

The 'spiritual descendants of Vikings' take their turn in the spotlight

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

February 9, 2015

c. 2015 Religion News Service

(RNS) Thor, Odin, and Freya are getting some new digs. A new temple is underway in Iceland, the first to honor these three Norse gods since the Vikings plowed the seas 1,000 years ago.

The construction of the new temple on a hill overlooking the capital city of Reykjavik was first reported by Reuters. It reflects a growing interest in Viking religion both in Iceland and beyond.

"I don't believe anyone believes in a one-eyed man who is riding about on a horse with eight feet," Hilmar Orn Hilmarsson, a high priest of Asatru, as the worship of Norse gods is called, told Reuters. "We see the stories as poetic metaphors and a manifestation of the forces of nature and human psychology."

Icelandic followers of Asatru—or Asatruars—reached 2,400 out of a population of 330,000 last year, government statistics show. The new temple will be used for weddings, funerals and naming ceremonies—a big deal to the Vikings of yore and today. But don't look for any animal sacrifices; contemporary Vikings make symbolic sacrifices instead and focus on values of hospitality, honesty, self-reliance, and honor.

Belief in the Norse gods died out in Iceland and much of Europe about 1,000 years ago when Christianity swept through. But Asatru saw a revitalization in the early 1970s, when young people brought a renewed interest to many earth-based religions. It was recognized as a formal religion in Iceland in 1973.

There are now "kindreds"—communities of Asatru worshippers—in places the Vikings never saw, including Australia, New Zealand, and at least 21 U.S. states, including Arizona, Mississippi, and Idaho.

Stephen McNallen is considered by many to have fostered Asatru's rebirth in the U.S. He is a founder of the Asatru Folk Assembly, one of several Asatru organizations in America, and he estimates there are as many as 20,000 U.S. practitioners.

People are drawn to Asatru for multiple reasons, he said.

"Some of it, I think, springs from a need to have spiritual autonomy in a world that is excessively complex and is inhibitive of individual freedom and expression," he said in a phone interview from his home in the Sierra foothills of California. "Many people are looking for continuity beyond this little space and time. Another reason is some people feel the desire to get back to their ancestral roots."

That last bit has caused some trouble for Asatru practitioners in the past. The Nazis borrowed some aspects of Asatru to justify their pursuit of a "pure Aryan race." And today, some white supremacist groups claim Norse beliefs.

McNallen, however, said true Asatru has nothing to do with racism.

"Like all native religions, Asatru is positive, it is life-affirming, and it has no negative connotations towards any other groups," he said.

There is no U.S. equivalent to the new Viking temple Iceland has planned, which will be very different from an actual place of Viking worship. Such a place would have been a long, rectangular wooden hall. The new temple will be circular and topped with a dome.

McNallen likes the design and sees it as something of a bridge between the worshippers of the past and present.

"What they have sounds very innovative," he said. "It takes some people, especially the younger folks, a while to realize we are not Vikings. We are the spiritual descendants of Vikings and we have to have answers for real people in the 21st century. We can't live in the past."