to the global character of the religion is the example of how Alexandra had found the Åsatru faith back in her home country in South America. She explained how she first heard about Åsatru through a friend and was very intrigued by the God figures and the myths. This was something that spoke to her more than the Catholicism she had grown up with. At first, she had some reservations, as much of the information she came across online, regarding modern Åsatru, emphasised the importance of Scandinavian ancestry, which made her question whether or not this could be a religion for her. However, she found meaning in the religion, and experienced a connection to the Norse Gods. She therefore started practicing by herself in Colombia, before later moving to Norway and after a while, joining Forn Sed.

This suggests a conception of a travelling religion, a conception which for some was (at least partly) rooted in the historical aspects of the Viking's travels, but for other was conceptualised independently of this history. Nevertheless, the informants shared the conception of a translocational[20] religion.

5.2.3 Summarising discussion of theme 2

This universalist approach, and the way the informants rationalise and justify it, demonstrate an intricate example of modern expressions of belief and practices. The modern reality of globalisation is embraced, and a type of universalist meta-narratives are upheld at least by some of the informants. At the same time, there is an emphasis on local variations and diversity, as well as rather relativist reflections. 'The sources' are utilised in a way which underpins a universality and a globalisation, which is highly compatible with the modern world. This again grounds the Heathenism in Bifrost and Forn Sed in the 'world-affirming' category, as the globalised world is embraced, and an inclusive character enabled. This universal and translocational aspect of their religion underpins several facets of Bifrost's and Forn Sed's inclusivity. With the universalist and translocation conceptions, the religion becomes inclusive of a belonging to Åsatru not only regardless of geographical location, but also regardless of bloodline, nationality, and ethnicity.

5.3 Theme 3: Individual freedom in religion

A third recurring and central theme from the interviews is the emphasis on internal diversity when it comes to both faith and practice. Through the interviews I learned that, in spite of its small size in terms of membership, the Heathen religion of Bifrost and Forn Sed is a highly diverse religion, with much room for individual personal interpretations and variations. Despite the many different preferences on how to carry out a *blot* or the various perceptions of the gods, or degree of faith, a shared sentiment between all the informants was that this diversity and individual freedom was a central, and exclusively positive, part of their religion. An emphasis on individual freedom within the religion was often coupled with an explicit scepticism or rejection of religious authorities such as religious leaders or sacred scriptures, as

[20] The concept of 'translocation' is borrowed from Floya Anthias (2021), developed in her book, *Translocational belongings : intersectional dilemmas and social inequalities*, where she challenges previous notions of boundaries, hierarchies, and belonging. In my use of 'translocational' the concept serves the purpose of demonstrating how the universalist approach to Åsatru transgresses various boundaries – from geographical borders to constructed boundaries of ethnic or cultural belonging.

well as a rejection of fixed doctrines, creeds, and dogmas. Instead, by emphasising 'what feels right' for the individual in terms of religious practice or faith, the individual was given religious authority. In the following paragraphs I will present various examples of the individual freedom experienced by members of Bifrost and Forn Sed, and how this freedom was emphasised as an important and defining part of their religion.

5.3.1 The individual as part of nature

Pia, from Bifrost, shares several reflections regarding the importance of individual freedom within Åsatru and she touches upon several aspects of this theme. The emphasis on the individual is exemplified through Pia's reflections on the difference between what she refers to as "human made religion", in which she includes Christianity, and "nature religions" in which she includes her own religion, Åsatru. The way she views it, one of the main differences is that in a 'human made religion' such as Christianity "you learn what the religion is. You learn the answers. In Åsatru, the answers aren't already out there, they are in here" she says and taps herself on the chest, "they are within each and every one of us". Individual variation and freedom within the religion is something that seems to be vital for Pia's understanding of her own religion. She emphasises several times that the great variation when it comes to understandings and perceptions of the gods that is present within Bifrost is a strength. Similarly, she demonstrates a strong scepticism towards anyone who claims to have the 'right answers' or spiritually place themselves above anyone else.

Pia's emphasis on a lack of a traditional religious authority is also reflected through her understanding of and practice of *blot*. Pia has long experience of being a ritual leader, *hovgydje,* in Bifrost and hence a lot of experience with organising and holding the *blots* in her *blotslag*. She underlines, however, that just because she is responsible for holding the *blot*, she is not in a position of authority over the other participants. The emphasis on the individual is particularly prevalent when it comes to how Pia views the toasting round of the *blot.* She finds it very important that each individual acts independently and personally in their toast:

> "…. What's important is that you need to know what you are saying. You're not supposed to just repeat what the previous person in the round has said. 'Cause then there is no meaning. You talk with the gods. It's not possible to lie to them. Then you lie to yourself! It is yourself that you are talking to, it is the nature forces, and you are part of the nature forces! You are human!"

Pia further explains that you can pay tribute to whoever, or whatever you want, since everything is part of nature, the only requirement is that "It must be felt from you".

This emphasis on diversity, and the importance of being yourself, and not 'simply follow what anyone else tells you to' is also reflected in how Pia describes Bifrost as a community: "That's where I'm able to be myself. I'm so… different, but that doesn't matter! Our strength is that we are so different". This further underlines how much she values the *difference* and *diversity* that she experience in her religious community, which for her also enhances a sense of belonging, as this is where she is 'able to be herself'.

These quotes from Pia suggest several things. Firstly, it suggests that she understands her religion, at least partly, in opposition to Christianity and other "human made religions", as she directly contrasts the two. Secondly, she gives the individual religious authority as she rejects that 'the answers' is something that can be taught to you by someone or something else. Thirdly, Pia's reasoning for why 'the answers' are within each individual human can be found in her explanation of why it is impossible to lie to the gods. Here she equates the gods with the forces of nature and underlines that because humans are a part of nature, lying to the gods is like lying to yourself. Hence, this suggests that the reason why the individual is given religious authority is because each individual human is a part of nature, and in this sense, nature can also be seen as a religious authority for Pia.

From this, one can read that for Pia, the individual freedom and variation constitute an important feature of inclusivity. Since 'the answers' can only be found within each individual, it enables anyone to partake in *blot* or Bifrost without having to follow or agree with what a religious leader tells you to.

5.3.2 Rejection of strict ritual structure – It is all about 'what feels right'

As already mentioned, there are some guidelines or suggestions within the two organisations regarding how a *blot* can be carried out. Nevertheless, all the interviewees were open to individual variations, and no strict ceremonial or ritual structure was emphasised, by neither Bifrost-members, nor Forn Sed-members. Again, the shared sentiment here was that the most important thing is that it 'feels right' or 'works' for the individual, and that variation between *blotslag* to *blotslag* or individual to individual is highly welcomed and a freedom they all cherish.

When trying to explain to me how a *blot* is carried out, Solveig refers to Bifrost's statutes where the four elements of the ritual are described. However, she was actually unable to remember what the four elements were and explained that it is something that "most of us

don't take it very seriously if we don't want to include it". This flexibility is something nearly all the informants point to as something they highly appreciate about their religious community. Vebjørn from Bifrost, for example, explains that there is a wide range of how the different members and the different *blotslag* do their rituals. Personally, he likes to keep them quite simple, but he knows that others prefer to include activities such as dancing and playing instruments. He adds:

> "And that's something I appreciate a lot in an organisation such as Bifrost, that there are no rights and wrongs. You do what works for you. And that does not mean that your way is wrong, and my way is right. It's all about what we find works for us".

Rune from Forn Sed represents another example. He tells me that when he joined Forn Sed, the dominant practice was that many followed the solstices for their main *blots,* which is common among many heathens. However, Rune wanted to instead follow the seasons according to what he calls 'the Norse calendar' and had found that the Swedish historian of religion, Andreas Nordberg's (2006) version of this was the most accurate. However, he pointed out that he does not find it problematic that other people chose to follow the solstices and that he thinks that the *blot* will be meaningful regardless, but that for him, mid-winter and mid-summer (according to Nordberg's calendar) are important days for *blot*; "that is what feels right for me". This suggests that while Rune choses to base his decision on what kind of calendar to follow for his *blots* on what he considers the most accurate historically correct Norse calendar, he still justifies his choice with what feels right for him and acknowledges that other decisions might feel right for others, which he also views as legitimated choices.

These accounts of the flexibility of each individual and each *blotslag* (in the case of Bifrost), all testify for the importance of individual freedom and appreciation of a lack of external authority, which constitutes a feature of their inclusivity, as several ways of practicing *blot* is included as legitimate.

5.3.3 Individual interpretations and conceptions of the gods

While Bifrost has its "oath" as a part of their set of laws, which resembles a type of creed, and Forn Sed presents a brief articulation of their faith in their guidelines, I learned through the interviews that in practice, there are no strict requirements regarding a personal faith or conviction in order to obtain membership in any of the faith organisations, and that, again, individual freedom was highly valued also when it came to the interpretation and conception

of the gods. Below are some examples of the various interpretations and conceptions of the gods that were articulated in the interviews.

An example of how the gods are understood became evident through Vedbjørn's reflection of why he enjoys participating in or holding *blots*:

> "it makes me think through things. Things I wish to do something about. Things that I ehm… 'okey, this is what I want to focus on going forward'. It [*blot*] is a way to help me to focus in that sense. And then I find it very nice to use the god figures in that way, 'cause then you can personify aspects of life."

He further explains that he views the Norse gods and the stories about them as good metaphors and adds that "if you ask me where the gods are, then my answer is that I don't know. And I can almost add that I don't care". Vebjørn shares an example of how he views the gods as metaphorical and the way in which this inspires him. He explains that to him, one of the most important gods is a goddess called Siv. Siv is according to Norse mythology, Tor's wife, and her husband is therefore clearly much more prominent and more widely known. However, Vebjørn views it differently:

> "… for me, she is the everyday-god, because… alright Tor, he is out fighting against all kinds of dangerous creatures, which is easy to be impressed by, and yes, that is an important job, by all means, but if it wasn't for her [Siv], who is home and manages everything at home while he is out fighting, then this war hero wouldn't have anything to return home to. And well, that is where most of us are. There are more 'everydays' and… and those are what you need to be able to put up with".

He adds that he has never met anyone else who interprets Siv this way, and that this is simply his personal way of seeing it. Vebjørn also emphasises that he appreciates the freedom he has in Bifrost to form his own understating of the gods:

> "You know, none of us, regardless of what kind of title you must have, have the right to impose a certain faith or interpretation on anyone else… So, there are neither sources nor persons who have the right to impose anything on you."

This is an explicit rejection of the religious authority of both scriptures and religious leaders, and an example of how the meaning or truth is personal and legitimated through personal feelings and preferences.

Jorunn in Forn Sed describes a similar conception of the gods; she says that her faith is metaphorical and elaborates:

> "When I ask, for example, Odin to help increase my wisdom, that means, for example, passing a test, or thank him for passing a test. Ehm, it's to focus on exactly that, to… just to give it a thought, to… to me, *blot* is sort of a meditation over these things. And it can give a personal calmness, a bit like… 'Alright, I'm going to nail this!' or 'Yay, I

> actually nailed this!' […] And if I do *blot* for good health, if you for example have a health challenge, then it's… it's that feeling of having done what you can, in many ways. That you, yeah… I guess you could say, send out good thoughts."

She further compares doing the *blot* with "taking a deep breath if I'm stressed out", to emphasise the meditative effect she can experience from it. A certain relativism and a certain functionalist approach to her own religion can be identified in Jorunn's reflections regarding her own faith as she summarises it by saying that:

> "I think that as long as what I believe don't harm anyone, as long as it doesn't causes me to feel any shame or.. yeah, affect me negatively, then it doesn't really matter if it's real after all. Because it gave me something good in life. Ehm, and that's enough for me."

Iben from Forn Sed also emphasises that Åsatru is a very "personalised religion because we have, at least in Forn Sed, we don't have any doctrines". Iben explains that for someone the gods might exist somewhere, but for them "it's mostly that the gods… well, it's nature, the forces of nature." Similar to many of the other informants, also Iben emphasises what 'feels right' when describing their religion; the Norse religion is simply what "feels right for me. It's what has given me inner peace. Yeah, what works for me." Rune from Forn Sed similarly emphasises 'what feels right' as he explains that:

> "the Norse [religion] felt most right. In terms of…. What I had contact with and what felt most true, or close… I have always been very fond of nature for example. And to sort of find it [religion] in nature and through the nature forces, that's been a part of the experience".

Again, both Rune's and Iben's accounts indicate a religious authority attributed to the individual, as they emphasise what *feels* right and what *feels* true, which indirectly might suggest that 'truth' is not something which can be found in sources or be taught to you by a religious leader, and in this sense, it is themselves as individuals that are given religious authority. Additionally, as seen also in Pia's account above, both Iben and Rune emphasise the importance of nature and how vital nature is in their religion. For Iben, the gods *are* the forces of nature, and for Rune, nature is where he found his religion. Hence, religious authority is indirectly attributed also to nature. Nevertheless, as demonstrated through all the accounts given above, truth is something that has to be experienced by the individual, something which opens up for several legitimated ways of relating to or conceptualising the gods. The fact that these diverse ways of interpreting the gods are all included as being legitimate elucidates yet another feature of the notion of inclusivity which Bifrost and Forn Sed strive towards.

5.3.4 Absence of faith

It is evident that having a strong and defined religious belief or spirituality is not a prerequisite for membership in neither Bifrost nor Forn Sed. This is alluded to on their respective websites, and perhaps more so on Forn Sed's website, as Bifrost has a more elaborate description of the Åsatru faith in their statutes, as described previously. This also feeds into the strong emphasis on and appreciations for individual freedom and the rejection of a strict doctrine developed by religious leaders based on sacred scripture.

Jorunn from Forn Sed confirms Forn Sed's stance on this by explaining that it is the Heathen *sed*, the Heathen custom, that is the basis for their organisation, and it does not matter if you "believe in it literally, believe in it metaphorically, or just have an interest for it". Additionally, the experiences of particularly two of my interviewees from Bifrost, Geir and Johanne, demonstrate that the same is true for Bifrost; as they could both share with me that their adherence to the organisation is not based on a religious conviction.

Geir does not identify as neither Heathen nor Åsatru but is still a member of Bifrost and attends the *blots* of his local *blotslag*. He tells me that when he participates in *blot* he does not turn to or communicate with any gods or any other powers, but that he nevertheless finds the rituals to be fruitful:

> "… perhaps what I get out of it the most is this sense of belonging to a community. That you meet friends. And I actually think that also for the others…. That is what is the actual driving force here. That you meet other people, that you get accepted, heard, and understood, and all these things".

While I do not know whether Geir's assumption about the 'actual driving force' for 'the others' is correct, his experience of joining the *blot* for the purpose of a feeling of belonging to a community, demonstrates the flexibility of the faith and practice of the members, and the inclusion of people who do not have a religious faith. Geir's account suggest another interesting finding, namely that while individual freedom regarding faith and practice is held high by the members, there is nevertheless a strong sense of community among many of the informants. This becomes evident as he points to the feast (*gildet)* that can sometimes be a part of, or follow the *blot* ritual, as an important arena for socialising and meeting friends, a sentiment which was shared by other informants too, both from Bifrost and Forn Sed.

Johanne is another example of those who have joined Bifrost primarily due to friendship and the sense of community, and she appreciates the lack of strict doctrines:

> "There isn't any creed or anything in Bifrost, there is nothing 'you need to do this or that', or anything like that. You can be a tiny bit spiritual, or you can have a tiny bit of faith, or you can be a tiny bit interested, and that's fine!".

Similar to Geir, she does not view herself as particularly religious, but adds that:

> "If I believe in anything, then it's actually more in nature and in human, not… I don't believe in the old gods, you know, but I think they are good… is it called allegories? There are good stories and metaphors in the Norse mythology. But it's not like I pray to any god. I don't sacrifice to anyone or anything else than like… *tunkallen,* or *nissen* in the barn".

For Johanne, participating in *blot* is not a main priority. However, her experience demonstrates another function that Bifrost can have; namely serving as an alternative to the dominant Norwegian Church and Human-Etisk Forbund (Norwegian Humanist society). when it comes to carrying out rites of passages. For example, Johanne tells me about the *knesetting*[21] of her children, which was organised by Bifrost. She uses the *knesetting* ceremony as an example that demonstrates how Bifrost is a faith community "that is so open and actively inclusive of… a diversity". In her case, she appreciates how her husband, who is not the biological father to one of her sons, was nevertheless able to have all her children *knesatt* with him. This is something Ingrid views as "being in strong contrast to Christianity for example". Johanne further explains that she is happy that Bifrost offers rites of passage, as it constitutes an alternative, both to the Norwegian Church's rites of passage and to Human-Etisk Forbund. She explains that even though she is not 'particularly religious', she prefers Bifrost over Human-Etisk Forbund as she appreciates the openness to the possibility of there being "something between heaven and earth" while this is not something she experiences an openness for in Human-Etisk Forbund.

This is again telling of the notion of inclusivity found among the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed. Johanne experiences the *knesetting* ceremony as more inclusive than the Christian alternative of baptism, and also as more inclusive than rites of passage offered by Human-Etisk Forbund, as they exclude the possibility of bringing in religious or spiritual elements. It also demonstrates that while individual freedom within the religious community is emphasised and appreciated, there is nevertheless certainly also a sense of community among the members, as ceremonies such as *Knesetting* and the ritual of *blot,* and especially with a following *gilde,* are community-building and cultivates a sense of belonging.

[21] *Knesetting* is a ceremony and rite of passage where a child is declared a part of the family and/or given a name.

5.3.5 Summarising discussion of theme 3

The individualist characteristic uncovered in this theme highlight yet another feature of the inclusivity that the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed strive towards, namely an inclusivity of diverse and individual ways of carrying out blot, and diverse and individual ways of relating to, or not relating to the gods. This aspect of inclusivity is enabled through placing the religious authority within the individual, as this takes away any requirement of having to subordinate to an external religious authority. This is also yet another characteristic that falls within the world-affirming category. Wallis (2019/1984: 26) describes the spiritual dimension of a world-affirming new religions to be "a matter of individual experience and individual subjective reality rather than social reality or even social concern" and that the conception of a deity is "primarily as a diffuse, amorphous and immanent force in the universe, but present most particularly within oneself" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 26). He similarly describes that typically, the individual is in focus of the religious practice, something which is reflected in the accounts above where taking part in *blot* is described as 'taking a deep breath' or helping the individual to focus. Despite this individualist focus, many of the members do describe strong sense of community. However, even when doing so, an emphasis on the individual freedom *within the community,* and especially the absence of 'someone telling you what to believe' is central.

Granting the individual religious authority also elucidates one of the ways in which the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed are constructing a modern religion. Here, the 'modernity' of the Heathens is again rather intricate. While the accounts given above challenge a previously dominant focus on internal cognitive aspects of religion, seeing as 'personal faith' or conviction is not required, they nevertheless reflect a pursual of a different type of internal focus, namely a focus on what *feels* right for the individual. While truth is something that has to be *experienced* by the individual, and cannot be taught, this *experience* seems to be a primarily internal and cognitive one, rather than an overtly bodily. Hence, while the religion, in a sense, rejects and reacts to one aspect of 'modernity' (the centrality of personal conviction in religion), parts of this aspect of modernity is nevertheless perpetuated, as there is still a focus on the internal feelings and experiences of each individual member. This enables an experience of more openness and inclusivity among the members, compared to how they perceive of religions such as Christianity, where what is regarded 'traditional' religious authorities of scriptures and priests determine the internal focus.

5.4 Theme 4: A holistic religion

Another recurring central theme which highlights an important characteristic of the inclusive Heathen religion, as well as their intricate relation to modernity, is the alternative worldview and mindset that the informants have found in Åsatru. In particular, a rejection of a dualistic worldview, a worldview which many of the informants associated with Christianity, was emphasised and contrasted to what can be seen as a more holistic worldview. In this section I will present some examples from both Bifrost- and Forn Sed-members regarding how Åsatru had offered them an alternative and, to them, a much-preferred mindset and worldview.

5.4.1 Rejection of dualisms

Solveig from Bifrost tells me that while she is from an atheist family, and was never baptised, she nevertheless came to realise, as she grew older, how much her worldview was influenced by Christianity: "… we have so many conceptions that are still informed by a religion that I don't belong to. For example, this distinction between good and evil, the distinction between this life and the afterlife, the distinction between body and soul". She explained that she was very intrigued when she realised that there had been a time where these dualisms that have come to be perceived as 'natural', were indeed not perceived as natural, and she was fascinated by the idea of discovering an imagery and a language through Åsatru, that offered her a different way of seeing the world.

Such sentiments were shared by most of the informants. Below I will present some examples of how a rejection of a dualist worldview was expressed in various ways by both Bifrost- and Forn Sed members. While a rejection of *dualisms* per se were not always expressed explicitly, such a rejection can be identified through how the informants talked about particularly the dualism between good versus evil, gender fluidity, and the human-nature dualism. Additionally, as indicated in Solveig's account, contrasts were often made to Christianity.

5.4.1.1 No good versus evil

As already discussed under theme 3, the members of Bifrost and Forn Sed have various ways of conceptualising and relating to the gods. In addition to the various conceptions and interpretations of the gods presented above, another interesting finding can be identified in the ways in which the Heathens talk about the gods in relation to rejecting the concept of

something being inherently good versus something being inherently bad. Again, this is often contrasted to a dualism of good versus evil, that is being associated with Christianity.

Jorunn from Forn Sed draws an explicit comparison to Christianity when it comes to the dualist perception of good versus evil, and the concept of an inherently good God: "For example, in Christianity […], God is infallible, even though there are lots of very obvious wrongs" she says and laughs a little before she continues:

> "[w]hile in the Norse for example, the gods have flaws! The gods aren't perfect at all. In many ways, you could say that it's their flaws that drive the world forward. And then there is this thing of not looking at things as either evil or good, but that there is a balance between chaos and order which needs to be upheld. There shouldn't be a preponderance of either or. And that's what life itself is like!"

Again, the worldview and mindset she finds through her Heathen religion offers her an alternative mindset when it comes to good and evil, a mindset which she finds better reflects the reality of the chaos of life. Vebjørn from Bifrost shares a similar reflection, and similarly draws comparisons to Christianity. When explaining why he prefers the Norse gods over the Christian god, for example, he says:

> "they are neither all-knowing nor almighty, and neither am I obligated to think that what the gods are doing is good or anything. You know, the terms 'good' and 'bad' in this metaphysical sense, don't exist in my world. […] there is no good and evil in and of itself, that doesn't exist. Like, in Christianity it is good *because* God does it, regardless of what kind of consequences it has. That, I'm not on board with. I reserve the right to evaluate what is good and bad myself".

From both Jorunn's and Vebjørn's account, it is clear that the lack of infallible gods, and the lack of a dualism of a defined good versus a defined evil, is something they appreciate. Instead, they favour a worldview and a mindset that to them allows for relativism, individual evaluation of what is good and bad and why, and a more holistic approach to the concepts. This again, elucidates a feature of inclusivity, where one can be included into the religious community without having to 'surrender' to an all-knowing, all-mighty and inherently good god.

5.4.1.2 Gender fluidity

For some of the informants, Åsatru also offers a holistic, or at least less dualistic, approach to gender. Both among the Bifrost-members and the Forn Sed-members, their community was often foregrounded as very 'queer friendly'. For some, this was regarded as a necessary and

highly welcomed ‘adjustment to the modern world’, however, for others, this could be grounded in the Norse mythology.

Solveig explains that Bifrost have several members who have transitioned from one gender to another. She thinks that many of those with “alternative understandings of gender” might be attracted to Åsatru due to characters such as Loke, who appears with different gender expressions in the mythology. While she acknowledges that the understandings of gender, gender roles, and gender expressions from the Old Norse period is not the same as today, she nevertheless holds that “there is very clearly an awareness of a fluidity” in the Norse mythology and sagas.

Jorunn from Forn Sed also expresses that “gender expression in the Norse is very interesting!” and she points to how the god Odin ‘crossed the line’ (of gender) several times, according to Norse mythology. She believes that in the Norse period “there was more freedom. I guess there was more understanding of gender fluidity than what we realise today. That’s what I think at least […] And yeah, a lot of that got lost when Christianity came”.

This again demonstrates how a less dualistic mindset, this time when it comes to gender, is something the informants are able to find in Åsatru, and that this is again contrasted to Christianity. This also elucidates how stories and characters form the Old Norse mythology are used to construct a ‘queer friendly’ religion, which constitutes yet another feature of the ways in which inclusivity is conceived. Similar efforts to lift stories of ‘otherness’ in terms of transgressing established boundaries of gender expressions and performativity are made by for example archaeologist Brit Solli (2008). With a queer theoretical perspective, Solli offers a discussion of the god Odin’s shamanic practice of *seid,* which is associated mainly with women, and how this did not compromise his ‘manliness’ or status as the god of war. With this, Solli argues that the study of a distant past “can be enriched by queer theory’s ability to challenge sexual stereotypes” (Solli, 2008: 204) and diversify the past.

5.4.1.3 Human-nature relations

Another dualism which is being rejected in favour for a more integrated worldview is the distinction between human and nature. This has already been alluded to through the consistent references to nature in the previous themes, but an even more explicit embrace of human *as part of* nature, will be further highlighted in this sub-theme, as this testifies for a worldview and a mindset in opposition to what many experienced as being status quo.

Karl from Bifrost has grown up with Christian parents but tells me that ever since he was a child, he had always been very intrigued by the Old Norse faith after being introduced to it through a 'theme week' about the Vikings in primary school. As he grew up, he started practicing the Old Norse religion by himself before eventually joining Bifrost. It is when I ask him if he thinks his religion affects his everyday-life he explains to me that:

> "Well, I don't particularly like it when white middle-class men use the expression 'decolonise', but… even so, there is something to it, to change the mind from this very 'standard'… not a bad word about Christianity, but this kind of monotheistic linear way of thinking, to a more polytheistic and cyclical way of thinking. And especially this thing of viewing humans, not as a steward or owner of nature, but as a part of nature. That is something I am working on".

This shows that to Karl, Åsatru offers an alternative way of viewing the world and an alternative worldview to the one he attributes to Christianity. It also suggests that he experiences that his mind has been 'colonised' and that Åsatru offers a liberation from this as it can enhance a 'decolonisation' of his mind, as it provides him with tools to view the world in a more cyclical, and integrated manner. He emphasises particularly a shift in his view of humans 'as part of nature', as something he is 'working on', which suggests that this is a mindset he highly prefers and strives to undertake.

Johanne, who is one of the informants who did not identify as neither Heathen nor Åsatru, could nevertheless also tell me that being a member of Bifrost and learning about 'the old ways' still has a function for the way she relates to the world around her. She explains that she finds it very important to be aware that we as humans take part in a type of reciprocity and connectedness with nature: "if I take something, then I should put something back again". She further explains that she always takes good care of her belongings and is mindful of always being grateful for what she has. This practice of gratitude, especially when it comes to gratitude and respect for nature, is something she finds that Bifrost can enhance and help her focus on.

Finding an integrated worldview through Åsatru can also be identified in Pia's story, especially when it comes to how she relates to nature. Pia lives in the middle of the forest and emphasises extensively how important closeness to nature is to her. In her living room there are visible birch tree-stems that hold up the ceiling, and she has a close relationship to both the trees and stones in her garden. Additionally, she can share many examples of how she talks to nature, sometimes through the gods – such as speaking to the Norse god Njård when

there is a storm outside, or the Norse god Ull if there are icy roads - or she can talk to animals that she meets on her walk in the forest. As demonstrated above, Pia refers to Åsatru as a "nature religion". She explains that the basis of her religion and her faith is nature: "It [nature] is with me all the time and in everything that I do", and she draws an image of how she perceives of all things as being interconnected, just like intertwined roots under the surface of the earth, an image which clearly suggest a holistic worldview of interconnectedness.

5.4.2 Summarising discussion of theme 4

All of these accounts are examples of how Heathenism has provided the informants of a mindset and a worldview which they much prefer, and which they have not found elsewhere. These accounts can provide several interesting insights into the construction of their religion, their notion of modernity as well as the ways in which they conceive of and practice inclusivity. Firstly, a rejection of a dualist worldview, particularly when it comes to the dualisms of good versus evil, dualistic understanding of gender, and the dualism of human and nature, can be identified. Sometimes these dualisms are explicitly attributed to Christianity, something which can be read as a process of constructing the 'religious self' in opposition Christianity as a 'religious other'. Another important finding in this theme is what the alternative worldview and mindset offers the heathens. What is very prominent in this regard, is the relation to nature. An articulated experienced kinship with nature, such as the one described by Rountree (2012), is not necessarily present, but there is no doubt that a reciprocal relation to nature, a closeness to nature and a deep respect for nature is an important part of the religion and something which their Heathen worldview enables and offers. Additionally, it offers an opposition to a dualist notion of gender, which enables an inclusivity of gender fluidity, grounded in their modern religion.

These accounts highlight yet again, an intricate notion of modernity. While being 'queer friendly' and 'ecologically conscious' is, for some, taken to be modern characteristics of the contemporary world, the way the Heathens do this, nevertheless comes with a rejection of another aspect of what is often regarded as central to 'modernity', namely a dualistic worldview. In this sense, the examples above demonstrate how the Heathens reject aspects of status quo that they perhaps find to be 'world-rejecting', in order to be able to be 'affirming' of both gender fluidity as well as the other-than-human, through a more integrated worldview.

Hence, they are not simply following a set path of ‘modernity’ but instead navigate their own version, by finding inspiration in the old myths.

Chapter 6: Discussion

From the previous chapters, it becomes clear that the Heathenism constructed by the members in Bifrost and Forn Sed, is situated in a context of a wider Pagan scene, where religious innovation takes place by looking to a pre-Christian past to construct a religion that practitioners find to be fruitful and meaningful in the midst of the complexities of the contemporary world. As demonstrated in the contextualisation chapter, Paganism is often rooted in counter-cultural sentiments, and with an increasingly globalised world, where people become exposed to a plurality of religious traditions, the practice of turning to one's local history and seek inspiration from religious traditions that existed 'before' emerged. However, similarly covered in the contextualisation chapter, this practice of 'looking to the past' has also been systematically used to bolster and justify racist ideologies.

Asad's (2009) conception of religion as a discursive tradition, lends itself well to analysing the process of developing the inclusive modern Heathenism in Bifrost and Forn Sed. The accounts given by the members of Bifrost and Forn Sed demonstrate an active engagement with old sources, but also an experimental and innovative engagement with other religions and traditions, and their own internal feelings and experiences, in order to construct an inclusive and modern religion. In this chapter, I will discuss how the findings presented in the previous chapter demonstrate how the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed take part in the production of a discursive tradition, by conceptually relating to 'a past', and 'a future', through 'a present' (Asad, 2009: 20), when they construct their version of modern and inclusive Åsatru. This will also highlight various features (and limits) of the inclusivity envisioned and practiced by the individuals.

6.1 Constructing the discursive tradition of inclusive modern Åsatru – relating to 'the past' and 'the future' through 'the present'

As seen from the various accounts given in the findings chapter, the religious innovation in Bifrost and Forn Sed is often sparked by a reaction to trends, concepts, and worldviews that the Heathens wish to overcome. These are often attributed to Christianity, and include for instance established doctrines and creeds, the hierarchical structure of priesthood, and the religious authority of religious leaders or of sacred scripture. Additionally, a dominant dualistic worldview or mindset is also attributed to Christianity and is something the Heathens often express a desire to overcome.

In the religious innovation at work when reacting to these dominant trends and tendencies, the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed seek answers and inspirations from 'what it was like *before'* this came to dominate, namely the pre-Christian Norse era. This then constitutes 'the past' in which the Heathens take to be their religion's vantage point "(when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted)" (Asad, 2009: 20). Through (critically) using the available sources on the pre-Christian Norse religion, in combination with an active imagination of what this past religion and worldview might have looked like, as well as a conscious innovation, the Heathens develop meaningful alternative religious practices and communities.

An important part of developing their modern version of Heathenism seems to be centred around Christianity as a reference point regarding what they wish to avoid or overcome, and hence, Christianity functions as a 'religious other' in the construction of the Heathen 'religious self'. However, the findings also suggest a strong awareness among the Heathens, regarding the history and current reality of racist and radical right-wing usages of elements from the very 'past' they turn to for inspiration. Hence, their process of constructing their religion also reflects a conscious manoeuvring around the possibility of feeding into this, and a conscious vision to rather strengthen an alternative and to 'save' the Norse symbols and gods from being 'lost' to the radical-right and neo-Nazis. In this sense, the racialist Heathens, or those who utilise Old Norse symbolism for extreme right-wing and racist political purposes, become a second 'religious other' who they construct their 'religious self' in opposition to.

6.1.1 Inclusivity through eclectically relating to 'the past'

In order to understand how this manoeuvring takes place, and the way in which the Heathens conceptually relate to 'the past', Strmiska's (2005) polarity between 'reconstructionist Paganism' and 'eclectic Paganism' is enlightening. As noted in the theoretical chapter, Strmiska suggests that the Pagans who seek to reconstruct a pre-Christian religion to "the highest degree possible" (Strmiska, 2005: 19), the 'reconstructionist Pagans', often tend to view an ethnic continuity or a continuous bloodline to be of importance. On the other hand, those who more "freely blend traditions of different areas, peoples, and time periods" (Strmiska, 2005: 19), the 'eclectic Pagans', deem ethnicity and bloodline to be irrelevant (Strmiska, 2005: 20).

The first theme presented in the findings chapter demonstrates a conscious self-representation and self-perception among the Bifrost- and Forn Sed-members of how the goal is *not* to reconstruct a lost religion. Instead, the Heathens express an awareness regarding the innovative aspect of their religion. Sentiments such as 'not being afraid of mixing', an openness to multiple religious belongings, actively asking questions of 'what can be thrown away', and actively seeking advice from the Parish Priest when developing a burial ritual clearly indicate how the vision of the faith communities is *not* to reconstruct the past. While all the informants I spoke to made it clear that their religion is rooted in pre-Christian Norse myths and traditions, the accounts uncovered in the first theme nevertheless indicate that they are perhaps more 'eclectic' than 'reconstructionist', following Strmiska's framework. For some of the practitioners, the strategy identified by Salomonsen (2002: 90) regarding "a hermeneutical distinction between content (spiritual roots) and form (historical roots)", might be applicable, as they emphasise a continuity of the god figures and the forces of nature. Nevertheless, it is clear that a strict reconstruction of the past religion is not the goal nor the ideal for Heathens in my study.

The second theme presented in the findings chapter, uncovered a universalist understanding of Åsatru among the Heathens. None of the informants saw Scandinavian heritage or a continuous bloodline to be a prerequisite to become Åsatru. Similarly, the Heathens I spoke to did not perceive the gods to be present only in Scandinavia, but rather to be universally available. Theme 2 therefore underlines the absence of focus on ethnicity and bloodlines and suggests instead an active distancing from such a focus. With this, Strmiska's suggested connection between being eclectic and deeming ethnicity to be of irrelevance seems to be affirmed by the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed and informative of how they conceptually relate to 'the past'.

However, Strmiska's suggested polarity between reconstructionist Pagans emphasising ethnicity, while eclectic Pagans deeming this irrelevant should certainly not be taken as an absolute. Ethnographic studies of contemporary Heathenism in Denmark and Sweden suggest that this is a rather flawed and overly simplified polarity. Gregorius (2015) and Amster (2015), through their ethnographic studies of Heathens in Denmark and Sweden respectively, demonstrate that in many cases, one cannot parallel efforts of reconstructionism with an emphasis on ethnicity. Both Gregorius and Amster identify examples of a desired 'authenticity' and a much stronger emphasis on continuity than what I have identified among

my informants. Nevertheless, most of these communities still reject an ethnicist or racialist component and attempt to avoid nationalistic discourses.

While being mindful of the limits of Strmiska's polarity, I find his theory of a coupling of the more eclectic Paganism and a stance against the significance of ethnicity to be of relevance in this study. The conscious rejection of an exact reconstruction or continuation of an old religion is a central component in the construction of the modern version of Åsatru among the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge. The awareness that goes into avoiding romanticising the past, or focusing on ethnic heritage, demonstrates how the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed manoeuvre the potentially troublesome field of Norse Heathenism. In my view, the self-perceived newness and the universalist approach is also central for enabling the inclusive character that the Heathens in both Bifrost and Forn Sed strive towards. Not only does this approach enable an inclusivity of practitioners of all backgrounds, ethnic, cultural, and geographical, it also enables inclusivity of elements from other religions and traditions.

The self-perceived newness and the universalist approach make it explicit that Bifrost and Forn Sed members embrace the contemporary, globalised, and religiously pluralistic modern world, and are with this, clearly 'world-affirming'. This is not to say that the more reconstructionist Heathens described by Amster (2015) and Gregorius (2015) are necessarily 'world-rejecting', but to emphasise that there are conscious tactics and efforts that go into constructing an *inclusive* Heathenism in Bifrost and Forn Sed. With these tactics and efforts, they are able to turn to a pre-Christian Norse past in order to counter certain aspects of status quo, while also avoiding fostering a hostility to 'the outside world' by being open for new impulses and inspirations in the moulding of their religion.

In addition to the inclusivity that is enabled by the self-perceived newness and the universalist approach, the findings accounted for in themes 3 and 4 uncover other features of how inclusivity is conceived and practiced in Bifrost and Forn Sed. While the features of inclusivity described above are easily understood in contrast to the exclusivity of the racialist Heathens, the features of inclusivity uncovered in theme 3 and 4 can be seen as being constructed against a perceived exclusivity of Christianity.

The individualistic character that is uncovered in theme 3 as a result of religious authority being given to the individual, very much resembles the accounts of the Heathen communities in Denmark and Sweden studied by Amster (2015) and Gregorius (2015 and 2008). Amster (2015: 45) describes a "considerable diversity in how people conceptualize their spiritual beliefs in Danish Åsatro and wide acceptance of the fact that people do not adhere to a

consistent set of beliefs", and Gregorius (2008: 196) provides a lengthy list of various polytheisms that he identifies among the Swedish Heathens, which further confirms the heterogeneity of Åsatru. This heterogeneity is also reflected in Michael York's (2003) attempt to establish Paganism as a 'world religion' and describe 'Pagan theology'. York (2003: 2-3) points to the modern world's "growing questioning of all authority" and the growing tendency of how "the individual is emerging as his or her own authority" when constructing their religion. The religious authority of the individual, and the following individualistic character of the religion in Bifrost and Forn Sed, is therefore clearly situated within larger trends of Paganism, where previous religious authorities are being challenged, and the focus shifts towards the individual. For many of the informants in my study, this reflected an inclusivity they did not find in the more established religions, (Christianity being the main reference point), where they experienced that you could only be included if you followed 'a set path' to truth. Being liberated from this 'set path' to truth, as 'truth' was instead something the individual themself had to experience through what 'feels right', was for the informants something that enabled an inclusivity of a diversity of variations and degrees of faith, spirituality, interest, or simply a curiosity of their religion into the community. It is important to note, that even though the informants stressed the value of individual freedom within their communities, they did indeed also express a sense of belonging and community; a community where difference and diversity valued.

This also indicates a variety in how the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed relate to 'the past', as there is much room for the individual to choose what to focus on and what to 'get rid of' when figuring out 'what works for me'. Additionally, it suggests the rather limited religious authority granted to 'the past', as the main authority lies with the individual, something which in turn indicates the development of the community's "styles of reasoning" (Anjum, 2007: 662) and that, as suggested by Asad (2009: 22-23), reason is intrinsic for the development of the discursive tradition, which in this case, is inclusive modern Heathenism.

Similar to how the individualistic characteristic of the religion in Bifrost and Forn Sed was to a large extent constructed in opposition to Christianity, so was the worldview and mindset they found in Åsatru. By attempting to overcome the dualist understanding of a definite good and a definite bad, the this-worldly and the transcendental, human and nature, as well as the dualism of gender, notions that were by many explicitly attributed to Christianity, the informants were able to find an alternative by using the available sources and imagining what the worldview might have been like '*before'*. Again, Christianity as a religious other seems

central in the construction of the religious self. In this context, constructing the religious self in opposition to a dualistic (Christian) worldview, enabled an inclusivity of various gender identities and expressions, as well as an ecological inclusivity through a certain "kinship with nature" (Rountree, 2012).

6.1.2 The limits of inclusivity

As with any religion, defining 'inclusive Heathenism' is a challenging task. "To define is to leave out some things and to include others" (Asad, 2001: 220), and is therefore inevitably always an act of exclusion. Hence, there is a sense of irony in attempting to define a religious community who seeks to be *inclusive*, and whose members stress diversity and heterogeneity as vital characteristics of their religion. By resisting strictly defined dogmas and religious identities, the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed are to an extent able to avoid the exclusionary act of defining themselves. However, as touched upon in the findings chapter, and as demonstrated in the discussion above, it is evident that there is indeed a line being drawn between those who belong and those who do not, as Christianity and racialist Heathenism is constructed as 'religious others'. Nevertheless, this line still seems to be drawn with the vision of 'inclusivity' in mind, as what is excluded in the definition of the religious self, seems to be based on a perception of 'the other' as non-inclusive.

6.2 The intricacies of modernity and being 'world affirming'

The discussion above demonstrates how the combination of conceptually relating to a pre-Christian past, and constructing Christianity as a religious other, while at the same time actively manoeuvring around nationalistic and racist pitfalls, and in this sense also relating to the racialist Heathenism as a religious other, enables the Heathens' in Bifrost and Forn Sed to construct a modern and inclusive Heathenism. This uncovers an intricate notion of and relation to 'modernity' as well as an intricate example of Wallis' (2019/1984) concept of being a 'world-affirming' religion.

Wallis holds that world-affirming new religions embrace the 'outside world' and affirms "its normatively approved goals and values" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 4) and that these religions do not offer an "escape or withdraw from the world and its values" (Wallis, 2019/1984: 23). The findings from my study do indeed demonstrate how 'normatively approved goals and values' of the contemporary world, such as globalisation, religious pluralism, multiculturalism, and individualism are reflected in the Heathen religion in Bifrost and Forn Sed, and the 'outside world' is by no means perceived of as threatening. However, the findings of my study have

also demonstrated that the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed do indeed challenge certain aspects of status quo of the contemporary world. This is particularly apparent in the accounts of how Åsatru offers the informants a way of overcoming a dualist mindset, by enabling a more integrated worldview. Hence, if the separation of human and nature, and the idea of humans as 'consumers' of nature is a value and goal of the contemporary world, the 'kinship with nature' that is being fostered in Bifrost and Forn Sed must be understood as a withdrawal from this.

Nevertheless, as I have argued, this can indeed still be considered 'world-affirming', in an extended notion of the concept, as this also includes an affirmation of nature. This suggests that being 'world-affirming' does not necessarily mean blatantly affirming the status quo of the contemporary world, but in this case entails a rejection of certain aspects of the status quo. This intricate case of being world-affirming also reflects Bifrost's and Forn Sed's complex relation to modernity, and elucidate how they exemplify one of multiple modernities, by challenging certain aspects of what tends to be considered 'modern', while rejecting others.

6.3 Summarising reflections

The discussion provided in this chapter has demonstrated how the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed have found 'a past', both through available source material about the Old Norse period and mythology, and through actively imagining this past, which they take as a vantage point for the development of practices that is fruitful for their needs in 'the present', and which fulfils their needs in a way they do not necessarily find in the more established religions. This is being done through establishing legitimate ways of reasoning, and actively defining 'racialist reasoning' as illegitimate.

For the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed, turning to the pre-Christian past is not about rejecting modernity, or seeking to reconstruct a lost religion or an alternative world order (such as seen in the racialists counterparts). Instead, they develop new practices and create community by engaging and partaking in the production of a discursive tradition, where 'the past' is used for inspiration for establishing an inclusive community, where the discursive tradition will continue to be preserved and further developed, also in the future. This active innovation, critical and experimental construction of modern Heathenism is a clear example of how Asad argues one should conceive of *any* religion:

> "The essence of each religion is this not something unchanging and unchangeable but something that is at once to be preserved and defined as well as argued over and reformed in the changing historical circumstances that the tradition inhabits. And people are religious to the extent that they belong actively to developing religious traditions, preserving or reformulating them" (Asad: 2001: 208).

As demonstrated, the Heathens in Bifrost and Forn Sed engage in a variety of ways in 'relating to the past', yet they are all a part of developing, preserving, and reformulating a religious tradition, and they share a vision of an inclusive tradition, which, as the empirical data attest to, is both multifaceted at the level of conception and complex at the level of practice.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and further research

Through this research project, I have delved into what was at first an entirely unfamiliar scholarly field to me, Pagan studies, and sought to understand how inclusive modern Heathens in Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed Norge construct their modern version of Åsatru and investigate what their notion of inclusivity entails. While this process has certainly provided me with a new and deeper understanding of contemporary Åsatru, it has also sparked new reflections regarding the concept of 'religion' more generally, as the accounts of the informants so explicitly testified for an active engagement in developing and reformulating a religious belief, practice, and community. Asad's (2009) conception of religion as discursive tradition helped to see these engagements in a bigger context, of what it means to be religious and what religion is and does. Additionally, the findings of this study have demonstrated the importance and value of listening to individual accounts from within the Heathen communities of Bifrost and Forn Sed, as the qualitative interviews uncovered a heterogeneity which would not be uncovered solely through a study of the communities' self-representation through the official websites.

The accounts of the Bifrost- and Forn Sed-members uncovered a strive towards an inclusive Heathenism, and a notion of inclusivity which was both multifaceted and central in their demarcation from the racialist and racist political usages of Old Norse myths and symbols. Their notion of inclusivity was reflected through a certain eclecticism, through a welcoming of people of all backgrounds, through their individualist approach to faith, which makes them inclusive of people with various degrees and expression (or even absence) of faith, as well as an inclusivity and affirmation also of the other-than-human, through a sense of 'kinship with nature'.

Due to the limited scope of this research project, the themes and findings uncovered in this study can be regarded as possible vistas for further elaboration and analysis. I therefore hope this study can spark further scholarly interest in the Heathen communities in Norway. For example, a comparative study of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed would likely offer interesting and important findings that have not been covered in this study. Additionally, as this research project is based on qualitative interviews, sufficient engagement with the actual *practices* of the members of Bifrost and Forn Sed was not possible. Ethnographic and more long-term studies of these communities would therefore offer new and interesting scholarly insights beyond the practitioners' own accounts of their religious practice. Additionally, as seen in ethnographic studies of Heathen communities in Sweden and Denmark, issues

regarding the role of politics within the communities is a central and interesting topic. The findings of this study were insufficient in drawing any conclusions regarding the role of politics in the Norwegian Heathen communities. Further research regarding this is therefore welcomed.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this research project have certainly highlighted some interesting insights which can be gained from paying attention to a small minority religion, which in many ways engage in a discursive tradition on behalf of the majority. 'The past' they turn to, is a past that constitutes Norway's shared heritage, and the work they do to 'secure the future' of this heritage by actively being a counterpart to the racist usages of the Norse symbols, is something which implicitly concerns far more than the members of Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost and Forn Sed.

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Appendix 1: NSD approval

NSD NORSK SENTER FOR FORSKNINGSDATA

NSD sin vurdering

Prosjekttittel

MA Thesis in Religion and Diversity; conflict and coexistence: A study of modern Heathens in Norway

Referansenummer

996860

Registrert

16.08.2021 av Hilde Rønnaug Kitterød - hilderk@uio.no

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Universitetet i Oslo / Det teologiske fakultet

Prosjektansvarlig (vitenskapelig ansatt/veileder eller stipendiat)

Jone Gro Salomonsen , j.g.salomonsen@teologi.uio.no, tlf: +4722850373

Type prosjekt

Studentprosjekt, masterstudium

Kontaktinformasjon, student

Hilde Rønnaug Kitterød, hilderk@student.teologi.uio, tlf: +4793872825

Prosjektperiode

23.08.2021 - 31.08.2022

Status

30.09.2021 - Vurdert

Vurdering (1)

30.09.2021 – Vurdert

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen, så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet 30.09.2021 med vedlegg, samt i meldingsdialogen mellom innmelder og NSD. Behandlingen kan starte.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET
Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige personopplysninger, særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om religion, filosofisk overbevisning, politisk oppfatning og rasemessig eller etnisk opprinnelse, frem til 31.08.2022.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 nr. 11 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse, som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

For alminnelige personopplysninger vil lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 a.

For særlige kategorier av personopplysninger vil lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER
NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen:

• om lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
• formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
• dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
• lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet.

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

NSD vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18) og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER
NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må prosjektansvarlig følge interne retningslinjer/rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER
Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilken type endringer det er nødvendig å melde:
https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema
Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET
NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Kontaktperson hos NSD: Anne Lene L. Nymoen

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Appendix 2: Information letter and consent form

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet til masteroppgave om hvordan norrøn mytologi og norrøne skikker blir praktisert i dag?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke hvordan norrøne skikker og mytologi blir praktisert i en moderne norsk kontekst. I dette skrivet gir jeg deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål
Denne forskningen vil bli brukt til en masteroppgave i masterprogrammet 'Religion and Diveristy Conflict and Coexistence' ved Det teologisk fakultet ved UiO. Formålet med prosjektet er å undersøke og forstå moderne praktisering av gamle norrøne skikker, med et særlig fokus på potensielle politiske konsekvenser. Prosjektet er basert på en annerkjennelse av at den norrøne tradisjonen ofte blir brukt politisk av høyreradikale aktører, og et ønske om å belyse og forstå hvordan norrøne skikker blir praktisert i en moderne kontekst av individer som ikke tilhører det ytre høyre. Oppgaven vil derfor undersøke følgende forskningsspørsmål: Hvordan praktiserer moderne hedninger i Norge norrøne skikker og mytologi på en måte som ikke nører opp under nasjonalistiske ideologier? Prosjektet vil i tillegg ta for seg spørsmål om hvordan, eller i hvilken grad, hedninger som genuint praktiserer gamle norrøne skikker forholder seg til at det norrøne ofte blir brukt som et høyreradikalt-politisk verktøy.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?
Det er Universitetet i Oslo som er ansvarlig for prosjektet og de innsamlede dataene vil kun bli brukt til én masteroppgave. Studie vil bli gjort av masterstudent Hilde Rønnaug Kitterød og veiledes av Jone Gro Salomonsen, professor ved Det teologiske fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?
Jeg ønsker å intervjue individer som genuint praktiserer eller interesserer seg for norrøne skikker. Du blir spurt om å delta på grunn av din tilknytning til Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost/Forn Sed Norge.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?
Sier du ja til å stille som informant i dette forskningsprosjektet vil du delta i et individuelt dybdeintervju. Intervjuet vil vare i omtrent en time og kan holdes enten fysisk eller digitalt. Intervjuet vil bli tatt opp og senere transkribert. I intervjuet vil du få spørsmål om dine egne tanker om og erfaringer med både Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost/Forn Sed Norge og din personlige tro eller praktisering. Du vil også bli spurt om du opplever at din tro er blitt annektert av høyreradikale aktører og om hvordan du eventuelt forholder deg til dette.

Det er frivillig å delta
Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger
Vi vil kun bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. Det er kun vi som vil ha tilgang til opptaket av intervjuet samt transkripsjonen. Filene vil være kryptert og sikkerhetsmessig lagret. Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine vil bli erstattet med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data. Du vil bli anonymisert i selve publikasjonen. Det er likevel mulighet for at noen av dine erfaringer og historier er gjenkjennelige for andre internt i Åsatrufelleskapet Bifrost/Forn

Sed Norge, siden organisasjonen er så liten. Dette er kun aktuelt om historiene du deler er relevant for oppgaven. Opplysninger om det mellommenneskelige livet i organisasjonen som vil kunne identifisere deg vil ikke bli brukt. Du vil ikke være gjenkjennelig for noen utover dette.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?
Opplysningene vil som sagt anonymiseres i publikasjonen, så godt det lar seg gjøre, og alle personlige opplysninger vil bli slettet etter at prosjektet er avsluttet. Prosjektet forventes å være avsluttet sommeren 2022.

Dine rettigheter
Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:
innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene,
å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
å få slettet personopplysninger om deg, og
å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?
Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra UiO har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?
Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:
Universitet i Oslo ved Jone Gro Salomonsen på j.g.salomonsen@teologi.uio.no
Vårt personvernombud: Roger Markgraf-Bye på personvernombud@uio.no

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:
NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Med vennlig hilsen

Jone Gro Salomonsen (Veileder)
Hilde Rønnaug Kitterød (Masterstudent)

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om masterprosjektet om hvordan norrøn mytologi og norrøne skikker blir praktisert i dag, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- ☐ å delta i individuelt dybdeintervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

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(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix 3: Interview guide

Innledning og bakgrunn

- Bakgrunn – fortell litt om deg selv
- Din tilknytning/rolle i organisasjonen

Tro, praktisering og trossamfunnet

- Hva slags betegnelse bruker du om deg selv?
  - Åratru/Hedning/religiøs/spirituell?
  - Hva legger du i dette?
- Hvordan er det å være med i Bifrost/Forn Sed?
- Hva gjør dere sammen i Bifrost/Forn Sed?
- Tar du del i ritualer og blot?
- Hvor ofte?
- Hva er et blot?
  - Hvordan foregår det?
  - Når foregår det?
  - Hvor foregår det?
  - Hvem deltar i ritualet? (både personer og makter/guder/forfedre)?
  - Hvem bestemmer hvordan det skal foregå?
  - Hvordan kommer man fram til hvordan det skal foregår?
  - Hva pleier du å ofre?
  - Hvordan oppleves det for deg?
- Er religionen din til stede/viktig for deg i hverdagen din? Hvordan?
- Tror du på guder?
- Er det i så fall enkelte guder som er viktige for deg?
- Hva er det som gjør at denne guden/disse gudene er viktige for deg?
  - Årstid?
  - Livssituasjon?

Bakgrunn og motivasjon for medlemskap i Bifrost/Forn Sed

- Vokste du opp med religion?
- Tidligere interesse for religion/spiritualitet?
- Hvordan 'fant du frem til'/ble introdusert til/interessert i Åsatru?
- Hvordan endte du opp i akkurat Bifrost/Forn Sed?

- Pleier du være åpen om religionen din?
- Hvordan reagerer andre på din religion?

- Hvorfor tenker du det er viktig å vekke til liv/videreføre/hente inspirasjon fra det norrøne?
- Tenker du at du praktiserer en gammel religion som har overlevd eller er det noe som er blitt gjenskapt?
- Er det en religion alle kan ta del i?

Politikk

- Opplever du at det er et politisk meningsmangfold i Bifrost/Forn Sed?

Økende global interesse for det norrøne

- Hva tenker du om at det er fler og fler som praktiserer norrøn mytologi andre steder i verden?
- Hva tenker du om at det norrøne er blitt populært også i popkulturen og tiltrekker seg stor internasjonal interesse?

Høyreradikalt bruk av det norrøne

- Hva synes du om at det finnes folk både i Norge og internasjonalt som bruker elementer fra det norrøne til høyreradikale agendaer?
- Er dette noe du opplever at du må forholde deg til på noen måte?
- *Referer til seksjonen om rasisme/diskriminering på hjemmesiden* – vet du noe om bakgrunnen for opprettelsen av denne seksjonen?

- Er det noe du ønsker å legge til?