

Reconstructionism's Role in Modern Heathenry

Bil Linzie

07.13.07

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. The Faulty Phrase
3. Reconstructionism
4. The 'Impossible' List
5. Towards Developing Practical Applications

Licensed under the Creative Commons (USA) Attribution-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported

You are free:

* to Share -- to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

* Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

* No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

* For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is to copy this notice onto the reproduction.

* Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

* Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.

Abstract

Reconstructionism is a term which has become very common among modern heathens over the past decade. This short article explains the rationale behind the philosophical approach to studying ancient heathenry and its role in the ongoing development of modern heathenry. In spite of its recent popularity, it has limitations which are inherent. These limits when built into experimental design can function as a prophylactic feature preventing the revitalization of heathenry from becoming mixed with the various strains of 'alternative religions' while assuring that modern continues to develop in a manner consistent with the moral and ethics of modern culture.

1 Introduction

Before the year 2000 CE the term 'reconstructionism' was rarely heard or seen in conjunction with modern heathenry. When we started writing our articles,¹ we received mostly friendly reviews as well as a handful of rants against the concept. Undaunted, we pursued. Initially the point was to expose the sources of many of the accepted rituals and traditions of Ásatrú. This was not meant to be anger-inducing nor were we trying to undermine the efforts of the good folk trying to revitalize the old heathen religion of the Germanic peoples. We simply felt that on a personal level that heathenry should be rebuilt on historical fact and that by encouraging this we were stepping forward to support its validity in the modern world.

Over the years, there appears to have been some misunderstanding about what reconstructionism actually means and how it might be important to the revitalization efforts of heathens worldwide. We address these issues in this paper. Some have grown to feel that 'reconstructionism' is the be-all-to-end-all, and that if one is not a dyed-in-the-wool reconstructionist only, one is simply not heathen, so we have taken it upon ourselves to clarify the term, its meaning, how it can play a role in modern heathenry.

To the credit of our detractors who have attempted to point out that reconstructionism has its shortcomings, we are aware that shortcomings exist, but we also maintain that these are, generally, in the application of the philosophical approach and that what are being listed as 'shortcomings' are, in reality, the natural limitations of the philosophy of reconstructionism.² We feel that by having knowledge of what the idea is, what it is capable of, and what the nature of the shortcomings are, the approach should be of benefit to all adherents of the Germanic heathen religions.

Lastly, as a favor to those who may not have read our other papers dealing with 'reconstructionism,' we provide some background as to the rationale for its development. Again, this is not done to incite, but is merely and informational regarding the evolution of modern organized heathenry from its start in the late 60s up to the present. The fact is that we, as modern heathens of 40 years, believe that heathenry has only improved in spite of what at the time looked like 'setbacks.' With our exposés of modern heathenry's sources, we hope to continue improving on quality of heathenry by supporting and shoring up its rich, historical foundations.

2 The Faulty Phrase

"In the beginning was the phrase, and the phrase was with 'the Movement.' And the phrase was 'the Movement.'"

In the United States starting in the mid-1950s through the 1960s something new was happening. Large numbers of people feeling cheated by organized religion, primarily Christianity, were experimenting with 'new religions'. These 'new religions' were based on older religions, often the indigenous religions of native peoples either long dead or still living such as the Aztec, Maya, Native Americans, shamanism, Buddhism, ancient Celts, ancient Greeks, ancient Romans, ancient Germans, etc. These

¹The first article, Germanic Spirituality was published under a Creative Commons Deed on July 11, 2003, at <http://www.angelfire.com/nm/seidhman> A total of 3 articles have been published in this manner so far.

²The average person would not classify a bird's inability to fly to the moon as being a 'shortcoming,' either. The inability is a natural limitation. There are certain limitations inherent in the idea of 'reconstructionism' as well.

new religions were like new pieces of jewelry twisted out of strands of ancient wires, and the solder which held the piece together was the new concept of religion offered up by Gerald Gardner and his successors commonly called Wicca. By the mid-1960s, however, individuals were beginning to question the validity of Wicca and began wondering what traditional religions would have looked like had they stayed alive. The ancient religions of the Celts, Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, etc. and some of the spiritual explorers including this author turned away from the alternative twisted strand approach offered by Wicca and began focusing on re-creating the religion of a single culture.

Modern heathenry came together in the United States as an organized movement circa 1974 under Stephen McNallan with his Ásatrú Free Assembly also known as the AFA. Prior to that there had been small collectives of individuals around the country who felt the the religion of the ancient Norse could be revived, but none of these were really organized. The AFA became the central 'campus' with a common goal to which everyone involved could adhere: "We will re-create the religion of the ancient Germans." By utilizing the AFA as a central clearinghouse for information, individuals were able to publish their research in *The Runestone*, the official journal of the AFA, so that all could share. The premise for re-creating the religion was simple: by studying Norse and German mythology in great detail, we should be able to piece together the ancient religion bit by bit in the same fashion that an archaeologist will re-create an ancient amphora with all its beautiful decorations and designs intact. And so the project was underway.

Snags and sticking points were discovered in reconstructing the amphora of religion early on. We had access, of course, to the ancient Norse sagas, to the Norse eddas, as well as fragments of ancient German literature, histories, etc. and began to note that there were many discrepancies and inconsistencies. We had descriptions of ancient rituals, but we do not have a script for any of them. We had literary descriptions of ritual objects, but few if any of these ritual objects had been uncovered by archaeologists. We even had the pieces in hand but were unable to discover the shape of the jar. So we took what we knew of religion, assuming that this was the basic shape of the jar, and using this as our 'blank' began slowly and meticulously to assemble the bits and pieces together onto the blank core. By the late 1970s we had a re-created religion which was able to stand and hold its own against any of the 'mix-and-match' wiccan religions of the time.

But what we have presented here, so far, is a very one-sided picture, however. Unbeknownst to many of us involved with the AFA and later developing groups, the workgroups of people both within the United States and abroad who were doing much of the same thing: re-creating the ancient religion of the Germanic peoples. Under Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson was the Ásatrúarmenn in Iceland, in Germany, the GGG, in Britain, the Odinic Rite, in the United States, Seax Wica under Raymond Buckland, and under Garman Lord was the beginnings of what would later be known as the Theodish movement. Interestingly, many of the groups were utilizing the same approach as we were with the exception of the Icelanders. Each group, independently, in their own time and in their own place were studying the sagas and poetry and were bit by bit piecing together a religion to be revived in the 20th-century.

At the beginning of the revitalization of the ancient Germanic religion there was the phrase: "the ancient Germanic religion." It was this phrase which spurred many of us on to learning Germanic languages so that we could read the originals and so that we could rebuild and bring back to life that which had been long dead. The phrase did, indeed, beget a movement, but none of us at the time could fully grasp the idea that the fundamental elements underlying the phrase itself were wrong.

A favorite activity that in those days was to scour old Norse dictionaries looking for terms pertaining to 'soul,' 'magic,' 'fate,' and 'religion.' We found many words pertaining to these concepts but the closest we could come to the word for 'religion' could best be defined as 'having faith in' and it became part of the name for heathenry as it was known at the time: Ásatrú. Not only were we having a difficult time finding an ancient Germanic word for religion, other words seem to be missing as well. A word for 'belief' didn't exist until after the conversion to Christianity. In other words, we could not find a heathen word which meant 'belief.' This did not stop the revitalization of the ancient

Germanic religion, however; we decided early on that just because it wasn't word for it didn't mean that it didn't exist during the heathen period. We were willing to accept this at face value.³

In the United States it was not until the 1990s when some began to question our basic assumptions. It puzzled some of us that scholarly authors, educated authors in Germanic studies, after our first 20 years, still did not recognize our efforts, the advances that we believed we had made in recovering the ancient Germanic religion. We felt that this was simply an oversight on their part because they spent most of their time pouring through old source material and history books and were not looking to see what was happening in the real world. By this time, however, many of our own were also receiving good educations under good professors and at recognized universities. Many of us were reading scholarly works as well as the dozens of small, independent journals put together by modern heathens. E-mail was becoming more and more common at the time and some began questioning the disparity between what the scholars were writing and what the heathens themselves were writing in this disparity became the heated focus of many discussions in the e-mail lists at the time. In the modern heathen community a rift was beginning to form. Questioning the basic assumptions driving the modern heathen movement was not a popular attitude at the time, and those taking the sides of the scholars became relatively unpopular personalities quickly.

We opened this essay with a play on the opening lines of John⁴ from the Bible. This wasn't done for mere effect, however; it reflects our common modern concept of religion. It is a concept of religion imported from the first empires, and it is a concept which we in the United States have accepted and continue to accept wholeheartedly. 'Religion,' in our modern sense of the word, is an ideal divorced from culture, from landscape, from language, and from worldview. A term which I have often used in the past is 'modular religion' as opposed to 'ethnic religion.' A modular religion is a religion which can be easily imported and exported across cultural boundaries. The most common modern example of a modular religion is Christianity, which, technically, should be the same spiritual concept for a second-generation Greek family living in Brooklyn as it is to an aboriginal family living in the Australian outback as well as to a French family living in Singapore. The concept is completely self-contained, essentially, complete with it's own rules, laws, axioms, and corollaries, i.e. a module. A modular religion stands in direct contrast to an ethnic religion such as the indigenous religions of Africa, Australia, Alaska, and Greenland. Anthropologists over the past 150 years have been entertained, fascinated, and frustrated by how closely bound religion - culture - worldview in these regions are to landscape - occupation - environment. So the phrase "we will re-create the ancient Germanic religion" began to appear faulty to some of us because of the use of the word 'religion.' Most of us were working only from the modern concept of 'religion' as a fundamental assumption.

Additionally, some of us noted early on but chose to ignore the fact that there is no 'Germanic people.' Some groups of course found it easier to focus their attentions on Anglo-Saxon materials, others chose to focus their attentions on old Norse, but most filled in the gaps in either group's recreations and one that wasn't enough to bring the Germanic religion up to and in concordance with the modern concept of 'religion,' i.e. that of being culturally independent and self-contained Elements were brought in from alternative religions as well, in particular Wicca, or even from Catholic rituals. The problem with our early approach of 'filling in the gaps, however, is that it also ignored the fact that there is no single Germanic people.⁵

Scholars have long used a different approach when choosing to look at 'Germanic Europe' as

3Of course, the premise is wrong according to standard rules of logic. "If there is no evidence that a thing exists, there is nothing to support a claim that it does exist. Such a claim, then, remains nonsense until evidence is produced."

4John 1:1, King James Version

5This is actually a completely separate problem but one which was completely unrecognized at the time.

being a multi-colored umbrella built out of closely related languages under which a variety of cultures developed, evolved, and, in some cases, died out. How many cultures there had actually been underneath the Germanic umbrella is not known. It is known, however, that early on, close to the time of Julius Caesar, there were large number of very small tribes, often migratory, living in central Europe and who spoke dialects related to a complex Germanic language stock. Changes came and went; languages died out -- new ones were created; tribes allied themselves with neighboring tribes sometimes even crossing language stock boundaries; economic bases shifted over time between hunting and gathering, fishing, animal husbandry, agricultural, etc. eventually new language groups began to develop such as Anglo-Saxon, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Old Saxon, and even under these there were regional dialectal differences: umbrella under umbrella under umbrella and so on. Scholars, then, like Rudolph Simek, have taken to understanding that there was no single Germanic religion; the spiritual life of the ancient Germanic peoples should be thought of in the plural: Germanic religions, and to be more specific, ethnic Germanic religions.

Our most fundamental, basic assumptions which were used as the driving forces to generate the modern heathen movement was faulty from the outset. We don't believe that anyone is to blame for the error -- it was unintentional. The modern heathen movement was and is an experiment in alternative spirituality, and it may have been completely necessary for the first trial runs at the experiment to fail that a new direction could be taken. At this point in time the new direction for modern heathenry falls under the newer rubric of reconstructionism.

3 Reconstructionism

"The organisers see the expedition as an interesting social experiment as 70 present-day individuals react to being confined to an open-decked ship, with little room for private life or home comforts, on the open seas.

*"They believe the voyage will provide new insights into the hearts, minds and spirits of the Vikings while teaching us a thing or two about ourselves."*⁶

Reconstructionism is a philosophical and theoretical approach to revitalizing Germanic heathenry in the modern era. Its start really was in the mid-1990s although there are threads of study going back to the beginning of modern heathenry in the 1970s.

The questions should now be clearly defined: "What exactly is reconstructionism, what differentiates it from any other approach and, lastly, why is it even important?" Reconstructionism is simply this:

There is no longer any faulty phrase; for reconstructionists, it has been thrown out and replaced with ... nothing.

Reconstructionism is an experiment pure and simple: "if we take the worldview of XYZ-people, and apply it in our own lives, what is the experience?"

The basis of reconstructionism is to reconstruct the 'worldview' of any group of people and apply to gain experience. The simplest of these reconstructive efforts will be completely physical in nature such as carving a runestone utilizing only the tools which were known to have existed during the period and among the culture which one is studying. Other physical-experiments would be that of baking bread, making cloth, blacksmithing, animal husbandry, gardening, boat-building, preparing and putting on a feast, carving wooden utensils, and so on. There is little difference between such an approach taken by modern heathens and those experiments already being conducted by anthropology students engaging in experiential anthropology. The approach is nothing new and has been taken up by members of the Society for Creative Anachronism, National Geographic, and other independent research teams like Thor Heyerdahl's for years, and the results of such experimentation by these

⁶quoted from <http://www.rte.ie/vikings/index.html>

adventurers has been of great use to serious scholars of history as well as modern heathens. This is reconstructionism in its most basic form.

The average modern heathen has probably experimented with making mead utilizing modern wine making equipment or perhaps has experimented with period clothing either bought from a museum replicas clearinghouse, or for the more adventurous, made on their sewing machine at home. Some may have started entered into modern heathenry from organizations like the Society for Creative Anachronism or some similar organization and may have gone further to learn how to cook over a fire, perhaps, even being able to start the cooking fire with a flint and steel, and these experiences even though done with modern equipment should not be undervalued.

For the average heathen, those with limited experience in agriculture or those young people living on limited funds while they gaining an education in computer science or medical school, these experiences are often only picked up vicariously through reading about experiments or not at all. On the other hand there are a large number of modern heathens who have gained some experience while in the military or who currently live in the country who are used to doing much by hand, but, in general, these experiences do not include building and maintaining a garden/ farm with only hand tools, working without modern forms of fuel like electricity or petroleum products, nor do they generally include working with source products such as sheep's wool, rock, trees, or forged iron rather than steel. Grouping together with others engaged in experiential anthropological experiments even for a short period or working independently on a single project such as creating sourdough from quern-ground flour (made from home grown wheat) can be of great value to the modern reconstructionist heathen.

The next questions should probably be "Why would anyone have to engage in such activities just to belong to a religion?" What is the relationship between reconstructing the physical processes of artifact production and religion? The assumption that the reconstructionist is working under, however, is that there is no real religion to be had. For the reconstructionist, 'religion' is something that is culturally independent and self-contained and what the reconstructionist is seeking to experience is not the religion but the worldview, the mindset of the the people in question, which gave birth to certain specific spiritual practices.⁷ The central spiritual practice of the modern heathen is the blót, for example, a sacrifice the regin (ON), the gods, but the reconstructionist isn't looking to rebuild the ceremony so much as he is trying to experience why the ceremony was even important in the first place. The reconstructionist is looking not for a religion but for that which underlies spiritual practice.

The reconstructionist relishes his personal experiences as well as those reported by others. As in experiential anthropology, the experiences build off of one another to reconstruct detailed processes of what life had been like 1000 years ago, and most importantly, these are not theories, i.e. mind-experiments, of what life might have been like, but probabilities based on experience. Given physical knowledge of the tools and materials of the time and place, it remains simply a modern reconstruction, to be sure, but one can presume with a degree of certainty that parts of the experiment fall "in the ballpark" and the degree of certainty can be finer tuned as to probability. The reconstructionist must always be aware that history is not being relived, nor can it be perfectly duplicated. That is not the point of reconstructionism in modern heathenry; the actual point is the attempt to gain the experience of what life was probably like because it is a collection of experiences and perceptions about the world in

⁷The argument has been posed by some that religion rather than falling under worldview is really added on to worldview. In the modern era, this argument is true: a modular religion taken up and incorporated will affect and reshape worldview. On the other hand, 'ethnic religions' which cannot by any modern definitions be truly considered 'a religion' are not, in fact, taken up and incorporated but are borne of the worldview itself and as such are completely inextricable from it. Lastly, since reconstructionism is about collecting experiences (glimpses into the ancient worldviews) and is an approach to researching history as opposed to a method for recreating 'religion,' the counter-arguments fall away as pointless and as a gross misunderstanding of what reconstructionism is.

a specific way which was the matrix in which heathenry was germinated and grown and, by extension, in which it evolved.

The approach of the reconstructionist heathen can be somewhat likened to the experiments of mycologists who by trying to re-create the exact conditions (environmental matrix) of a particular fungus, they are able to encourage the mushroom to flourish under laboratory conditions. Granted, the cultivated fungus is not the same as a wild mushroom, but the importance of the experiment is that the natural processes producing the wild mushroom are now understood through experience.

Physical experimentation is interesting, fun, and important to overall understanding, but there is an area of reconstructionism that is much more tricky to understand and reproduce: the logic inherent to the ancient worldview being studied. For the reconstructionist to attack this area, he must engage in looking into his own worldview. What makes this so difficult for moderns is the idea that most came to modern heathenry in search of an alternate religion which is culturally compliant with their own ethnic background. The worldview/ belief system remains the same, for the most part; they were looking for an alternate to Christianity (usually) and not a complete change in worldview. The concept of a modular religion which often offers salvation in the form of reward in the Afterlife for a life well lived (according to the proscriptions set by the religion to which they are adhering) is generally very deeply embedded in our modern cultures. Altering one's experience through careful experimentation is simple enough but altering one's fundamental understanding about how the world works can be very difficult.

The first step and probably the most difficult to overcome is to want to either change one's worldview or at least want to alter it. For many, this means destroying, or at least setting aside the comfortable worldview they have already built, subscribed to, invested in, and believe in and hope for. A common search in the last 50 years or so has been that of finding an 'afterlife' which was comfortable to strive for, which would be tolerable to live out after death and which is attainable. There has been a general move in the last 50 years to develop a concept beyond that of Christianity where the end-results did not take 'til the end time' to be realized, and to that end, many modern Christians have developed modified versions of the 'Afterlife' and have put them into place wherein Hell, Purgatory and Limbo have been all but eliminated and so that Heaven is attainable in a more comfortable time frame than 'at the end of time.' Modified alternate versions of eastern religions have been springing up as well so that the Tibetan 'cycle of reincarnations,' for example, has been reduced to a comfortable time frame and definition so that one is constantly advancing towards the ultimate goal. By the time many discover modern heathenry, they have already developed their sense of an Afterlife. For the reconstructionist, the concept of 'the Afterlife' must be suspended or thrown out, so that he can experiment with the sense of an Afterlife adhered to by the Germanic group being studied. For those approaching reconstructionism on their search for the perfect, personal religion such an experiment, 'the tossing out of the ever-comforting Afterlife' must often seem like a perversion, a blasphemy of all that is held holy.

Taking the first step, then, is often completely contrary to one's personal belief system with its inherent proscriptions along with, perhaps, abandoning one's personal goals, i.e. those which propelled his search for a comfortable 'alternate to Christianity' in the first place, making the engaging in such an experiment extremely difficult and for some, perhaps, completely impossible.

We were admonished at one point for daring to experiment with the concept of altering or completely changing one's worldview or even finding a way to accept two separate worldviews.

If religion is one's life, one is not going to be satisfied looking at religion as a module within a worldview, to be exchanged out for another depending on what is needed at the time, and if a given religion is not meant to become the 'life' of the adherent, it stands little chance of succeeding against against the competing religion-modules.

The above statement is fair game. If one actually 'believes' in something, how can one simply either suspend or, perhaps, change out the belief for another? Were this the case, then is it really possible for one to state that he truly believed in the first place? Can a 'belief' really be much of a belief at all if it can be changed out for another? How can a religion based on such whimsical beliefs be expected to

hold up against others?

While a 'true believer' may find this situation to be paradoxical, the reconstructionist finds such a position to be a fertile place worthy of study and research. The 'assumption' is that 'belief' must be a necessary component to modern heathen praxis. The reconstructionist questions the concept of 'belief,' though: What was the Old Norse or the Old High German or the Old Saxon word for 'belief?' Was the word used among heathens or was it created to represent an early Christian concept? In fact, Bernard Maier, (and others as well) in his *Die Religion der Germanen* provides substantial evidence that the concept and the early word-constructs were probably not part of the Germanic heathens' worldviews, at least in any of the cultures leaving behind written records. What about those men in the sagas who were described as 'godless' trusting only in sword and strength of arm? Did they believe in anything at all? Or like the zen masters of Old Japan, did they stress taking life as it comes remaining flexible and fluid, placing their trust in nothing except the task at its conclusion? In our blithe treatment of the concept of 'belief,' or doing away with the concept altogether, it would appear that reconstructionists may be treading on good solid heathen ground with historical precedence for support.

The heathen engaging in reconstructionist research is in a good position, holding to no specific beliefs or dogmas to speak of,⁸ to question everything: Is such-and-such fact, or are we assuming it to be fact? What is the evidence supporting the alleged fact? Here are some reconstructionist style questions:

1. How much of the eddaic material is Christian interpolation or interpretation?
 1. Why doesn't the tribal separation of the Vanir versus the Ásir show up in gothic, Old High German, Old Saxon, and Anglo-Saxon texts?
 2. Was Óðinn viewed as 'the High God' in all Germanic linguistic branches?
 3. Why does a heathen Afterlife show up only in later (eddaic) poetry while the sagas and heathen period skaldic poetry match the bulk of archaeological evidence that life was continued in the grave?
2. Did the A-S word *weorð-scipe* mean 'to carry on a spiritual activity rather than a social one' as it does in modern times or was it really simply and broadly a social activity 'done in honor of someone?'
3. What does a modern reconstruction of heathenry look like without the concepts of
 1. religion,
 2. belief,
 3. an Afterlife,
 4. a spiritual sense of reward/ punishment,
 5. a soul detachable from the corpse?
4. Is the heathenry practiced by the men and women of the sagas representative of that practiced in heathen times by the
 1. common farmer,
 2. common farmer in what is now Germany,
 3. Normans,
 4. animal herders of the Alps,
 5. Prussians,
 6. Germanics bordering the Celts along the Danube
 7. or in the present day Elsâß?
5. As a pie-graph, how was the heathen spiritual life divided up? Was the percent of devotion equally given to gods, ancestors, and beneficial wights of the farm and the wild?
 1. Did this percentage change from time to time and from region to region?

⁸At least at the time of the running of the experiment.

2. Was the spiritual life of a thrall the same as that of a karl or jarl?
6. The Germanic peoples tend to be very formal in social life/ government. Is it possible that the reason that Germanic social life/ government cannot be easily gleaned from Germanic spiritual life is because for the early Germanic peoples social life/ government really was their spiritual life? Is it also possible that remnants of heathen ceremonial spiritual life is best seen today in the formal proceedings of court, Congress and Parliament of the UK?

Our favorite set of questions at the moment involves the modern idea that 'a god' in modern languages implies a universal figure, i.e. that like Jehovah, Thór (Donar) is the only Thór in the whole world so that Thór in Norway is the same Thór in northern Germany, southern Germany, Austria, New York, New Mexico, etc. How does such a belief support the fact that Thór or Wodan were deities seemingly bound to and functioned as a part of the landscape? Is it possible to see these deities as having 'counterparts' in all the various regions where they were worshiped? Is it possible to view a god, Thór, for example, as being a title for a deity playing a specific role? What happens to one's interpretation of the ancient worldview of the area being studied? If such an approach ever existed, does it support existing evidence regarding cultural differences, particularly those differences which show regional variations in folklore such as Óðinn the warrior's choice of Scandinavia versus Wodan of northern Germany whose horse, up to the last century, received hay and grain during Yule? How would a 'godname-as-title' affect how tales or poetry are written? And are there any such indications in ancient poetry still existing? The experimental investigation of these questions is still pending.

The above type of questioning is not very popular among practicing heathens because such interferes with 'belief.' This is the content of critics taking a stance against reconstructionism; the argument, then, against it is often phrased thus: Because the reconstructionist is involved in 'experimenting with worldview' specifically through temporary placement of 'partial worldview modules,' he cannot possibly adhere to such as a real religion. The full response to such an argument will be the topic of the rest of this essay; however, our opening counter-argument is this:

The assumption used by our detractors is that 'the ancient Germanic heathen worldview already exists and is available to all who wish to follow.' However, we do not believe that any of the Germanic worldviews have been explored completely enough to render functional and, as a consequence, we have written several papers pointing out where large portions of the worldviews have been either ignored or replaced with blocks taken from the modern.

It is the job of the reconstructionist, then, to ask questions which prompt exploration of the breadth and width of the ancient Germanic worldviews as far as is possible, utilizing current data sets, in order to uncover, discover, experience and reconstruct the underlying intelligence which gave birth to those same data sets.

Lastly, reconstructionism is not really an approach for all modern heathens, and can be very difficult for the personality type which is 'actively seeking a worldview as a comfortable alternative to the common worldview of his country/ community. We can not advocate the approach for these purposes because reconstructionism generally leaves far more questions than answers, and it would, therefore, be of little value. For those of us engaging in such an approach, we do so not because we are seekers of 'universal truth' or because we are looking for a 'livable alternative' to the norm, but rather because we are seekers of ancient knowledge, of ancient worldviews long misplaced and forgotten, and hopefully, by our works, others will benefit.

4 The 'Impossible' List

For all the good reconstructionism can do, there is a list of things which will be impossible for reconstructionism. We feel that it is important that this list is put out there for several reasons. First, of course, there exists an overall gross misunderstanding of reconstructionism in general and that

reconstructionists believe themselves to have some kind of direct access to 'the heathen worldview.'⁹ Reconstructionists, if they lose sight of the ultimate goal of reconstructionism, can fall into the trap of believing they are serving to re-create something which is virtually impossible to re-create in the 21st century given the constraints of modern legal systems and the modern sense of human, national or personal rights and, of course, environmental conditions which no longer exist. Reconstructionism can also lead to a sense of 'superiority' over others. Reconstructionism is an area of study which can never be completed at 100% because history is already gone and can never be revisited with any real degree of certainty -- even if it were complete at some point, its completion could never be known because there is no way to go backwards in time to compare the current state of knowledge with the original. Because conditions can be never exactly reproduced, the very best that a reconstructionist can ever hope for is 'faint glimmerings of experiences which are similar to those of our ancestors within a certain degree of probability. The 'Impossible' List will in all probability be more complete than any of the reconstructed worldviews.

So, here is the partial list, as it stands to date:

1. First, and foremost, it is important to understand that reconstructionism cannot replace adherence to a worldview. 'Adherence' implies that one is operating from the 'inside'; reconstructionism gathers its real power from being on the 'outside' looking in. The paradox is similar to the paradox of quantum physics where one is able investigate the motion of an electron but cannot at the same time know anything about its position and vice versa.
2. . Reconstructionism does not imply that one is engaged in reproducing or duplicating history. It is not a time machine where one is able to step back into history and experience it first-hand. It is rather 'a methodical approach to studying those forces and processes which most likely gave rise to heathenry.'¹⁰
3. The end-product of reconstructionism is not to re-create early germanic cultures in the 21st century; knowledge only of the ancient processes is the only goal.
4. Reconstructed heathen worldviews will only function as an aid to clearing the mirror of history so that modern adherents will have a chance to experience more fully the picture in a historically accurate fashion, but even at its best, reconstructionism will never be able to completely clear the glass.
5. Reconstructionism is an approach to studying the historical foundations of heathenry; it is not, nor can it be 'an approach to 'living as a heathen.' 'Living as a heathen' must be from within an activated worldview.
6. Our detractors with all their arguments against reconstructionism are absolutely correct. Their arguments come from within an 'activated worldview,' historically accurate or not; our arguments are always from the perspective outside looking at usually more than one worldview in a static fashion.

For example, we once posed the question "Is the current perceived spiritual distance between a man and a god, the same as the historical perceived distance between a heathen and his god?" We analyzed the data sets as non-adherents looking at adherents. Adherents, on the other hand, based their arguments naturally on personal experience. Explanations of our results were either

⁹We have often used the term to mean heathen worldviews collectively irrespective of timeframe or region. The fact remains that there neither was nor is a single worldview, and that the plural, 'germanic heathens worldviews' is the proper concept.

¹⁰It should be noted that these are also most of the same forces and processes which eventually gave prompted and carried through the conversion of northern Europe to Christianity and which eventually evolved into the early Church of northern Europe.

acceptable or non-acceptable, and if they were non-acceptable, it was because we could not step into the individual 'personal experience.' We were capable of seeing the positions of the spiritual electron, and because of the paradox were incapable, at the same time, of experiencing its movement.

In spite of this list of impossibilities, however, the benefits of reconstructionism are too many to ignore it as an approach to researching the past.

As reconstructionists, we can gain insights into our historical past, but at the moment that we are engaging in reconstructionism, we cannot practice as modern heathen adherents any more than we can conduct neurosurgery on our own brains -- we cannot be the patient and the surgeon at the same time. To engage in reconstructionism must be able to suspend our 'heatheness' temporarily, step out of the heathen cloak and into the lab-coat of the researcher, make a series of small tweaks and adjustments in the worldview (as a static thing), and then, in a somewhat schizophrenic fashion, be able to step back in, replace the mantle of heathenry, finally, to gain the experience. It is an awkward game to be sure, but no more or less unusual than the hundreds of thousands of scientists who adhere to Christianity and who must engage in research whose results conflict with the teachings of their own Church.¹¹

Up to this point we have relied upon scholarly research by men and women with little vested interest in heathenry beyond the simple thirst for knowledge of the past in order to build up what we know as modern heathenry. It is time for us, as heathens, to carry on with the tasks left to us by the scholars of the past. With reconstructionism we have the methodology for conducting that research ourselves, but only so long as the individual can handle both suits of clothes.

Lastly, although reconstructionism has been the center of heated debates between modern heathens who wish to cling to Ásatrú as an alternative religion and those who have adopted heathenry as a way of life primarily for its cultural and historical values, as philosophy it much to offer both groups. As the basis for regenerating an 'alternative religion,' it assures that the outcome is based on historical precedence allowing heathenry to develop on top of historical fact. For the latter, though, it offers a philosophical and theoretical approach to studying the past and a way to gain 'personal experience' of the past, albeit in a piecemeal fashion. Even though we have already determined that the past is snow from yesteryear, and that the same snow can never be revisited, it is the experience of heathenry in the present which can make the approach of reconstructionism enticing and enriching for all.

5 Towards Developing Practical Applications

Any set of practical applications, we feel, would be counter productive and would have, in all probability, the undesired effect of generating a dogmatic or prescriptive approach rather than reproducing what heathenry was a should be: a way of life with a naturally occurring spiritual component inextricably interwoven into the folkway fabric. To this end, all of our papers, to date, only go so far as to question 'commonly held beliefs' about heathenry, but have avoided any actual prescriptions regarding designing the folkway itself. Reconstructionism from within praxis is somewhat of a paradox as stated above and so we present the following analogy.

It is a commonly accepted axiom among traditional American fiddle-players that a classically trained violinist makes a poor traditional player because he 'lacks the spontaneity and subtleness of the folk-player who relies heavily upon the imprecision of note and the limited

¹¹The author once had a neurology professor who maintained that teaching evolution was proper because God had invented the process of evolution, DNA chains and micro-organisms which would eventually come together to produce a hominid which could evolve enough to be able to investigate properly his own past even down through micro-organisms to DNA-chains and the effects that the process of evolution would have on them!

technical skills to produce the free-flowing, improvisational tunes both played from the heart of the folk and borne out of compensation for his limitations.' The violinist has the skill, the technical ability, to imitate any regional player, to be sure, but because his playing is borne out of an analysis of the tune, he is incapable of truly 'understanding' the folkway which produced the tune in the first place, i.e. the 'heart' of the farming, hunting, trapping, coal-mining people who lead a minimum subsistence life and who found solace as well as entertainment within simple uncomplicated lines of melody. Although the highly skilled violinist can imitate the tune, he does not possess the heart within which the melody conceived, developed and was fostered. The violinist at best is a mimic who can be spotted quickly by any traditional player.

The analogy presents a seemingly impossible paradox, but in spite of this, classically trained violin players have converted successfully over to traditional playing. The problem is that the process for this conversion is not clearly defined. Certain elements of the conversion process are known, however and they can actually play a role in the development of practical applications of reconstructionism in modern heathenry.

A major element and perhaps the most significant for our purpose is immersion-in-practice or community participation. Like the violinist who plays months at a time, both in private and at local dances, becomes comfortable with the scratchy 'whistling' of the bow hitting strings inaccurately, the oddness of local, idiosyncratic scales, the bizarre bowing patterns which serve both to provide a consistent rhythm for dancers but also compensate for a limited repertory of technical skills, the reconstructionist becomes 'comfortable' with inherent beauty and idiosyncratic symmetry of the heathen way of life. The fact that 'a germanic sense of Afterlife' is questionable is balanced out by the shifting one's focus to leading an honorable life punctuated heavily with participation in one's own geographical community. The question regarding the mysterious 'nature of the gods' is replaced with actions which treat the gods both as if they are physically real and present at the feast. The need for ceremony and a sense of sacredness is satiated with a participation in social protocol addressing not only a real sense of social stratification but also requiring that one give credit/ praise/ respect where it is due. Participation and praxis, more than anything else, leads to practical application.

There is a 'layering on' element which offers constant feedback to the individual. This is a by-product of participation and praxis. Presumably, the feedback loop utilizes sensory experience from praxis to lay a new foundation atop the old. In this way, the heathen way of life is acquired in small bits at a time rather than in large lumps. In the author's experience, this process has been in play for the past 15 years allowing for a very slow and limited absorption.

We have written since 1999 CE, that for heathenry to work, a key component is that it must play out in one's geographical community. Although critics of the idea fully admit that there appears to have been little separation between ancient 'heathenry' and ancient 'community,' their point that ancient communities were homogeneous being comprised primarily of heathens and that because this ancient environment cannot be reproduced in modern culture has held many back from experiencing 'participation in community.' Alternate experimentation at creating loosely knit 'internet communities' or 'temporary communities' which come together sporadically 'to celebrate the great feasts,'¹² while fun for the participants and, perhaps, even somewhat spiritually uplifting, do not seem to have generated much success in improving any understanding of the ancient worldviews. It is presumed that the modern worldviews held by most of the participants serves to produce what could be interpreted as a loosely heathen, Norse-themed, weekend barbecue.¹³

¹²Yuletide, Midsummer's, and spring or fall festivals have been the main meeting times for these 'temporary communities' which consist often of several families averaging less than 2 dozen people total.

¹³Bill Bainbridge had coined the phrase 'barbecue Ásatrú' completely independently from this paragraph. The author had not heard of the phrase before until the conference at which this paper was

We have found through experimentation, however, that participating in one's geographic community serves to shore up a sense of social responsibility and promotes not only a sense of belonging to something greater than the individual, but also a sense of accomplishment for the greater good. Although it is rare to have more than one or two heathens within a small community, perhaps only a single family, there is a 'consistency' built up on a daily basis which cannot be reproduced within any of the 'temporary communities.' Again we have taken lessons from the violinist/ wannabe fiddle-player -- for one's music to 'be functional,' it must be played on the community stage before the general audience instead in the confines of a small room with a select audience. The Hávamál, the 'ground-rules' for most modern heathens, plays out well in the geographical community as it is fairly consistent with communities' moral codes even today; on the other hand, 'internet heathens' have mainly used carefully chosen individual verses for chastisement of others which adds little to experience or understanding. For heathenry to be a viable way of life, it must be functional on the stage of the real world not merely for a contrived audience of select members.

From research from the area of sociology, we know, or at least suspect, that the heathen life circled around the agricultural cycle of tides. Yule, for example, always centers around a lull in the agricultural year and varied from region to region as to starting stopping points depending on the specific industry of the region. A reconstructionist's approach to Yule, to further the example, would be to look at the already existent Yuletide of one's geographical region and to start building from there; reconstructed, in this manner, heathens remain a functional portion of the community. In the author's area of the world, not only are green chiles a primary cash crop and a staple food of the region, but the reconstructionist's approach would suggest that a primary annual feast could be built around the chile roasting (after the harvest) for this is a time when people come together in a state of semi-leisure/ social/ communal work.¹⁴

Reconstructionism, as stated above, is often confused by heathens and non-heathens alike as being a call for a return to the 'good old days.' In fact, and in practice, this is not the case. Although there are inherent limitations to the approach, reconstructionism, as a standard part of modern heathenry, functioning as a touchstone can do much to assure that heathenry remains in line with the germanic cultural heritage by preventing modern 'myths' about heathenry from developing and propagating. For those new to heathenry, reconstructionism allows the newcomer to settle into a different way of life by encouraging a one-step at a time approach and proceeds in a slow manner allowing the newcomer to step into the new worldview comfortably. Lastly, reconstructionism, because of it's narrow focus on understanding and incorporating the logical foundations of the heathen worldviews into daily life, can easily become a non-threatening community-friendly activity.

being read in March 2008.

14The roasting and peeling of the chiles in a highly socialized setting is not unlike the quilting bees or corn shuckings of the German communities of early North America. Commonly, dance, song, strong drink, and courting among the young are accompaniments to all these activities.