
Zuism: History and Introduction

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Abstract: Zuism is a religious movement inspired by ancient Sumeria. The first documented occurrence of it is from Iceland. This article analyses the religious organisation within the Iceland-specific context and argues that its sudden rise in popularity can be at least partially attributed to Iceland's specific relations between church, state, and taxation. The first part of the article focuses on introducing the movement and explaining the background situation that led to its creation. The second part introduces its core religious tenets. Finally, the third part focuses on how Zuism developed in the years following its founding and addresses its controversy.

Key Words: Zuism; Iceland; Mesopaganism; Neopaganism; Sumeria; Church tax.

Abstrakt: Zuismus je náboženské hnutí inspirované starověkým Sumerem. Jeho první zdokumentovaný výskyt je na Islandu. Tento článek analyzuje toto hnutí ve specifickém kontextu Islandu a argumentuje, že jeho náhlý nárůst počtu členů může být alespoň částečně přisouzen specificky islandskému vztahu mezi církví, státem a daněmi. První část článku se zaměřuje na představení samotného hnutí a následně na vysvětlení situace, která vedla k jeho založení. Druhá část představuje jeho hlavní náboženské hodnoty. Třetí část článku se následně zaměřuje na to, jak se zuismus vyvíjel v letech od jeho založení a také přibližuje kontroverzi, která kolem něj vznikla.

Klíčová Slova: Zuismus; Island; Mezopohanství; Novopohanství; Sumer; Církevní daň.

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Zuism (Icelandic: *Zúismi*) is a religious movement unique to Iceland. Other names that could describe the group, such as *Sumerian-Mesopotamian Reconstructionism* or *Kaldanism*¹, might also be acceptable. However, for the purposes of this article, the term Zuism will be used exclusively to avoid any possible confusion. The term itself seems to originate from the Sumerian verb *zu*, meaning “to know”. Thus, a possible way to describe the translation would be “the way of knowledge”, or, in other words, insight into the relationship between the mortal and the divine. A possible parallel might be found in the Greek word *gnosis*.

Officially stated to continue the traditions and rites of ancient Sumeria – which have not been practised for several millennia at the time of this article – the movement attracted momentary attention and experienced a significant surge in popularity in the past several years. Despite its ties to the ancient Middle East, the main source of the movement’s international fame appears to have less to do with the actual religion and more with its rather unique position within Iceland’s ongoing debate on the relation between church and state. This article aims to rectify the severe lack of academic sources on Zuism and introduce the movement, both in terms of its history and its current-day position in Iceland.

Historical background

From the beginning of the eleventh century Iceland was a Christian nation – first Catholic and then Lutheran, from the second half of the sixteenth century onward. However, even after the country initially underwent Christianization, it retained ties to its older traditions, as shown by the numerous Old Nordic literature works written throughout the centuries.²

Starting with the nineteenth century, the country has seen a slow but increasing interest in other faiths and religious practices, starting with the Theosophical movement founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). Despite officially being a part of the Lutheran faith, by 1920, Theosophy had established its own local branch under the leadership of pastor Séra Jakob Kristinsson.³

The 1970s saw the rise of a prominent religious tradition in Iceland, one tied to its older pre-Christian roots – specifically the Ásatrú Fellowship (*Ásatrúarfélagið*). Named after the Norse pagan gods called the *Æsir* – which include a pantheon of popular Norse gods such as Odin, Thor, Frigg, and Baldur – the organisation was founded in 1972. A year later, it was officially recognised as a registered religious institution, allowing it to hold legally binding ceremonies and giving its chief priest

¹ *Kaldea* (or Chaldea) being a late term for Sumeria.

² The most renowned collections are known as *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*.

³ “*Iceland, Theosophy in*” [online], *Theosophy World*, year unknown, accessed January 2021, available online at <https://www.theosophy.world/encyclopedia/iceland-theosophy>.

(*Allsherjargóði*) the same status as a Christian pastor.⁴ Since then, many other religious organisations have been established in the country, especially in the last decade, although most remain a minority in the overall population.

Zuism (or *Félag Zúista á Íslandi* in Icelandic) as a religious association was supposedly founded in 2010 by Ólafur Helgi Þorgrímsson. However, it became an officially recognised religion in 2013, originally starting with supposedly only three official members, the other two being brothers Águst Arnar and Einar Ágústssonir, who were listed as board members.

From a technical standpoint, Zuism does not belong among neopaganism groups, as it does not seek to create a new religion. By the same margin, it does not belong to the rather broad category of New Age movements, as it does not seem to be influenced by any of the elements that help shape it (such as Theosophy, Spirituality, etc.).⁵

The classification issue is further complicated by the movement's recent founding, which means that even academic literature is yet to notice the organisation properly. Thus, often enough, works that categorise similar movements do not mention Zuism⁶ due to having been before its founding, or they do not include it – most likely because of its relative obscurity.

Compounding the issue is also the fact that the movement seeks to revitalise a religion that is not native to Iceland itself (nor did it have any known historical influence on it) whilst inevitably being influenced by the already established religions and traditions of that area. In order to reach a conclusion where Zuism would belong in terms of pagan⁷ groups, we need to define the three major categories that are commonly used today:

- a) Paleopaganism – Usually designates the polytheistic (and/or nature-centred) faiths of both pre-Christian Europe and the broader world, including those still active today, such as Hinduism and Shintoism. It is important to note that this classification is only used to help categorise such faiths and would not necessarily be used by the practitioners themselves.
- b) Mesopaganism – A general term coined to designate the variety of movements that aim to either recreate and revive previous faiths or create new ones based on pre-existing pagan religions. The difference from Paleopaganism is in the influence of practices and concepts (such as but not restricted to monotheistic religions) on the founders and, by extension, on the resulting movement. This ends up creating a de facto separate entity that incorporates elements from the original whilst re-

⁴ CAMILLE BUCKLEY, "What Is Zuism, Iceland's Fast-Growing Pagan Religion?" [online], *The Culture Trip*, June 16 2018, accessed January 2021, available online at <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/iceland/articles/what-is-zuism-icelands-fast-growing-pagan-religion/>.

⁵ MICHAEL YORK, *The A to Z New Age Movements*, Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press 2009, 260 p.

⁶ MICHAEL YORK, *Historical Dictionary of New Age Movements*, Lanham, Toronto, Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press 2004, 267 p.

⁷ In this instance being a general term meaning both old and new religions not originating from one of the three Abrahamic faiths.

taining more modern concepts or sensibilities. Examples range from Theosophy to Mahayana Buddhism.

- c) Neopaganism – This model is a broad category of primarily Wicca and feminist spirituality, sometimes incorporating contemporary liberal values. It is not directly connected to the more open-ended western paganism that usually focuses on reconstructions of ancient religions as well as imports of various present-day indigenous and folk-oriented practices. Given its focus on personal freedom and self-development, there can be an overlap with the New Age movement.⁸ In comparison to Mesopaganism, this category would incorporate more recent movements from the past few decades.

As with any classification system, there is no absolute dividing line, and there will always be a measure of mutual overlap. The three-group model proposed above should therefore be taken as a tool for facilitating differentiation. For example, if we use it on Zuism, the result would be its classification as Mesopagan. At the same time, however, it also carries significant overtones of contemporary liberal attitudes regarding religious freedom and church taxes, as will be detailed in later parts of this article.

However, it should be noted that even among pagan groups, Zuism enjoys a peculiar position for several reasons. Firstly, there are very few reconstructionism groups focused on ancient Middle Eastern religions in contrast to Hellenic, Slavic, or Celtic ones – be they regionally specific or pan-European in their focus.⁹ This is perhaps even more salient in Iceland, given the strong influence and presence of the older pre-Christian faith (represented by groups like the aforementioned Ásatrú Fellowship).

Furthermore, while the country has seen a rise in the diversity of religious movements and organisations in recent years, Zuism still retains the unique position of being the only movement that focuses on ancient Sumeria. This also runs into the problem of ancient Middle Eastern religions rarely, if ever, having larger groups that could be studied appropriately. Regarding whether the movement has its origins elsewhere, the movement's now-defunct webpage previously made claims that the movement was connected to a foreign mother church. To quote:

Zuism in Iceland is connected to the mother church of Zuism in the state of Delaware in the USA.¹⁰

There is, however, a significant issue with such claims, namely that it is difficult to verify. Given the nature of such a supposed mother church, it would have been listed under the umbrella term "New Age" in the state's religion census. Such groups con-

⁸ YORK, *The A to Z New Age Movements*, p. 163.

⁹ BARBARA JANE DAVY, *Introduction to Pagan Studies*, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield 2007, p. 97.

¹⁰ "Doctrines of Zuism" [online], *Zuist.org*, January 16 2018, accessed January 2021 available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20180116084124/http://is.zuist.org/about/our-mission/>.

stitute less than one per cent of Delaware's population¹¹, and assuming such a church did exist at all, it would have been lumped in with other similar associations due to its small number of members. The claim that before 2014 there was an earlier Zuist movement in Delaware that helped spawn the Icelandic organisation should therefore be the subject of further investigation.

The founder of Icelandic Zuism, Ólafur Helgi, in a later interview from 2015, stated that he left the movement mere months after its creation and that he has had nothing to do with it since.¹² According to state records, this statement is correct, as in February of 2014 he requested he be deregistered as director and has been unrelated to the association from that point on.

However, it should be noted that official statistics differ from such claims. They show that in 2013 there were a total of zero registered members, two by the end of the following year and four by 2015.¹³ One could ask just how was it possible for the association to be registered at all, as according to the rules on the registration of public religions and religious associations, established in 2013, it was required that 25 people over the age of eighteen be members for registration as a religious association.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the low member count was sufficient for the district commissioner in Northeast Iceland, who also supervises the activities of religious associations, to begin the process of delisting Zuism as a movement in the same year.¹⁵

This was then followed by a massive surge in popularity, and by 2016, the movement had over three thousand official members – an increase by a factor of seven hundred and fifty. While the numbers have been steadily declining in recent years, it cannot be denied that Zuism experienced a major spike in popularity within a relatively short period.

While the sudden increase in the number of members could be explained in various ways, an often-cited reason is the promise of tax breaks that, at least for a time, seemed to be a primary driver behind the movement. To explain the situation regarding the country's specific long-standing issue of taxes, more specifically church taxes, it is crucial to understand the chronic problems the native population faces regarding how the state funds religious movements.

¹¹ "Religious composition of adults in Delaware" [online], *Pew Research Center*, accessed March 2021, available online at <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/delaware/>.

¹² "Dularfyllsta trúfélag á Íslandi verður brottfellt á næstunni" [online], *Stundin.is*, April 14 2015, accessed February 2021, available online at <https://stundin.is/frett/dularfyllsta-trufelag-islandi-verdur-brottfellt-na/>.

¹³ "Populations by religious and life stance organizations 1998–2021" [online], *Statistics Iceland*, accessed February 2021, available online at http://px.hagstofa.is/pxen/pxweb/en/Samfelag/Samfelag__menning__5_trufelog/MAN10001.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=8b25e57f-b0ee-4a83-be93-0b7c89ba2933.

¹⁴ KJARTAN KRAJTANSSON, "Zúistar fá tugi milljóna frá ríkinu en finnast hvergi" [online], *Visir.is*, November 16 2018, accessed February 2021, available online at <https://www.visir.is/g/2018181119273>.

¹⁵ KJARTAN KRAJTANSSON, "Zúistar telja ósannað að loforð um endurgreiðslur hafi fjölgað félögum" [online], *Visir.is*, October 22 2019, accessed January 2021, available online at <https://www.visir.is/g/20191277537d>.

Zuism as Iceland's highlight on church taxation

All citizens of the country are subject to a dedicated "religion" tax, with the percentage being calculated on the individual's income. Unlike, for example, Germany – which has its own dedicated church tax – Iceland's government instead includes support of churches in its annual budget. It should also be noted that since this is part of the general income tax, all Icelanders are mandated to support religious organisations, regardless of whether they are members of one or not.¹⁶

Each registered religious group then receives a "parish fee" (*sóknargjald*), where a monetary sum is given per each registered member of at least 16 years of age. The vast majority of the island's admittedly low population is still registered as belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland. At the same time, as Zuism elder Gunnhildur Gunnarsdóttir noted in an interview from 2016, this might be partially because all Icelanders are automatically registered at birth with the church of their parent and most never bother to deregister.¹⁷

The conversation about rethinking the relation between church and state has been going on in Iceland since at least the 1990s, beginning with the efforts of Siðmennt (or the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association in English).¹⁸ After two unsuccessful attempts at registering and almost twenty years of lobbying and focused efforts by Siðmennt's managing director Bjarni Jónsson, the group mentioned above finally attained the promise of the issue being discussed in parliament in 2008.

However, the global financial crisis of 2008 and Iceland's subsequent national banking collapse in the same year crashed the country's economy, with some even calling the financial disaster "the biggest any country had ever suffered relative to its size".¹⁹ A subsequent change of government followed in 2009, and due to more pressing constitutional amendments being passed, the process was further delayed by several more years. January 2013 finally saw the long-sought changes to law and legal proceedings regarding religious organisations, allowing both Siðmennt and Zuism to become officially recognised.

How is this relevant to Zuism itself? Following a change in leadership in 2015 where Ísak Andri Ólafsson became the organisation's director, there seemed to be a shift in the movement's priorities, and the movement's leadership made a new promise in November of the same year: The movement would reimburse members

¹⁶ SAM BRUNSON, "The Rise of Zuism" [online], *By Common Consent*, December 9 2015, accessed December 2020, available online at <https://bycommonconsent.com/2015/12/09/the-rise-of-zuism/>.

¹⁷ ISAAC WÜRMAN, "The Beautiful Joke of Zuism" [online], *Roadsand Kingdoms*, July 07 2016, accessed March 2021, available online at <https://roadsandkingdoms.com/2016/the-beautiful-joke-of-zuism/>.

¹⁸ WÜRMAN, "The Beautiful Joke of Zuism", <https://roadsandkingdoms.com/2016/the-beautiful-joke-of-zuism/>.

¹⁹ ANH NGUYEN, "Case Study: Island's Banking Crisis" [online], *Seven Pillars Institute*, June 13 2017, accessed April 2021, available online at <https://sevenpillarsinstitute.org/case-study-icelands-banking-crisis/>.

for the parish fees that the association would receive from the state.²⁰ It is perhaps not a coincidence that a mere two months after the declaration, Zuism suddenly had over three thousand members, despite their number being in the single digits before. Correspondingly, the association received over 32 million from the state in 2016 and over 31 million in 2017.

This new directive was no secret, as the archived English version of the now-defunct Zuist webpage clearly states the following:

The religious organisation of Zuism is a platform for its members to practise a religion of the ancient Sumerian people. Zuists fully support freedom of religion, and from religion, for everyone. The organisation's primary objective is that the government repeal any law that grants religious organisations privilege, financial or otherwise, above other organisations. Furthermore, Zuists demand that the government's registry of its citizens' religion be abolished.

The organisation redistributes the government's annual financial support equally to all members of the congregation. The organisation's financial matters are handled by an accountant firm, and general administrative matters are handled by a lawyer. Neither the administrative board nor other members will have access to the organisations financial matters.

The religious organisation of Zuism will cease to exist when its objectives have been met²¹.

It should be specified that the movement was not necessarily opposed to the existence of parish fees by default, but instead was more in opposition against the way they were distributed:

The board of Zuism opposes the government's financial support of religious and life stance organisations in the form of annual grants (sometimes referred to as *sóknargjöld* or "parish fees", although these were actually abolished in 1987). Iceland's Ministry of Finance once more confirmed in parliament in 2014 that this financial support is a grant, as opposed to an annual member fee.

If the state decides to pay out such grants on behalf of its citizens, an individual should be able to choose what organisation receives the grant. This choice should not be limited to religious and life stance organisations. Most appropriate would be to put an end to such grants, and have religious and life stance organisations collect their own member fees.²²

While the movement's lawyers denied any connection between the shift in official policy and the rapid growth of Zuism's member base, an outside observer might find

²⁰ KRAJATANSSON, "Zúistar telja ósannað að loforð um endurgreiðslur hafi fjölgað félögum", <https://www.visir.is/g/20191277537d>.

²¹ "Zúistar á Íslandi" [online], *Zuistar.is*, December 05 2015, accessed December 2020, available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20171102151051/http://www.zuistar.is/english.html>.

²² "Zúistar á Íslandi", <https://web.archive.org/web/20171102151051/http://www.zuistar.is/english.html>.

it too coincidental that there seemed to be such an influx of newcomers almost immediately after the said policy change was announced. To make matters worse, there were even cases where people from other religions joined the movement, be it for reimbursement or as a protest against the ongoing state of affairs.

Such individuals included even prominent Icelandic politicians like Birgitta Jónsdóttir, one of the co-founders and the first MP of Iceland's Pirate Party. Despite already being a Buddhist, she stated in an interview from 2016 that she joined the movement to support the objectives of its leaders. In her own words:

“I don't even expect to get my money back – it's not about that. It's about the issues they were raising.”²³

In the same interview, she also admitted that Zuism was a joke and a beautiful one at that. This inevitably raises a question of just how serious many of these new members were about the religious aspect of Zuism and, by contrast, how many simply wished to make a statement and, perhaps more importantly, whether at this point the movement can genuinely be considered a religion or if it is in fact a protest movement as some Icelandic media suggested.²⁴ Stefán Bogi Sveinsson of the Progressive party even urged the Zuists in 2019 to deregister as a religious movement, as in his view, it is doubtful anyone joined the movement for genuinely religious reasons. To quote:

“I would go so far as to say that no one has registered in the organisation to practice Zuism itself. Their reasons for registering are rather twofold: to get money in their pockets, or to protest against current legislation about religious organisations.”²⁵

Besides the goal of supposedly refunding members for their church taxes, Zuism also had several other stated goals. For example, the abolition of the aforementioned practice of infants being automatically listed as members of the same religious organisation their parents belonged to:

The board of Zuism is opposed to the automatic registration of infants in religious and life stance organisations. Currently, an infant is registered in the religious or life stance

²³ WÜRMAN, “The Beautiful Joke of Zuism”, <https://roadsandkingdoms.com/2016/the-beautiful-joke-of-zuism/>.

²⁴ “Why has the ancient Sumerian religion Zuism become the fastest growing religion in Iceland?” [online], *Iceland Magazine*, December 03 2015, accessed January 2021, available online at <https://icelandmag.is/article/why-has-ancient-sumerian-religion-zuism-become-fastest-growing-religion-iceland>.

²⁵ PAUL FONTAINE, “Progressive suspects people joined the zuists for the money” [online], *Grapevine.is*, December 01 2015, accessed February 2021, available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20171116185941/https://grapevine.is/news/2015/12/01/progressive-suspects-people-joined-the-zuists-for-the-money/>.

organisation of its parents if both parents are registered in the same organisation. The parents have no input in this process and are not notified of it²⁶

In a similar vein ran the demand for cancelling the right of religious organisations to view private information about its members:

The board of Zuism supports the repeal of any law allowing for the access of religious and life stance organisations to individuals' sensitive personal information. The present law states that the head of such an organisation shall confirm that an individual looking to join the organisation is not already a member of another religious or life stance organisation. This should be out of the hands of the heads of these organisations. Statistics Iceland, the centre for official statistics in Iceland, should handle the registration of individuals for religious and life stance organisations, until the current law on these organisations is abolished.²⁷

This particular demand is a bit ironic, given that following its change of leadership, the movement had no problem accepting people already belonging to other faiths (as shown above with Birgitta Jónsdóttir) in order to boost their numbers. However, they would apparently hand over the responsibility of keeping track of every citizen's religious association to the state. The phrasing until the current law on these organisations is abolished is nonetheless curious, as it appears in Zuism aims multiple times. Another example would be the following:

The board of Zuism opposes a specific clause regarding a single religious organisation in the constitution. The board also opposes the official role of a single religious organisation during the inauguration of parliament each year. The repeal of laws regarding the privileges of religious and life stance organisations will help to alter the unjust and abnormal structure of religious matters in Iceland. The aforementioned constitutional clause should be abolished as well.²⁸

It is up for debate whether the movement truly intended to advance such agendas or whether it was merely posturing on their part. The fact that all these goals and more were listed on the now-defunct Zuism page might seem like an indication of the former, but since there seems to be no available record of actions dedicated to promoting or advancing such aims, the latter seems more likely.

²⁶ "Zúistar á Íslandi", <https://web.archive.org/web/20171102151051/http://www.zuistar.is/english.html>.

²⁷ "Zúistar á Íslandi", <https://web.archive.org/web/20171102151051/http://www.zuistar.is/english.html>.

²⁸ "Zúistar á Íslandi", <https://web.archive.org/web/20171102151051/http://www.zuistar.is/english.html>.

Zuism's doctrines and practices

Contemporary Zuism draws from the worship of the Sumerian gods of ancient Mesopotamia. On its now-defunct home page, the movement professes to primarily worship the four creation gods (An – god of the heavens, Ki – goddess of the earth, Enlil – the god of the air, Enki – god of water) and to a lesser extent some of the other ancient gods. To quote:

Zuism comes from an ancient Sumerian religion. We believe that the universe is governed by a group of living beings, who have a human form but are immortal and possess supernatural powers. These beings are invisible to the human eye and guide and control the universe according to well-laid plans and laws.

In Sumeria, there were four leading gods, known as creation gods. These gods were An, the god of the heavens, Ki, the goddess of the earth, Enlil, the god of the air and Enki, the god of the water. The sky, earth, air and water were considered to be the four major elements of the universe.

Creation was accomplished by measuring the divine word, the creator god only had to make plans and measure the name of the object to be created. To keep the universe in constant balance and to avoid confusion and conflict, the gods created what is called me, universal and unchanging rules and laws that all beings were obliged to obey.

The second most important after the creation gods were the celestial gods, the moon god Nanna, the sun god Utu and Inanna, the queen of the heavens. Inanna was the goddess of love, creativity and war. Nanna was the father of Uta and Inanna.²⁹

Said page also lists Dumuzi (a god associated with shepherds, commonly viewed as Inanna's primary consort) among the gods worshipped by the movement and states individual prayers directed to personal sub-gods are permissible.³⁰

At the same time, it should be mentioned that the worship of gods is not necessarily the centre of Zuist religious activity. Instead, the ancient deities appear to be mere intermediaries, with the actual focus being given to the worship of a heavenly creative force. To quote:

Zuism is essentially the worship (id est worth-giving) of Heaven, of the north ecliptic and celestial pole and of the constellations which spin around it. It is the knowledge of Heaven, which is an ancient gnosis, returning as a new gnosis for a new era; from this comes the name "Zuism", zu meaning "to know" in Sumerian (Wolfe 2015, *passim*). We believe that stars, with their movements, influence the formation and life of categories of beings on Earth. They generate beings out of Earth, either by direct influence or by assimilation of the knowing subject (the star-gazer) and the known object.

²⁹ "Doctrines of Zuism", <https://web.archive.org/web/20180116084124/http://is.zuist.org/about/our-mission/>.

³⁰ "Doctrines of Zuism", <https://web.archive.org/web/20180116084124/http://is.zuist.org/about/our-mission/>.

Our gods are the stars (Rogers 1998, *passim*), offspring of An/Dingir (Heaven), the hub of whose vault is the north ecliptic pole winded by the constellation Draco, the Dragon. Our God of Heaven is therefore immanent, not exclusively transcendent (like that of Christians and other Abrahamics): our God is existent.³¹

Regarding the Zuist view on humankind's role in the universe, the main focus was restoring the natural link between Heaven and Earth. To quote:

We believe that the disruption of the attunement of Earth with Heaven and its stars is the reason why civilisations degenerate and die, as beings themselves degenerate, their actions become senseless, and institutions lose meaning and become empty logistical machineries (Pankenier 1995, pp. 150–155). The reason why the entire Western world is currently dying is because it has lost its “link with the stars”, which is the original meaning of the word “religion” (literally “re-linking”).

The harmonisation of human (earthly) activities with the movements of the stars, with the gods, is the practice of Zuism and the way for wellbeing, for good life. Zuism is the means to bring the “lords of Heaven down to Earth” (the literal meaning of Anunnaki), to “square” the latter, Ki, providing her with forms.³²

The aforementioned defunct page also lists the designations of their priest ranks as En, Ensi, and Lugal, but without explaining any distinction between them for those that are not specialists in ancient Middle Eastern religion. The same lack of details or distinctions is seen in the supposed way the movement was meant to conduct their ceremonies:

Regular meetings where hymns from ancient Sumeria are sung in honor of the gods. Prayers are offered to the creation gods and each one also prays to his personal sub-gods. Zuism has a lot of rituals and ceremonies that take place at these gatherings. Zuism also organises reading and prayer groups.

Members practice faith in their daily lives by reading the ME tablets and following the rules that the gods have set for us.³³

Unfortunately, given that the movement's web page was deleted without archiving its subsections, any further details are seemingly lost forever. In terms of actual religious practices and rituals, it can be said with certainty that the movement conducted wedding ceremonies, as they had both the legal authority to do so, and their entries confirm performing such activities. To list a statement from 2018:

*The denomination offers and has performed various ordination ceremonies, such as weddings and baptisms in recent weeks. We encourage interested parties to take advantage of this service.*³⁴

³¹ DAVID G. BROMLEY, “Zuism (Iceland)” [online], *World Religions and Spirituality Project*, June 01 2018, accessed February 2021, available online at <https://wrldrels.org/2018/06/02/zuism/>.

³² BROMLEY, “Zuism (Iceland)”, <https://wrldrels.org/2018/06/02/zuism/>.

³³ “Zúistar á Íslandi”, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171102151051/http://www.zuistar.is/english.html>.

³⁴ “Yfirlýsing frá trúfélaginu Zuism“ [online], November 2018, accessed February 2021, available online at <https://zuism.is/2018/11/16/yfirlýsing-fra-trufelaginu-zuism/>.

The word baptism or christening (*skírnir* in the original article – a form of *skírn*, not to be confused with *Skírnir* from Norse mythology) is a rather peculiar choice of term, as it is a word associated with Christian practices and not what one might typically associate with Sumerian religious traditions.

Although it is most likely that this is simply a case of using already established language forms to convey familiar ideas to the target audience, the question of how such a process differed from its Christian counterpart would certainly be interesting – if only more materials were publicly available to allow an adequate comparison.

Another part of Sumerian religious practices, specifically animal sacrifice, seems to be completely absent from the movement, as there seems to be no mention of it on any of the movement's websites (both those still operating and those defunct). Considering it would have certainly caught media attention if it were practised, especially in a country like Iceland, a safe assumption can be made that this is one part of Sumerian religion that did not see a revival in modern times.

Subsequent developments

Despite the promises from 2015 onward, the movement's leaders seem reluctant to disclose just how many members have been reimbursed or how much of the application fees have been paid out.³⁵ Estimates place such reimbursements at around 6.6 million ISK, though the association itself did not submit these numbers.³⁶

To make matters worse, the brothers Ágúst Arnar Ágústsson and Einar Ágústsson were charged with embezzlement and money laundering in 2020, allegedly funnelling most of the government funding into the organisation for their private use. Estimated numbers would project a loss in the tens of millions for the organisation.³⁷

As the article disclosing the indictment writes:

“The funds that flowed to the religious community from the state treasury were not in fact spent on or for the purpose of actual religious practice or related activities within the meaning of these legal conditions, but in other and unrelated ways and including allocated to or for the benefit of the accused, the disposition of its assets and its control in practice.”³⁸

That is not to say that all funds collected by the movement were used in this manner, as around two million ISK was donated to Icelandic hospitals and charities in 2018.³⁹ In addition, another almost ten million ISK was paid to cover the organisa-

³⁵ BIRGIR OLGEISSON, “Zúistar endurgreiða en gefa ekki upp hve mikið” [online], *Visir.is*, November 16 2017, accessed January 2021, available online at <https://www.visir.is/g/20171119135>.

³⁶ KJARTAN KRAJTANSSON, “Stjórnendur Zuism ákærðir fyrir fjársvik og peningþvætti” [online], *Visir.is*, December 07 2020, accessed March 2021, available online at <https://www.visir.is/g/20202045709d/stjornendur-zuism-akaerdir-fyrir-fjarsvik-og-peningathvaett>.

³⁷ KRAJTANSSON, “Stjórnendur Zuism ákærðir fyrir fjársvik og peningþvætti”, <https://www.visir.is/g/20202045709d/stjornendur-zuism-akaerdir-fyrir-fjarsvik-og-peningathvaett>.

³⁸ KRAJTANSSON, “Stjórnendur Zuism ákærðir fyrir fjársvik og peningþvætti”, <https://www.visir.is/g/20202045709d/stjornendur-zuism-akaerdir-fyrir-fjarsvik-og-peningathvaett>.

³⁹ KRAJTANSSON, “Stjórnendur Zuism ákærðir fyrir fjársvik og peningþvætti”, <https://www.visir.is/g/20202045709d/stjornendur-zuism-akaerdir-fyrir-fjarsvik-og-peningathvaett>.

tion's various legal fees, and over two million was spent on other various payments such as for public relations and telecommunication services. However, even after subtracting all of the aforementioned transactions, the association would still face exorbitant debt should its leaders be found guilty.

It should be noted that this is not the first time the Ágústsson siblings have had trouble with law enforcement. In 2015 the duo gained media attention as 'the Kickstarter brothers' due to no less than three of their projects (such as the Trinity Windmill design meant to be a portable source of energy⁴⁰) coming under investigation for embezzlement.

The aforementioned American site halted any further funding after approximately 20 million ISK had already been collected, although it did not disclose any further details due to the ongoing investigation at the time.⁴¹ The case concluded with Einar Ágústsson being sentenced to three years and nine months in prison (leaving Ágúst Arnar Ágústsson as the sole leader of Zuism), and his associated company had its assets seized.⁴²

Zuism also applied for the purchase of land in May of 2019 in order to construct a ziggurat⁴³ that would serve as a temple for the growing religion⁴⁴. According to media sources, the temple was meant to carry the name Ekur (roughly translated from Sumerian as mountain house), in reference to the mythological place where heaven and earth intersect.⁴⁵ However, in the end, the city council of Reykjavík refused the submitted application in 2018⁴⁶, with no further proposals being brought forward since.

Recently there also seems to have been new talk of the movement being delisted as a religious association. By law, any religious organisations must partake in regular activities and submit annual reports of their operations and finances in March of each year, but it seems that limited if any activity has been undertaken by Zuism in recent years. Whether the movement will end up being deregistered or not is still uncertain, however.

⁴⁰ "Trinity Portable Wind Turbine Power Station (Suspended)" [online], *Kickstarter*, accessed January 2021, available online at <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/janulus/trinity-portable-wind-turbine-power-station/description>.

⁴¹ KJARTAN KRAJTANSSON, "Fangelsisdómur yfir Kickstarter-bróður vegna fjárvika staðfestur" [online], *Visir.is*, November 23 2018, accessed February 2021, available online at <https://www.visir.is/g/2018181129391>.

⁴² KRAJTANSSON, "Fangelsisdómur yfir Kickstarter-bróður vegna fjárvika staðfestur", <https://www.visir.is/g/2018181129391>.

⁴³ A collective term for large terraced compounds that served as temples for ancient Sumerians, Akkadians and other Babylonians.

⁴⁴ "Iceland's Zuiist religion apply for permit to build a temple in Reykjavik" [online], *Iceland Monitor*, May 30 2018, accessed April 2021, available online at https://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/politics_and_society/2018/05/30/iceland_s_zuist_religion_apply_for_permit_to_build/.

⁴⁵ BÁRA HULD BECK, "Zúistum synjað um lóð í Reykjavík" [online], *Kjarninn.is*, October 08 2018, accessed April 2021, available online at <https://kjarninn.is/frettir/2018-10-04-zuistum-synjad-um-lod-i-reykjavik/>.

⁴⁶ KRAJTANSSON, "Zúistar fá tugi milljóna frá ríkinu en finnast hvergi", <https://www.visir.is/g/2018181119273>.

As Halldór Þormar Halldórsson, a lawyer with the district commissioner in North-east Iceland, points out, it is rather difficult for the authorities to monitor whether religious associations actually conduct such activities in the first place. As long as the acting director of a movement claims it is active, it would take a long and complicated process of disproving it to allow the state to deregister a religious denomination. At the same time, the law is very open about the qualifications required of such directors – for example, there is no requirement for a clean criminal record.⁴⁷

As of early 2019, the State Accounting Office suspended payments to the religious organisation when doubts arose about its legitimacy. This prompted the Zuists to sue the Icelandic government for defamation.⁴⁸

It could be argued that, in a way, members of Zuism ultimately ended up proving the opposite of their intentions in regard to laws concerning religious organisations and institutions. To quote:

The board of Zuism opposes the conditions imposed by the state on organisations in order to acquire status as official religious or life stance organisations. The state should not be involved in the inner structure or form of organisations of this kind. The most appropriate action would be to repeal specific laws governing religious and life stance organisations. Organisations of this kind should be allowed to set their own rules and regulations, as for any other organisations.⁴⁹

When contrasted with the above statement, the so-far brief history of Zuism paints a somewhat different picture: The movement originally started as a small and, in terms of members, insignificant group. Only when the law underwent changes to allow more religious freedom of registration, it saw a massive influx of new members, most of which seems to have been in response to their political protest and promises of tax refunds rather than to its religious activities.

On the other hand, a different argument could also be presented: that a case such as this ended up proving that at least the sentiment behind Zuism's protest presented valid points against the notion of mandatory church tax, doubly so in an environment where the relevant laws have too many loopholes to exploit. No matter what stance one takes on the issue, the case of Zuism is yet another curious example that sparked renewed debate on the topic. Perhaps that might even be considered its legacy, in addition to any claims of continuing the religious traditions of ancient Sumeria.

⁴⁷ KRAJTANSSON, "Zúistar fá tugi milljóna frá ríkinu en finnast hvergi", <https://www.visir.is/g/2018181119273>.

⁴⁸ INES PEREIRA, "Zuist Organization Under State Scrutiny" [online], *Grapevine.is*, December 06 2019, accessed December 2020, available online at <https://grapevine.is/news/2019/12/06/zuist-organization-under-state-scrutiny/>.

⁴⁹ "Zúistar á Íslandi", <https://web.archive.org/web/20171102151051/http://www.zuistar.is/english.html>.

Conclusion

For all of its brief moments of popularity, Zuism in Iceland seems to be well on its way to meeting a rather anticlimactic end. Icelandic data shows that the number of members has declined sharply from its short-lived peak in popularity. Compared to its more than three thousand members back in 2016, the following years saw a consistent decline in membership.

For comparison: In 2020, the movement had only about 1200 members, less than half the number reported four years ago. By 2021, the numbers dropped yet again to a mere 838 registered members.⁵⁰

This trend also seems unlikely to be reversed, as not only are its leaders going from one indictment to the next, but the key promise of refunding church taxes to members was by all accounts either not fulfilled, or at best, it only impacted very few members. Instead, the movement helped siphon tens of millions from the state, most of which ended up being spent on dubious projects or transferred elsewhere.

However, the possible end of the Icelandic movement does not mean that it had no impact at all. A more accurate statement would be that outside of Iceland, its presence has been minimal enough to be considered non-existent. Aside from the aforementioned protest against government policies that temporarily put Zuism into the broader spotlight, there were also short-lived attempts to branch out into other countries. For example, a British branch of the movement was supposedly established by the Ágústssonir siblings in 2018 but ended up being dissolved a mere year later.

There are groups in other countries that could have been inspired by Icelandic Zuism or at least apparently sharing somewhat similar beliefs, such as the Zuist Church of Australia⁵¹ or Zuist Church of Russia.⁵² However an additional study has revealed that no actual religious organisations of that nature have registered within said countries, leaving their presence seemingly confined solely to social media platforms. Moreover both listed groups explicitly deny any relation to Icelandic Zuism, making it difficult to establish any connection between them.

Even polls do not support any notions of Zuism organisations in either country, as shown in the census of Australia from 2016. There were no Zuist groups in the statistic.⁵³ Assuming that such a group did exist at all, it would have been listed under

⁵⁰ "Populations by religious and life stance organizations 1998–2021" [online], *Statistics Iceland*, accessed February 2021, available online at http://px.hagstofa.is/pxen/pxweb/en/Samfelag/Samfelag__menning__5_trufelag/MAN10001.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=8b25e57f-b0ee-4a83-be93-0b7c89ba2933.

⁵¹ "Zuist Church of Australia" [online], *Facebook.com*, August 2020, accessed February 2021, available online at <https://tinyurl.com/2sb7vcvd>

⁵² "Zuist Church of Russia – Зуйстская Церковь России" [online], *Facebook.com*, June 2020, accessed February 2021.

⁵³ "Census of Population and Housing: Reflecting Australia - Stories from the Census" [online], *Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016*, latest issue released at March 27 2018, accessed March 2021, available online at <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2071.02016?OpenDocument>.

the umbrella term “paganism”, implying that it lacked the members and the recognition for being categorised on its own. In Russia, the statistical evidence is even less indicative of any Zuist presence, although it should be noted that this is at least in part thanks to less available data.

In Dr. Igor Popov’s online book *The Reference Book on All Religious Branches and Communities in Russia* (Справочник всех религиозных течений и объединений в России к.ф.н. И.Н. Попова)⁵⁴ there are references to multiple different new religious groups. However, there was no mention of Zuism in any capacity. Given that the non-Abrahamic⁵⁵ religions make up only about two per cent of the population⁵⁶, the most likely explanation is similar to that of Australia – namely that even if Zuism has a presence in the country, it is ultimately so small in scale that it fails to register in any official census.

There is also no evidence that the Icelandic movement has had any contact with or influence on the so called Mardukite Zuism, a different neo-pagan group inspired by the religious traditions of Babylonian times, rather than those of Sumeria – as is the case with the organisation analysed in this article. To quote their position on the situation:

It is important for us to make note of this, because those who are otherwise unfamiliar with our work may simply be googling or looking at news articles, which at the time of writing this blog are all focused around the events and politics surrounding “Icelandic Zuism” and the “Zuist Church of Iceland” of which we, as the Church of Mardukite Zuism, have no official ties with—in fact there have been no communications at all between the two groups.

Perhaps the only thing that associates the two together is that they are both referred to as “Zuism” or “Zuist” traditions and emphasise an interest in Mesopotamian Neopaganism; although, as we would expect, the Icelandic Zuists are essentially a neo-Sumerian interpretation of a potential modern Anunnaki religion in contrast to our Mardukite Babylonian one.⁵⁷

All things considered, Zuism seems to be a product of specific societal and legal circumstances – a form of protest against the establishment that emerges in society and often fades back into obscurity afterwards. The intentions of its founder might have been different, but, judging by the consequences of its so far short-lived existence, Zuism became less centred on reviving Sumerian religious traditions and more on activism and siphoning state funding.

⁵⁴ “Новые западные религии / New western religions” [online], *Russia’s Faiths*, accessed March 2021, available online at <https://russiafaiths.blogspot.com/p/new-western-religions.html>.

⁵⁵ In this case only Christianity and Islam, given the low number of Jews in the country.

⁵⁶ “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe” [online], *Pew Research Center*, May 10 2017, accessed April 2021, available online at <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-affiliation/>.

⁵⁷ “Deep Roots of Modern Mesopotamian Neopaganism, Origins of Mardukite Zuism from 2008 Publications” [online], *Mardukite Zuism – A New Babylon*, July 02 2020, accessed March 2021, available online at <https://mardukite.com/2020/07/02/deep-roots-modern-mesopotamian-neopaganism-origins-zuism/>.

In a way, its aim of drawing attention to the issue regarding the relationship between church and state has been successful, as without taking advantage of the legal changes, the movement would not have received state funding at all. However, ultimately Zuism participated in the very thing of which it blamed the national Church of Iceland (namely receiving government funding via mandatory taxation) and that the court may still find it guilty of participating in embezzlement. Considering that, one can only hope that this case will not discourage possible future attempts to change the status quo.

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