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OSCE Representative welcomes decriminalization of blasphemy in Iceland

OSCE (03.07.2015) - OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović today welcomed amendments passed by the Icelandic Parliament to decriminalize blasphemy.

“Blasphemy laws are incompatible with freedom of expression and freedom of religion,” Mijatović said. “Democracy requires the possibility to openly discuss and challenge every single idea, dogma or belief even if this discussion may be felt as shocking, disturbing or offensive.”

The bill that was passed yesterday repeals a provision in the penal code which made “ridiculing or insulting the dogmas or worship of a lawfully existing religious community” an offence punishable by a fine or imprisonment of up to three months.

In May Norway also put into effect legislation decriminalizing blasphemy.

“Iceland and Norway have clearly set examples to be followed by other OSCE participating States,” Mijatović said.

Mijatović is in Sarajevo on an official visit.

Pirates get blasphemy decriminalised

Iceland Monitor (02.07.2015) - The Icelandic Parliament (‘Alþingi’) has voted today to decriminalise blasphemy in Iceland.

As reported by *Iceland Monitor* in February this year, three Pirate Party MPs moved a bill before Alþingi to have the clause removed from the Icelandic Penal Code, in the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris.

The three MPs took to the Alþingi lectern today, one after another, while the vote was under way and declared, “I am Charlie Hebdo.”

A statement on the Pirate Party website reads: “The Icelandic Parliament has issued the important message that freedom will not bow to bloody attacks.”

One MP voted against the bill, while three abstained. All four are from the current ruling coalition.

How thousands of Icelanders suddenly started worshipping the Norse gods again

The Washington Post (03.02.2015) - The story of how Christianity arrived in Iceland, according to Nordic lore, reads like a scene ripped from "Game of Thrones." A millennium ago, Christianity had just taken over Norway. So the Norwegian king dispatched a mighty warrior missionary named Thangbrand to Iceland to spread the good news. Thangbrand did, along the way spearing dead a great many heathens. Then came a test that would decide whether the icy island would accept Christianity or stay faithful to Thor and the other Norse gods.

Thangbrand had discovered an Icelandic beast impervious to fire. So, he said, "we shall light three fires. I shall bless the first one, you heathens shall bless the second one, and the third one shall remain without a blessing. If [he] walks through your fire unharmed but is afraid of my fire, you must accept Christianity." The beast galloped through the heathen fire — but reared before the Christian one.

That was in the year 1000. And from that day on, according to Icelandic texts translated by the University of Pittsburgh, Iceland was a Christian nation.

But now the old Norse gods have once again emerged from the clouds to claim a people once theirs. For the first time in more than 10 centuries, thousands of Icelanders soon will be able to worship Thor, Odin, Frigg and others at a temple on which construction begins this month. Not since the collapse of the Viking age has anyone overtly worshiped at the altar of a Norse god in Iceland, which banned such displays of reverence at the rise of Christianity.

The degree of religiosity among the church's denizens, however, is a matter of debate. "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 the Norse god religious church, Asatruarfelagio, told Reuters. "We see the stories as poetic metaphors and a manifestation of the forces of nature and human psychology."

That contention explains a shift in Iceland in the past four decades, as a small religious sect devoted to the Norse gods rose from obscurity. According to statistics kept by the Icelandic government, membership in the Asatru Association has exploded by Icelandic standards. Founded in 1972 as a means to preserve ancient ways, the church had a membership below 100 in its first two decades. Today, nearly 2,400 are in its ranks.

While not a large number on the international scale, it is for Iceland, which has a population of around 320,000. The church claims to be the largest non-Christian church in Iceland.

In most corners of the globe, Thor finds a home only in comic books, Hollywood movies and video games. But the rise of Asatru, which has doubled in size in five years, is neither extemporaneous nor inscrutable. According to research published in the Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, the church can thank both ancient economics and modern politics for its fast emergence.

The people of Iceland were never sold on Jesus. "From the time of Iceland's formal adoption of Christianity as the official state religion in the year 1,000 C.E., Iceland has

never been a fanatically Christian country nor particularly orthodox in its Christianity," wrote scholar Michael Strmiska of SUNY Orange. "A strong case can be made that the acceptance of Christianity was motivated more by economic and political considerations than authentic Christian fervor. ... Good political and economic relations with Christian Europe depended on at least a semblance of Christian conversion, and so this semblance was achieved."

Indeed, even as Christian governments authored increasingly restrictive measures on non-Christian faiths, the old ways glowed. Even today, when walking the streets of Iceland's capital of Reykjavik, pedestrians will find many streets named after Norse gods. And "a very large number of Icelandic personal and surnames are formed from 'Thor,'" wrote Strmiska.

In 1972, an Icelandic poet named Sveinbjorn Beinteinsson tapped into that residual fealty, launching a fresh religious organization that began as a scholarly pursuit, but quickly took on religious overtones. How? First, Beinteinsson and friends assumed the name of "Asatru," which means "belief or faith in the ancient gods," wrote Strmiska. But then, an act of nature took on grand significance. And what else would it be but a mighty thunderbolt?

It went down, probably apocryphally, like this: One day in the summer of 1972, as the movement battled with the government to establish its church, a "mighty lighting bolt flashed across the sky, struck a power station in the capital and plunged much of Reykjavik into darkness," Strmiska found. "Such powerful electrical storms are almost unknown in Iceland.... Several of my Asatru informants rather gleefully interpreted this lightning storm as divine intervention on the part of the thunder-god Thor ... [and] the government had a sudden change of heart, and soon decided to grant official recognition to Asatru."

Several forces below the skies then took over. Leader Beinteinsson died, which brought national coverage to the church and boosted enrollment. Sexual harassment scandals drove away some members of the Lutheran church. A fierce atheism took hold in Iceland, which today has one of the highest rates of nonbelievers in the world. And finally, a religion involving ancient thunder gods has an undeniable "cool" factor, according to Strmiska.

Many atheists took solace in the traditions of the Norse gods, though they didn't necessarily believe in them. "I believe in nothing," one member told Strmiska. The academic wrote: "What he did not 'believe' in was the literal reality of the gods or other such beings, accepting them only as metaphors and guiding figures in cautionary tales."

This is a sentiment parroted by members of the modern church. Its new circular temple, according to Reuters, will be dug 13 feet deep into a hill and peer down upon Iceland's capital. A dome atop it will allow sunlight to filter inside. "The sun changes with the seasons," the church's high priest said. "So we are in a way having the sun paint space for us."
