

What I'm Doing – 2007-Mar-04 – Gary Stanfield

(Notes on presentation @ Shawnee Mission Unitarian-Universalist Church).

Intro

TODAY'S TOPIC

What I'm doing regarding religion other than the obvious. It's unusual, might be interesting. I'm doing Teutonic reconstruction. (Define "Teutonic"). Emphasis on English.

"Reconstruction" does not mean following exact pattern. It means adaptation to modern context that is faithful to form and spirit of ancient practice. It means religion based on social scientific discoveries and on meta-religion. Jacob Grimm's method is to work back and forth among the different national Germanic religions, relying mainly on Norse data, to reconstruct Proto-Germanic religion. This is the way Grimm and other linguists reconstruct Indo-European language.

Practice more than one religion. Wicca in Gaia Community & elsewhere. UU here. Wicca is another topic, but all three conflict: time, liturgy, intellectual style. They also supplement.

Teutonic religion does not offer a vast store of original material, so the surviving lore must be supplemented by knowledge – intellectual and emotional – of other religions. Just as linguists can't reconstruct Indo-European language completely, modern Teutonic religion has to include improvised or borrowed elements if you're going to practice it.

Highlights of My Practice

MAJOR FEATURES

Looking for enlightenment. Definition: Awareness, rationality, self-control. Progress w/o end-goal. No heaven, not even metaphorical.

Looking for reality. Not escapist, help in mundane life. View of life corresponding to life as I know it. Practical guidelines.

Reject: everything always turns out well; you're better off dead; life sucks then you die; everything follows from a single principle or intent and therefore makes sense. Not want oversimplified laundry list of commandments nor principles. Not looking for a "faith" – have to wholeheartedly believe in unknowable, illogical, or empirically false.

Progressive mysticism separates religion from secular self-improvement. Use of mystical means to achieve enlightenment. (Remember, this is mundane enlightenment, not illusion or dream.) Mysticism is a separate topic for another day. Briefly: it exploits contact with "divine", "transcendent", "hidden inner reality", (my preference) "religious mystery". What you contact can't be expressed in words, must be experienced, but it is objective.

A brief summary of progressive mysticism:
both rational and non-rational;
meditative;
a process, not a goal ("progress");
used to achieve a more enlightened mundane life.

Aside on Religious Mystery

Please bear with me if you already know the following.

Empirical mysteries are explained and cease to be mysterious. In contrast, religious mystery does not go away as we attend to it. Instead, religious mystery is more apparent as we attend to it. For example, we know what empirical phenomena we are looking at in the clear night sky above. But at the same time we can experience a mysterious emotional mix just from looking at that sky.

There is an excellent article on mysticism in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

INNER AND OUTER SANCTUM

I'm not trying to practice every and all aspects of ancient Teutonic religion.

Every religion has its inner and outer, as far as I can tell. (There are hundreds or thousands; lucky to know 4 or 5.) Both are useful.

Outer practice is devoid of progressive mysticism and may include anti-enlightenment practices. For examples: opposition to marriage with outsiders, banning all dances, burning witches, requiring burkhas. The outer sanctum also includes banquets, coming-of-age ceremonies, child care, pageantry. You got through the outer sanctum to get to the inner. Some formal religious organizations have difficulty handling mysticism and some engage in mystical practices on a routine basis. Some mysticism is not progressive. Zen seems to be an all-inner-sanctum religion.

Inner practice is progressive mysticism. Different religions follow different styles, such as dervish dances, prayers to Saint Mary, or mushroom consumption. However the inner sanctums of different religions are more similar than are the outer. This is because despite radically different symbols and practices, they are into enlightenment as I have defined it.

The inner sanctum style I follow is runic religion. Rune is the Anglo-Saxon (and Old Norse) word for mystery.

Both inner and outer are subject to abusive practice. For example, abandonment of sexual practice among some Tibetans because sex is more fun than is God. Turning from involvement with mundane reality (as in hermitage) is an abuse.

Inner sanctum practitioners never abandon the outer, because that is where the social life is and because the outer is necessary to support formal organization and facilities.

It isn't progressive mysticism to swap out light bulbs or fix lawn mowers, but please volunteer if you can.

POLYTHEISTIC VIEW OF LIFE

Teutonic polytheism does not posit geological, biological, astronomical theories. The myths are surreal and metaphorical. This religion is neither earth-centered nor earth-denying. Earth is a giant, not a deity.

Life is polycentric. It is not guided by any single principle, such as love or heroism. Of the many deities, each has his or her purpose, and they live in community. (They don't have an administrative ruler.) By analogy, none of us is self-contained perfection and each must also live in community. Moreover, different mythic communities and realms interrelate – just as our communities must interrelate. This is a non-authoritarian view of life.

Life does not have to be fair nor to make sense, and is not entirely under your control. The ancient Anglo-Saxons had a word for this: *wyrd*. The mythical creator of *wyrd* was a witless and unspeaking giant named "The Alloted One", or *Metod*. All the deities together or singly cannot overcome *wyrd*. By analogy, you are not all-powerful, not to blame or credit for every circumstance in which you find yourself.

Every religion is subject to some kind of ethical problem based on or in some other way related its objective lore. For example, the military atrocities in the Old Testament are not a good source on which to base your life. For Teutonic reconstruction, the major ethical issue is admiration of vikings. They were violent, organized, predatory criminals and their behavior is contrary to the lore, but they are often mentioned in historical evidence from the era of mixed religion in northern

Europe. “Viking” is an ethnic slur. Inside prisons, racism seems to be an ethical problem but outside prisons we find tiresomely redundant denunciations of racism. Racism, of course is contrary to the integrationist emphasis of the lore. On the other hand, the lore itself is weak on conflict management, child raising, sexual courtship, and other topics on which religions typically have thin or no coverage.

RUNIC RELIGION

Teutonic religious philosophy is not a theology. In the USA, most people grew up with Christianity as their model of religion and have never perceived a religion in which a deity fails to be the ultimate focus of the whole religion. But in Pagan religions in general, it is possible to practice 90% of the time w/o reference to the high deities. I’m not doing that; I do a lot of deity worship. But I do practice a religion in which deities often play a minor role.

Most of the religious lore is encoded in four rune (mystery) poems. These poems are unusually ambiguous and contain many meanings organized into layers. They are progressive mysticism only, and not for the outer sanctum. I will show you briefly how the lore is structured in one of these poems and how it can be used.

The poem I am working on is The Old English Rune Poem. As an example of runic poetry, consider Feoh from the Old English Rune Poem. [Show the poem in MnE.] It seems to say that we have to be generous just in case we are ever in a legal trial. This is the lowest level of meaning and is intended to satisfy by itself. However, there is a metaphorical level of meaning, where we ask who or what this judge is, what you mean by “give out plentifully”, and what “cash” represents. So this seems to imply several other verses lying behind the lowest-level of meaning. For example, the idea that you have to be socially beneficial to satisfy some inner longing. If you dig deeply enough, a coach can help you discover an entry point to the study of religious mystery, where your motivation to do this is discussed. [Hide the poem.]

As an example of runic liturgy, I have a handout: The Generation’s Meditation. Don’t let the Old English confuse you; the whole rite can be performed in Modern English. However, the foreign language quotations show where the rite uses stanzas from the Old English Rune Poem.

Varieties in Reconstruction

There is a wide variety of reconstructionist religion. The most common are Greek and Germanic, but there are also Roman, Egyptian, and American Indian. The Pagans who do recon often regard Wicca as a much less rigorous and less substantive alternative. That is because Norse Wicca and other forms of non-reconstructionist religion do not require as much familiarity with ancient lore as do the reconstructionist religions.

Within Teutonic recon, there is also great variety. Some want to practice every superstition they can find. Some have difficulty seeing a non-authoritarian theology, so they orient their systems toward Odin as an all-powerful, ultimate deity. They usually call themselves Odinists. Some like the structure of laws in Jewish lore, so they make up a set of commandments and/or an elaborate set of laws. Some have a structure of formal ranks and titles, and a subculture in the general style of early medieval European society (which they practice as a hobby). Nostalgia for older times is a common theme. There are books on runes which largely ignore the rune poems and derive all their lore from rune-names and superficial analyses of the rune poems.

Most Teutonic recons are Asatruists. The Asatru method, contrary to Grimm’s method, is to combine all the Germanic Pagan religions as if there were no national differences.

On occasion, I meet with a few others in a three-round ceremony followed by a banquet. Conventions of Germanic Reconstructionists usually involve reenactment of dark age lifestyles, athletic contests, classes, banquets, fortune-telling by means of seith, emotionally powerful religious ceremonies, and attendance of 25-150. The largest formal denomination is The Rune-Gild with a worldwide membership of perhaps 400 – slightly less than All Souls UU Church on the Plaza.

Conclusion

Teutonic reconstructionism is a movement to reconstruct one or more varieties of pre-Christian Germanic religion for use in a modern context. This kind of religion is dependent on social science, and I participate in that by philological analysis of *The Old English Rune Poem*.

As I practice it, this religion involves study of religious mystery literature as a source of wisdom with deity worship as a sort of anchor or framework. It is almost a solitary practice in a not-very-popular religion. I am doing progressive mysticism, which is an inner sanctum practice.

The recon I do is thoroughly modern. I regard Teutonic Pagan religious philosophy to be less medieval than is Abrahamic religious philosophy. No other Teutonic recon is doing quite what I am doing.

Runic Teutonic recon religion is content-poor compared to many other religions. And we have not really figured out the meaning in the content that is available. Hence broad education in religion is required.

I will do Anglo-Saxon recon until it is time to start more in-depth analyses of the two Norse rune poems. I would prefer that someone else would do a similar in-depth analysis of the two Old Norse poems in parallel with my work.

Major primary and secondary sources are listed on a handout.