



# *Nordic Ideology between Religion and Scholarship*

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EDITION

# Introduction:

## Nordic Ideology, Religion and Scholarship

*Horst Junginger and Andreas Åkerlund*

### 1. The Relevance of the Nordic Myth

Although our modern understanding of the world seems to oppose timeworn stereotypes such as the “North” and proscribed ideologies such as Nordic or *völkisch* ones, the Nordic myth is perhaps only hibernating and may be reinvigorated if time and circumstances allow. In the current financial market crises, many and sometimes tough accusations have been voiced against those lazy people in the southern parts of Europe who would squander the money of hard working people further to the north. If they continue with both their incapability and unwillingness to stick to Northern standards in terms of economy, labour and a less idle attitude toward life, the only appropriate answer would be to discipline them or possibly show them the door. And not far below Greece the black abyss lies in waiting to overrun Europe exploiting its social welfare system and the wreck of its prosperity.

The ideological borderlines of European Nordicism have, quite obviously, shifted from eastern Communism and western Capitalism towards the south in geographical as well as in political and religious concerns and are now primarily directed at the spread of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. And again the question becomes pressing how Europe and the North may attain a defensible coherence by means of common ideas and values. Since identity formations generally function better by way of distinction, the fight against everything perceived as dangerous and hostile usually supersedes all efforts for a positive definition of Europe rapidly. Ideological unity still seems to be unachievable without an ideological enemy. In states of tension, intellectuals often fall prey to or even profit from the conceptualisation of otherness, having no qualms about acting against the principles of scientific universalism and the international constitution of scholarship.

Due to the general rejection of everything connected with National Socialism any new form of Nordicism will, at least in the respectable parts of our societies, have to take a detour around ordinary forms of nationalism or proto-Nazi ideas. Therefore, it is little wonder that the political programmes of conservative revolutionaries are undergoing a revival these days and that socio-biological views centring on a *homo europaeus* in the tradition of Madison Grant (1865–1937), the influential anti-miscegenation activist and propagator of a “scientific racism”, are booming. Beyond that, eugenic and racist ideas proliferate all over Europe’s far right and Northern imaginations are bundled into fascist sheaves anew. The *European Declaration of Independence* of Anders Behring Breivik (born 1978) is greatly influenced by Madison Grant’s postulation of genetic purity, which Breivik takes as an

ideological tool for the defence of Europe against the Islamic intruders from outside and the Marxist adversaries from within.<sup>1</sup> Breivik e-mailed his manifesto to some 1,000 addressees shortly before the Oslo blast and the Utøya massacre on 22 July 2011, many of them members of the Christian right, but also Pagan Odinists. While Breivik concedes Odinism is part of the nascent movement against the political establishment, he strongly emphasised that only a powerful Christian self-consciousness in the tradition of the Templars would have the power to overthrow multiculturalism, cultural Marxism and the Islamic threat. Posing the rhetorical question of whether Odinists could become part of a resistance movement based on Christian values, he answered in the affirmative: “Even Odinists can fight with us or by our side as brothers in this fight as long as they accept the founding principles of PCCTS, Knights Templar and agree to fight under the cross of the martyrs.”<sup>2</sup> Breivik’s Nordic worldview seeks to transcend a narrow-minded understanding of Christianity into a rightist interconfessionalism, similar to the sorts seen in the 1930s and 40s.

In his own words, Breivik studied Old Norse mythology and had “a lot of respect for Odinist traditions”, thinking highly of them as an important part of Norwegian culture and identity. He nevertheless left no doubts about his own religious commitment and the ideological superiority of Christianity compared to Nordic Paganism:

Odinism is significant for the Nordic countries but it does not have the potency to unite us against such a devastating force as Islam, cultural Marxism/multiculturalism and capitalist globalism.<sup>3</sup>

Only the reinvigoration of a military Christian spirit would avert the ongoing attack on the occidental way of life. As Europe is at the edge of disaster, immediate action, indeed a holy war, would be necessary to prevent its extinction. The Christian basis of Breivik’s imaginations of the North unfortunately passed widely unheeded in the public debate and did not attract the scholarly attention it deserves. Since Christian terrorism is generally conceived as a contradiction in itself, someone like Breivik appears to be completely alien to the majority. His view of things is therefore relegated from a possible option within the mainstream discourse of the radical right to a state of mental illness. Breivik must be crazy, otherwise he could not

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1 Breivik’s manifest 2083: *A European Declaration of Independence* is to be found all over the web. It considers 2083 the year when the conservative revolution ought to be completed. Four hundred years earlier the Great Turkish War, the War of the Holy League initiated by Pope Innocent XI, had started to expel the Ottoman troops from Europe in 1683. 2083 means 2011 by way of adding 8+3 in the second part of the number.

2 Breivik, *A European Declaration of Independence*, p. 1360. PCCTS is the abbreviation of *Panperes Commilitones Christi Templique Solomonici*, the Poor Fellow Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon (Christian Military Order of the Temple).

3 Ibidem, p. 1361.

have committed such crimes, such ungodly deeds in opposition to all human values and Christian tenets.<sup>4</sup>

On a less dramatic level and far away from religious-based violence, Northern myths also prevail in our present day culture, where they normally appear in the form of romantic idealisations of the North. The clearness and naturalness of the Scandinavian landscape and people are not only cited by the leaflets of tourist agencies but have found widespread, almost global, acceptance. Scandinavia's welfare system continues to be appreciated as a symbol of Nordic solidarity and as model of how a wholesome folk community could and should function. Other examples may be added to one's liking. Nothing is wrong with a particular predilection for Nordic literature, Nordic jazz or Nordic crime movies even if those preferences come along with an element of resentment toward other forms of film, music and literature. If we are honest to ourselves, we have to concede that our own mindset is not always as free of bias as we like to imagine. Individual preferences for what people like to label "Nordic" should therefore be accepted as unproblematic, but not without question, as it is difficult to differentiate a clear line where the tolerable inclination ends and the questionable preconceptions start. Well before the advent of fascism, plenty of myths and illusions connected with the North flourished all over Europe in various branches of the arts as well as in tourism and sales promotion without exceedingly adverse effects. But it is quite evident that economic and political depressions, not to speak of the chaotic aftermath subsequent to military conflicts, inevitably generate derogatory prejudices of all sorts and reinforce the tendency towards aggressive encapsulations or even hatred against others. To put a stop to violent clashes becomes almost impossible when feelings have started to run high. Perhaps only education and knowledge acquired long time in advance may have the necessary countervailing effects when the going gets tough.

## 2. The Starting Point of this Volume

The present volume originates from an international symposium on "Nordic Ideology between Religion and Scholarship. Pagan and Christian Imaginations in Scandinavian-German Scientific Exchange in the First Half of the 20th Century" that was organised by the authors of this introduction and that took place at the University of Uppsala from 23–25 August 2010. Participants came from Sweden, Germany, Finland, Norway and Australia. It was our intention to address with it the religious and scientific contexts in which the idea of the North evolved into a mainstay of extreme nationalism not only in National Socialist Germany but also in a number of pro Nazi-German movements in Scandinavia. Based on the initial ob-

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4 It should be noted here that Christian terrorists, unlike Islamic terrorists, are considered to act in contrast and not in compliance with their religion and holy writ.

servation that the imagination of the North could prosper equally on Pagan as well as on Christian premises, the religious indistinctness of the Nordic idea required, in our view, scientific clarification. The revival of Nordic and Old Norse myths was not restricted to an anti-Christian heathendom, where it served as spiritual fundament of a new Pagan religion. Also within the realm of Christianity, especially among Lutheran Protestantism and *völkisch* German Christians, the idea of a Nordic heritage found a firm rooting. Common features in the intersection of Nordic types of Christianity and Paganism included the deeply ingrained antagonism against Judaism and Bolshevism in first place. To a lesser extent the imperialism of the British Empire functioned as political antipode to consolidate the idea of a Nordic alliance especially in the course of World War I and II. After 1945, the political post-war constellation compelled a modification of the old enemy images that were partly abandoned, regenerated or complemented by new spectres of exaggerated libertarianism carried to extremes by the hippie subculture.

In addition to the strictly religious parts of the Nordic idea, the aim of the conference was directed at a new scholarly occupation with the North that increased considerably in the first half of the twentieth century. From a narrow-minded religious or anti-religious perspective the amalgamation of religion and science looks as it would be improper or mutual exclusive. On the contrary, however, the correlation between scientific and religious constituents is an indispensable prerequisite for any successful religion or religious worldview in modern times. Therefore, disciplines like archaeology, Germanic and Nordic studies, ethnography, folklore studies, history, prehistory and especially religious studies featured prominently in the shaping of what counted as “North” and “Nordic”. In search for the inner bonds of the assumed fellowship of all Nordic men and peoples, a science-based religious perception turned out to be the crux of the matter. Questions of spiritual kinship became closely intertwined with questions of biological lineage. Since the natural and biological sciences totally failed to produce any definitive evidence of a Nordic race or of hereditary traits of its members, other factors had to constitute the community of the North and establish a reliable border dividing between Nordic and un-Nordic. A combination of religious and scientific explanations provided the ideological basis for the setup of a commonly shared Nordic identity with the final goal of justifying the supremacy of the North and rationalising a ‘natural’ contradiction between people of Nordic descent and their opponents.

The conference also wanted to shed light on the differences between Scandinavia and Germany with regard to the perception of the Old Norse heritage and its role for the construction and reconstruction of the Nordic Myth. It is obvious that the use of Old Norse material to forge the nation’s past differed considerably between the Scandinavian countries, possessing a lot of pre-Christian antiquities, and Germany, which had no remnants of that time. On both sides of the Baltic, the “North” was thus perceived and defined in different ways long before the period treated in this volume. Any comparative approach therefore has to be attentive to these variations of the same pattern “North” resulting from different historical

conditions. But Germany and Scandinavia were no strangers to each other since there has always been an intensive contact over the Baltic Sea. Contact does however rarely mean equality. At least since the nineteenth century, Germany was an important, if not the most important, reference point or even role model for Swedish intellectual, military and economic elites. At the same time, German intellectuals such as the brothers Grimm showed great interest in Scandinavian pre-Christian culture, using it as a mythological fountain of youth for the German nation. This relationship, formulated as a *Wahlverwandschaft* (elective affinity) between the “Germanic peoples”, is vital for the understanding of the contributions in this book.

The huge impact of the German academe on the intellectual life in Scandinavia and the close cultural contacts between the two regions do however raise the question of how ideas and ideologies ‘travelled’ between them. This addresses the important question of intellectual transfer through publications and personal contacts. The idea of transfer does however mean that both the dislocation and relocation of ideas always entail reinterpretations, which have to be adapted to new political and cultural circumstances. Transfer studies concerning the scientific and *völkisch* Nordicism would not only show patterns of selective reception based in the different scientific and cultural contexts of Germany and Scandinavia, but also help to problematise the idea of a shared image of the North on both sides of the Baltic Sea.

The symposium’s main objective was to fathom the ideological principles and intellectual depth of European Nordicism. Owing to the great number of mythologems that have gained currency in various subject areas under the umbrella term “North”, a reflective interdisciplinarity is needed to deal with the iridescent and multifaceted character of the Nordic idea adequately. It is not easy to apply stable categories to a rather unstable and frayed topic and develop tenable generalisations in so doing. Therefore we thought it important to bring together different scholarly approaches and methodologies to overcome a mere phenomenology of glimmering ideas and repulsive behaviours characteristic of the *völkisch* or Nordic movement. Only if we widen our disciplinary perspective and sharpen our theoretical tools it will be possible to deal with the ramifications and heterogeneous character of the Nordic idea. The question of how the situation in Scandinavia coincided or stood at odds with the German understanding of the North still waits to be answered on the background of a broad analysis of European politics, religion and culture. As a matter of course, international cooperation has to be strengthened in the case of a transnational attempt at a better understanding of Nordic imaginations. Although history does not repeat itself, the reinvigoration of the North as an ideological reference point to cluster fears and threats connected with the East, the West or the South is far from being a purely scientific issue in the world of today. The success of populist right-wing parties everywhere in Europe and the devastating activities of terrorist cells and lone fighters in their wake demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the Nordic myth in a blatantly obvious manner.

Five months after the symposium on “Nordic Ideology between Religion and Scholarship” we held another international congress at the University of Uppsala

from 17–18 January 2011 on “Sven Hedin and His Relationship with Germany: An Elective Affinity Based on Mutual Sympathies”. Two contributions of that gathering – the one by Isrun Engelhardt and the one by Harmut Walravens – have become part of the present collection of articles. Both conferences arose from a research stay of the German signatory of this preface in Uppsala that resulted from a generous grant of the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation. It is my particular desire to thank the foundation in Stockholm for the bestowal of its esteemed Humboldt Award that gave me the opportunity for an intensive exchange as scholar in residence at the Department of History at Uppsala University. Many thanks go to the History Department and the Forum for German Studies (*Forum för Tysklandsstudier*) in Uppsala for their logistic backing. The Forum for German Studies also supported both conferences financially. The main funding however came from the Swedish Research Council and the Torsten and Ragnar Söderberg’s Foundation. From my German perspective I cannot do otherwise but praise the dependable and unbureaucratic way in which both institutions allocated their subsidies.

### 3. Particular Aspects of the Nordic Myth as Presented in this Volume

The first part of the book provides clarification of what usually figures into the Nordic idea and ideology. Uwe Puschner starts with an historical survey of the emerging *völkisch* movement and the intrusion of its political slogans into the public discourse in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century. He makes clear that *völkisch* worldviews were based on certain historical premises and accompanied by particular linguistic characteristics, distinguishing the literal meaning of the word “folk” and its derivations from related semantic fields around notions such as ethnicism, chauvinism, conservatism, jingoism, nationalism, Nordicism, patriotism, populism, racism and such like. The well-known impossibility of translating the German expression *völkisch* into other languages is caused by the glimmering nature of the *völkisch* ideology itself. Even today, scholars are bothered with definitional problems and try to determine the specific nature of the *völkisch* concept properly. Puschner outlines a large part of the relevant literature on various aspects of the *völkisch* idea and movement. He brings to mind how difficult it is to achieve appropriate generalisations in the complicated habitat where the Nordic mindset evolves. Particularly in the transition towards “normal” forms of national hyperbole, problems differentiating the precise meaning of the *völkisch* or Nordic surplus increase. Specifying the role of the German paradigm appears therefore as plausible option to attain a better understanding of the ideological content and function of *völkisch* Nordicism in Europe.

Horst Junginger treats in his article the question of whether the general trend towards a non- or anti-Christian interpretation of the North in the SS and related organisations was really representative of the situation in National Socialist Germany as a whole. Contrary to the assumptions of the so-called historiography of the church struggle, we have in fact no reliable data of the extent of the estrangement from Christianity and the breadth of the interest in founding a new heathen religion. None of the various Pagan groups in Germany succeeded in imparting its religious agenda to the SS or gained any significant influence in the Third Reich. Quite the reverse, their proverbial and well-kept sectarianism constituted a key obstacle to the forming of a new Nordic religion. In fact, almost all branches of organised Paganism fell under the surveillance of the SD, the Secret Service of the SS, being considered a menace to the unification of the German people. Though NS politicians frequently used the anti-Christian impetus of the *völkisch* religious movement to put pressure on the churches, Pagans failed to shift National Socialism in the direction of a Nordic, Germanic, or Indo-Germanic religion. This notwithstanding, it has to be conceded that a significant part of the SS leadership and a considerable number of intellectuals sympathetic to organisations such as the Ahnenerbe of the SS were in search of a new Nordic worldview encompassing elements of a Pagan religion. That this kind of religious seeking would have led to church-like structures, the establishment of a Pagan priesthood and the creative “invention” of novel gods and dogmas appears to be quite unlikely. Treating the SS Ahnenerbe, the brain trust of Himmler’s black order, and its activities in terms of a conventional think tank and not as spearhead of a new Pagan religion, Junginger pleads for a better distinction between supernatural religions and intermundane worldviews, with an interesting contact zone in between.

Section two deals with the ideological absorption of intellectuals in Germany and Sweden who put emphasis on particular aspects of the Nordic myth. Debora Duse explores at the beginning how a number of politically and ideologically involved scholars such as Jakob Wilhelm Hauer (1881–1962), Bernhard Kummer (1897–1962) and Åke Ohlmarks (1911–84) managed to include the system change that took place after World War II in their scientific agenda. Following the idea of a “surplus value” of Eddic literature, Duse’s starting point is the observation that academics working on Old Norse material had an explicit or implicit interest in transcending the aridity of academic scholarship towards worldview issues related to the demands of one’s own folk and life. Translating and writing commentaries on the *Poetic Edda* and the *Snorra Edda*, as adapting features of Norse mythology to original literary works, provided these intellectuals with the opportunity to expound their political views in scientific guise. This occurred in marked contrast to the marginal importance of the Eddic tradition in scientific contexts (in opposition to political ones) in previous times when the focus regarding the Old Norse tradition had been on the Icelandic sagas. The main reason for that bias was the primacy of the interest in Nordic or Germanic culture, of which religion was only one aspect.



Another reason arose from a different reading of the Eddic texts and the mythological value attributed to them regarding their capacity to function as a source for the resuscitation of an Old Norse religion. The spectrum of interpretations ranged from the idea of the Edda as a Germanic or Nordic bible of *völkisch* Pagans to treating the texts as a strictly literary tradition transmitted in Iceland in Christian times. Hence Dusse underlines the various ways in which the reception of the Eddas evolved among philologists, historians of religions as well as in Pagan contexts before and after 1945.

What happened to the Nordic or *völkisch* strain within Old Norse studies after 1945? This question is approached by Bernard Mees in his contribution on Walter Baetke (1884–1978). Professor of history of religion in the Third Reich and of Nordic philology in the German Democratic Republic at the University of Leipzig, Baetke is probably best known for his 1942 study *Das Heilige im Germanischen*. After the war, Baetke turned more surely to Old Norse mythology, where he continued developing his prewar reputation as a critic of romantic excess. He moreover played an important role for the re-shaping of religious studies in both parts of Germany. Criticised recently for his radical source criticism, Baetke seems to have adopted a quite transformed attitude toward the studies of Old Germanic Heil after 1945. Yet what does Baetke's skepticism mean for the modern-day understanding of Heil in Old Norse and Germanic studies? Did he become a hypercritic after 1945 or was his work from the Nazi period itself tainted by the obvious association of Königsheil with the Führer cult? Dealing with these kinds of questions, Mees analyses the context of Baetke's understanding of Heil in light of recent studies of Germanic antiquity, post-war academic apologetics and influential discourses of Aryanism, leadership and charisma, which prevailed in the years of the Nazi dictatorship. Whereas the fact that Baetke's political opposition to National Socialism was grounded on a conservative Christian point of view is beyond question, his scholarly position regarding Old Norse studies appears more ambivalent and open to interpretation, as Mees shows.

In the case of the German-Dutch amateur historian Herman Wirth (1885–1981), his classification as a staunch propagator of National Socialist Germanophilia is unambiguous and leaves little space for reservation. As founding member of the predecessor organisation of the SS Ahnenerbe and inventor of what he himself titled *Geistesurgeschichte*, Wirth can be seen as a paradigmatic model of Germany's scientific decline in the time of fascism. The article by Luitgard Löw casts fresh light on Wirth's work after his exclusion from the Ahnenerbe in 1938. Already at the beginning of 1939, Wirth approached the Swedish National Antiquarian Sigurd Curman (1879–1966) with a treatise on Scandinavian rock art sites that would reveal the symbolism of an ancient Indo-Germanic religion. Wirth moreover claimed that the ideograms he had detected during two expeditions on behalf of the Ahnenerbe in Sweden in 1935/6 would be the definite proof of a primeval Nordic civilisation, which, however, had been over-layered and partly destroyed by Christianity

in later times. Wirth's interpretation of the runic alphabet in particular was intended to provide material evidence of the high level of civilisation the Germanic forefathers had reached long before the advent of alien traditions such as Jewish Christianity. Wirth occupied himself with all sorts of "Nordic" signs, cultic symbols, writing systems and iconographic remnants, merging them together without consideration of geography or dating. On the basis of a wide variety of studies, he detected age-old symbols, myths and narratives, which he used to imaginatively reconstruct a primeval Indo-Germanic worldview that would have originated from the Arctic and have gone back to Palaeolithic times. With the handwritten excerpt from a manuscript titled *Den store Gudens äldsta runor* (The Great God's Oldest Runes), Wirth hoped to convince the Swedish antiquarian Curman to enable his admission into the Swedish academe. Since the book has not been discovered yet, the summary preserved by Curman in his archival records in Stockholm is of great significance for a better understanding of Wirth's Nordic *völkisch* mythology. Given the importance of Wirth for the *völkisch* movement as such, we thought it helpful and reasonable to include an English translation of Wirth's treatise on The Great God's Oldest Runes as addendum at the end of this volume.

Anders Gerdmar is concerned with another vital aspect of *völkisch* Nordicism within the Protestant context, that is to say with an explicit Christian form of *völkisch* antisemitism. It was not only among Pagans, but also among German Christians that the Jewish people functioned as ideological counter-model against which almost all positive values could be set against. Gerdmar's analysis of the Protestant theologian and Luther specialist Erich Vogelsang (1904–44) reveals how a *völkisch* reading of the anti-Jewish statements of the great sixteenth century reformer functioned as religious and political justifications of the Third Reich's persecution policy. Studying the precursors of National Socialist exegesis in German Protestant theology, Gerdmar saw himself confronted with the question how to gauge the general nature of the relationship between Protestantism and Judaism. The Protestant faith had been such an important ideological element in German culture that its anti-Jewish impetus must have had an extraordinary impact on the shaping and spreading of antisemitic resentments. This holds true for Protestant currents of all denominational shades but particularly for upright proponents of Lutheran theology. For that reason, Gerdmar focuses on Protestant confessional and enlightenment theology with regard to their common theological roots and stance towards Judaism. He argues that fundamentals of Protestant theology such as the Law-Gospel distinction not only favoured a dichotomy where Jews represented the negative side, but that this trace can be found in both of the otherwise divided lines in German Protestantism.

Lena Berggren presents the Swedish Manhem Society as one of the most important Swedish pro-Nazi associations. The society was founded in September 1934 in memory of the scientist and writer Olaus Rudbeck (1630–1702) who had published a large treatise *Atlant eller Manhem* at the end of the seventeenth century