

INTELLIGENCE REPORT

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SUPREME COURT REQUIRES PRISONS GIVE SPECIAL CONSIDERATION TO RACIST PAGANS



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by Casey Sanchez

Correctional officials around the country struggle with a court ruling accommodating Odinism, a sometimes racist religion



Clarification: This story originally contained a description of litigation brought by a group of plaintiffs including several members of the Caucasian Cartel prison gang. It never intended to suggest that the Asatru adherent who originally filed the case was a member of the Caucasian Cartel or any other gang.

Each month, Laurel Owen leaves her home in Arkansas and drives to prisons as far away as Texas and Kentucky, where she is paid to teach inmates the rituals of a Norse pagan religion known as [Odinism](#) or [Asatru](#). Owen, who heads a support group called the Prison Affairs Bureau of the Odinic Rite, says many inmates she meets have suffered for their beliefs. "Most of the guys you encounter inside will have spent time in the hole and been labeled a Security Threat just for being Odinist," she writes. "They have fought to be who they are."

As practiced by Owen and others outside prison, Odinism tends to be a benign form of paganism, tolerant of others and close to nature. Behind the walls, however, it is likely to take on a [more sinister cast](#), and many prison wardens have long regarded Odinism as the religious arm of white supremacist prison gangs. The U.S. Supreme Court has nonetheless ruled that Odinist inmates have certain rights that prisons must recognize. So while a decade ago a pagan volunteer like Owen would have been dismissed as a kook or, at worst, a gang liaison, Odinist inmates today can wear Thor's Hammer pendants under their jumpsuits and request visits from outside leaders.

The Supreme Court ruling in 2005 involved a case brought by a band of Satanist, Odinist and white supremacist Church of Jesus Christ Christian inmates, including some who are serving time for racially motivated killings. The justices ruled that prisons must accommodate these unusual faiths. Four years and several inmate

lawsuits later, more than 15 state prisons now recruit non-inmate Odinists to develop policy, write scripts for rituals and lead ceremonies behind bars. Along with this new wave of religious rights has come a raft of litigation from inmates seeking to build fire pits in their cells, from convicted hate crime perpetrators joining class-action lawsuits to take 60 Odinist holidays off work, and from white supremacists demanding the right to read literature exhorting followers to wage wars of race purification. As security-screened, non-racist Asatru volunteers like Owen stream into the system, they face suspicion from prison chaplains and competition from better-established racist Odinist groups with clout among inmates.

The Devil's Advocate

Asatru and Odinism have had inmate adherents since the mid-1980s. (Among believers, Asatru is sometimes used interchangeably with Odinism, and at other times it designates an Icelandic sect that venerates a separate family of gods.) While some prisoners have embraced a non-racial Asatru as a faith whose warrior ethos speaks to them in a hostile environment, white nationalist inmates have imported a Nordic racial paganism from the racist-right subculture of the early 1990s.

Both types of inmates got a boost from the 2005 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Cutter v. Wilkinson*, brought by incarcerated Asatruers, Satanists, Wiccans and adherents of the Aryan Nations church, who sought the right to worship in a group, wear religious medallions and read literature from their faith. An Ohio prison had denied their requests, arguing that their religion was just a front for gang activity. The inmates filed the original case in 2000, only months after President Bill Clinton signed into law the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA),

which placed prisons that restricted religious expression under heavy legal scrutiny.

The Ohio inmates' violence and racism were so objectionable, however, that in 2005, the Department of Justice under President George W. Bush, which otherwise supported RLUIPA, urged the court to take a different case on the same issue. In a brief urging the court



to allow restrictions on Odinist practices, Ohio's attorney general noted that the plaintiff in one suit "was convicted for conspiring to bomb the school attended by the daughter of a judge presiding over a desegregation case," and that most plaintiffs in a second suit "have documented affiliations with prison gangs, including the [Aryan Brotherhood](#), the [Ku Klux Klan](#), and [skinhead groups](#)" and that "several have been involved in racially motivated killings or assaults, some since this case began."

Nonetheless, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the inmates, noting that for more than a decade the Federal Bureau of Prisons "has managed the largest correctional system in the nation under the same heightened scrutiny standard as RLUIPA without compromising prison security, public safety, or the constitutional rights of other prisoners." Since the ruling, the prison systems of Indiana, Michigan and Texas have settled lawsuits with Odinist inmates and rewritten their religion policies, although similar suits brought by inmates in Alabama, Maine, Montana, Oregon, Utah and Virginia have been shot down by state courts.

At latest count, 15 states allow some form of group Asatru or Odinist worship. In a 2007 affidavit for a Utah prisoner suing for damages after being denied the right to use ceremonial altar cloths and drink mead from a bull horn in an Asatru ceremony, a fellow inmate stated: "Every prison I've been to has a Asatru/Odinist program. While in Federal custody in Colorado we won a Federal legal proceeding for our own outdoor area similar to the Native Americans. Our sponsor was actually one of the prison's correctional officers."

Not all correctional officers are so sympathetic to Odinism. In a 2004 report, the National Gang Crime Research Center surveyed prison officials in 49 states and found that Odinists, Asatruers and Wotansvolk were the most common "white racist extremist religious front groups proselytizing American prison inmates today."

One chilling example of Odinism in prison gone haywire is the case in Virginia of Michael Lenz, a self-described high priest of Asatru. In 2000, he and five Asatruer inmates met around a makeshift altar for a "blot," in which followers make an offering of food and drink to the gods. As Lenz would later testify, he became convinced that inmate Brent Parker was not taking the ceremony seriously and had to die to protect the honor of the gods. Lenz and another inmate, Jeffrey Remington, stabbed Parker 68 times with a makeshift knife. Lenz was executed for the murder in 2006; Remington committed suicide in 2004 while on death row.

Aryan Prisoners of War

Odinism's most violent prison strain was cooked up in the Colorado Supermax cell of lifer inmate [David Lane](#). Lane drove the getaway car for The Order, the right-wing terrorist group that in the 1980s netted more than \$4 million in robberies of armored

cars and murdered liberal talk-show host Alan Berg in his Denver driveway. In 1995, Lane, along with wife Katja and business partner Ron McVan, created [Wotansvolk](#), a religion that refers to the Christian New Testament as "the Ten Commandments for racial suicide" and offers in its place Wotanism, which Lane described as religion that "preaches war, plunder and sex." Lane noted that Wotan, in addition to being the Germanized spelling of Odin, is also the acronym of "Will Of The Aryan Nation."

"Wotansvolk's name-recognition is high among the Aryan prison population," writes Swedish scholar Mattias Gardell, a leading authority on racist Nordic paganism. "Katja Lane's campaigning has contributed to the fact that all states now permit the wearing of a Thor's hammer as a religious medallion." In 2001, at the height of its popularity, Wotansvolk boasted a membership of 5,000 inmates. Today the organization is defunct, but its lavishly illustrated books remain in print and in demand among prisoners who have brought state suits to possess them. In contrast with their Asatru kin, however, the Wotanists' claims have been uniformly rejected by the courts, as judges say violence advocated by the religion's texts outweigh its free speech merits in a prison setting.

Lane remains a mythic hero in white power circles and was, until his 2007 death, the top "Aryan Prisoner of War," noted for coining the "14 words" that serve as a rallying cry for militant white nationalists: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White Children." Lane's devotion to Odinism lives on among dozens of other so-called Aryan Prisoners of War, white inmates lionized by the white power movement for their racist activism.

"Odinists represent a significant subgroup of white supremacists in prison known as the Aryan Prisoners of War," says Randy Blazak, a sociologist at Portland State University in Oregon who studies prison Odinism. For his research, Blazak has interviewed dozens of Aryan Prisoners of War, including Lane before he died and other members of The Order. "The growth of the religion of Odinism among racist inmates has significant implications for the spread of hate crimes, domestic terrorism, racial divisiveness and the destabilization of prison populations," he says, noting that frequently "the racist Odinist ideology follows inmates upon release."

Some Aryan POWs, Blazak says, embrace Odinism not as religion but as a consoling ideology in support of their view that the white race is being "assaulted and emasculated by social forces." As one inmate wrote in response to the study, "I'm of the subset of that community that do not believe in literal Vikings in the sky, but do think the values embodied in the Odinist 'God-sense' are especially pertinent for imprisoned Caucasians. Most prisoners are victims of religious intolerance; they're convicted of 'offenses against [the idea of] the United States.'"

Aryan POWs represent racist Odinism's violent fringe, but many jailhouse conversions to neo-pagan faiths are, in fact, more benign. "Some prisoners see the appeal of prison Odinism as an avenue to win prison privileges such as time for religious ceremonies, as well as a way to cope with prison life and society in general," Blazak writes. "However, those recognized as 'Aryan POWs' by the white supremacist community identify with the need for aggressive racist activism. ... The question that remains is which end of the spectrum attracts more inmates?"

How many Odinist inmates subscribe to racial supremacy is a question that generates more heat than light. Valgard Murray, an Asatru leader and consultant to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, contends that "less than ten percent are racial fanatics." But in Texas, which boasts the largest prison system in the country, security threat group coordinator Sigifredo Sanchez says 90% of Odinist inmates are classified as belonging to white supremacist gangs. They, like all other gang members, are relocated to separate wings of the prison where they cannot access group religious services. "It's been my experience that legitimate groups will carry some of these more racist members because it swells numbers," said Blazak. "Among them there's a real serious dislike of racist pagans, but at the same time, numbers count in prison."

Between the racist and non-racist believers are a large number of "Odinists until release" who join in meetings and make offerings to the gods at blots less for spirituality than to break up the boredom and isolation of prison life. "They've got plenty of time on their hands. There's also the practicality of it. It gets you out of [your] cell, there may be food and drink available," says Blazak.

Sanchez, the Texas prisons' security coordinator, adds, "We have had Odinists for quite awhile. You have to look at the historical basis. Aryan groups are looking for anything that would be beneficial and a place where no one will stop them from meeting. They've always tried to use a religion that somebody can bond with."

Rune Stones or Gang Signs?

After a two-year lawsuit, the Texas Department of Corrections is negotiating with an inmate who is seeking the right to lead his own Asatru group service and use rune stones, a set of 24 small blocks or stones carved with ancient symbols that make up an

alphabet. Sanchez is wary of both developments. "Not all of our officers are trained to look at runic codes," he says. "We had a guy out there who was ABT, Aryan Brotherhood of Texas – that's what he had in runic type writing on a tattoo. The guy was able to make it out there in general population [and not be segregated as a gang member] because the officer did not recognize the runic symbols." Prisons that use the rune-stone-as-gang-sign policy to deny access to Odinists have had little sway with courts, most of whom cite the large presence of Muslim, Jewish and Latino inmates who use Arabic, Hebrew and Spanish in their services.

Donald Rothstein, who has spent more than 20 years investigating security-threat groups for the Minnesota corrections system, said that Odinist religious services, just like any religious group meeting, provide an opportunity for him and his colleagues to gain intelligence on security threats. Asatru or Odinist inmates are allowed to meet for group worship in four of the state's prison facilities, and they are monitored when they do. "If for some reason white supremacist inmates are having an action [and] fifty of them show up – say that's five times the normal service – we know something is going on." Rothstein says Minnesota inmates are observed based on behavior, not for gang or religious affiliation.

Not all racist forms of Asatru are so difficult to decode. In Maine, inmate Dale Wood, who referred to himself as the "gothi," or leader, of his Asatru group, sued the state's prison system after his group was disbanded by correctional officers. While inspecting the group's religious lockers, authorities found pictures of Hitler, swastikas and the Ten Commandments from "Wotansvolk Wisdom for Aryan Man," a violently racist revision of Jesus' parables whose fifth commandment reads: "Cut off ZOG's head and feed it to the

dogs. Government beyond the consent of the governed is tyranny and theft; obedience to tyranny is slavery."

"Prior to this time, I and the other prison staff thought that the prison Asatru group was religious group," said a corrections sergeant in a court affidavit. "I determined that the Asatru group at the facility was really a white supremacist gang."

Pagan vs. pagan

Correctional officers aren't the only ones motivated to expose sham Odinist groups. In 2007, Murray, the Asatru leader who consults for the federal prison system, took the unusual step of testifying against Odinist inmates as a paid witness for the State of Ohio. The case, which is still in litigation, is a class action suit led by an Asatru adherent who believes his faith entitles him to more than 60 days a year off work.

"It's a frivolous lawsuit," Murray told the *Intelligence Report*. "I've written the runic calendar for the federal Bureau of Prisons. There are only 12 recognized holidays." Other neo-pagan groups have called Murray a traitor for his action. Laurel Owen, the Odinist prison volunteer from the Arkansas Ozarks, writes in a how-to guide for outside Odinist volunteers that there are real dangers involved in teaching Odinism to inmates. "Rival gang members will compete for your attention and for a place of leadership. ... You may even be asked to join a gang." She adds, "The first day you go in, tell your group that gang affiliations are not your business and that you don't want to know. Tell them the important thing is this: You are there for spiritual reasons, not to front for a gang." Owen believes Odinism is a positive force in inmates' lives and she has even developed an Odinist alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous that is in use at two Texas prisons.

But the questionable motives of Odinist inmates are part of the reason why Murray, for example, now refuses to certify convicts, past or present, as gothis or leaders of Asatru groups. Instead, he is focused on certifying counselors to respond to the growing demand for Asatru and Odinist religious volunteers inside prison.

In Texas, the prison wardens are adapting as well. "We're not looking at Odinists as a group anymore, but we can monitor individuals for gang activity," says Sanchez. "That's important. An Odinist who is a gang member, who monopolizes that religion, he can become a charismatic leader and bond that group and make it a gang. It's important that we stop that before it happens."

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