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WCER

*The World Congress of Ethnic Religions
(W.C.E.R.) was founded in June 1998 in
Vilnius. Its purpose is to act as a forum
for native religions of the world, regardless
of tradition or geographical position.*

Why Ethnic?

by Denis Dornoy (Denmark)

Many observers are surprised, suspicious, or even frightened by the word **ethnic** in our name. Is *ethnic* connected with *ethnic cleansing*? Is it another *pure race* ideology? Do you have to belong to a long-lost people to be *ethnic*? Isn't *ethnic* a subject for white-haired academics?

Ethnic is none of the above, and its meaning is far simpler. **Ethnos** is Greek, meaning *people*, and **ethnic** means *related to a particular people*, i.e. anything that define a people: its language, customs, daily behaviour, food ... or spiritual outlook. We call this last point **ethnic religion**. It is a set of traditions, worship, way of life, related to a people. It often, but not always, involves ancestor worship. Sometimes it is so integrated into everyday life that it cannot even be called "*religion*" (i.e. belief) according to Western standards.

All this seems obvious : we all belong to a people and live our lives according to some established rules and customs. What, then, is the point about "ethnic" religions?

The point is, ethnic religions are in danger of disappearing. In an age where we accept that a variety of plant and animal species are essential to the survival of nature, the same should apply to humans : for centuries, ethnic cultures have been erased, one by one, from the face of the earth, in the name of an unspecified "better" culture or "faith". Sometimes it happened (and still happens) brutally - by physical elimination - sometimes by gradual brainwashing of younger generations.

Today, ethnic religions in Europe, Australia and the Americas are struggling to reclaim what they can from the wreckage of various "religions" or "ideologies" that all promised a bright future, a perfect society and eternal bliss, but turned out to be just another form of conquest, destroying everything - be it physical, mental or spiritual.

Not all was destroyed, though. From the Great Plains of North America to the villages of Lithuania, the spirits remained alive, waiting to be reawakened. The proud native culture of India was never destroyed and thrives on, although under pressure from both East and West.

By nature, ethnic cultures are very independent-minded. None of them feels superior to others, but they insist on respect of their original nature. They all, however, have to face the same odds : whether they are struggling to survive or to be revived, they need to connect to each other and hold regular consultations. Hence the WCER.

Goals and purpose of the WCER

This is a set of proposals to be discussed during the 2nd WCER conference, and should not be taken in any way as a final version:

1. Create an information centre for all our member organisation, by newsletter or any other means available (Internet, printed matters, etc)
2. Stress authentic, native traditions as opposed to invented, artificial new religions.
3. Create a united group for pressuring governments, local or national, in matters of religious intolerance (on the advice of the local groups concerned).
4. Inform and advising the media on matters of native faith and traditions (on the advice of the local groups concerned).
5. Create an international library of traditional religions.
6. Seek membership by non-European native religious groups, among others in America, Asia/India, and Africa.
7. Work toward recognition as a Non-Governmental Organisation by institutions under the United Nations.
8. Issue official statements on important occasions such as the celebrations of "2000 years of Cristianity".

Universalism and Heathen Revivalism

by Koenraad Elst (Belgium)

In the present article, I will posit a somewhat dissident concerning ancestral religions and universalism. Being a scholar of Asian religions by profession, my involvement with heathen revivalism originates in my study and practice of several continuous non-Abrahamic religious traditions, viz. Buddhism, Taoism and Hinduism. It is from that angle, and especially on the advice of the foremost contemporary Hindu philosopher Ram Swarup (1920-98), that I have started taking an interest in indigenous (in my case European) heathendom and its modern revival. His and my premisses is that, if the said Asian religions have been able to survive till today, there is no reason to accept the disappearance of the native European religions as a historic inevitability, nor to dismiss their revival as a priori ridiculous.

So, I have done some participant observation of mostly Celtic and Germanic revivalist groups. And, frankly, I have seen a few strange things there, childhood diseases. Many non-authentic ideas are read into the vague notion of "heathenism": firstly, all manner of

post-Christian ideas from the past couple of centuries, such as Romantic anti-rationalism, traditionalism (the heathen or convert-Muslim counterpart of the Catholic Church's First Vatican Council of 1870, viz. an in-your-face rejection of modernity), feminism, environmentalism and nationalism; and secondly, the Christian enemy-image of heathenism as primitive, immoral and violent.

The philosophia perennis

A number of post-Christian movements, from the Theosophists to the Traditionalists, have posited the existence of a worldwide stream of quintessential religion underlying all the diverse religions known to us. Skipping the occasion to formulate a critique of these highly imperfect attempts to identify that common stream, that "perennial wisdom", I would like to point out that the basic idea is quite old. The Rg-Veda (1:164:46) says:

"They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni,
Also that divine and noble-winged Garutman;
The one being, the wise call by many names;
Be it Agni or Yama of Matarishwan."

It was totally obvious to the Vedic seers that there was one truth, and that people of various climes and nations and classes and life stages will come up with their own perceptions of this one truth. Variety is a fact of life, not an evil to be combated nor a value to be defended, but what matters is the underlying single truth.

The old heathens were tolerant and pluralistic in matters of religion and philosophy; but they did not practise cultural relativism (now propagated both by New-Rightist "differentialists" and by Leftist "multiculturalists"). Thus, in morality, they did not think that any one thing was as good as any other: they honoured certain forms of behaviour and punished others; they praised the mores of certain neighbouring cultures and tried to emulate them, while holding others in contempt for their barbaric, effeminate or otherwise undesirable customs.

This acute sense of better and worse created a dynamic of progress. Certainly they held to the mores of their ancestors, but not blindly. Caesar was shocked at seeing the human sacrifice practised by the Celtic Druids, because to Romans this was a primitive ancestral custom abolished centuries earlier. Likewise, the Chinese abhorred the human sacrifices of the Shang dynasty (ca. 16th-12th century BC) and praised their abolition by the succeeding Zhou dynasty as a great forward step in the march of civilization. Without sending their ancestors to hell, as the Muslims and Christians do with their heathen ancestors, they did feel that ancestral mores were more primitive and in some cases just no longer acceptable.

This way, when our heathen ancestors saw something worthwhile in a neighbouring culture, they did not ask themselves: but is this the tradition of our ancestors? What they cared for was: is this true? Is this useful? Does this work? And the reason why they didn't mind borrowing from other cultures, was their basic awareness of the commonness of the human condition to all nations. Unlike so many neo-heathens, they were not wailing about their "roots"; they were quite securely rooted and roots were not an issue, they could focus on the truth. The most widespread visualization of the Gods in all heathen cultures was the starry sky (Isis was Sirius, Osiris/Prajapati was Orion, Balder/Mithras/Apollo was the sun, etc.), the universal canvas par excellence, there for all to see. So, from their roots upwards, they reached to heaven, breathing a lot of good atmospheric oxygen along the way.

They rejected Christianity, alright; however, they rarely rejected it because of its foreign origins, but rather for its funny or silly dogmas. Those neo-heathens in Europe who reject "foreign Christianity" in favour of "native Indo-European tradition" ought to realize that for most of them, Indo-European tradition was once a foreign innovation too. The oldest European religions, along with the oldest Indo-European languages, now only remain as fragments incorporated in the Indo-European languages and religions which immigrated from the East.

Most of our biological ancestors at one time looked up to the culture of the newly arrived Indo-Europeans, and assimilated themselves into it. They sacrificed their "identity" for something which they perceived as superior. I am convinced that we, too, should not worship "ethnic identity" as our central value; identity is there and will be there, but we should aspire to the truth. In the age of globalization, our aim should not be to oppose globalization, but rather to appropriate it, to infuse it with our ancestral civilization rather than letting it get usurped by aberrations like consumerism, missionary Christianity or conquering Islam.



The Baltic Religion

-a short history
by Audrius Dundzila (U.S.A.)

Baltic religion thrived in the Baltic lands until the middle of the Middle Ages when the Roman Catholic Church declared a crusade against the Balts for their non-Christian beliefs. The Balts spent centuries defending their lands from Christian invaders. Prussia and Latvia were defeated. This led to the genocide and assimilation of the Baltic Prussians, whose language had disappeared soon after the turn of the 18th century. The Latvians fared better, except that foreign domination continued until 1918.

Grand Duke Gediminas (ca.1275-1341) advocated harmony between the religions in Lithuania. He granted religious freedom, explaining that the Lithuanians and the Christian Germans, Poles and Russian worshipped the same divinity, each in their own way. But his efforts did not stop the Christian aggression.

The Lithuanian state, as the last country in Europe to accept Christianity, officially converted to put an end to the devastating wars. Nevertheless, the Christian Church employed cultural genocide until as late as the 20th century to eradicate Baltic Religion. Christianity advanced only slowly among the Balts. In the Duchies of Prussia, Lithuania and Samogitia, Baltic Religion was the state religion until as late as 1410. Most Balts continued to practice their own religion.

The National Awakening in the 19th Century included a widespread interest in Lithuanian Religion and folklore. Simonas Daukantas (1793-1864) and Jonas Basanvicius (1851-1927) advocated Lithuanian Religion and folklore as a way of self-preservation. Lithuanian Religion became popular during Lithuania's short-lived inter-war independence. The first Romuva congregation was founded in 1929.

During Soviet Occupation, a clandestine Romuva congregation met in Siberia in the late 40's and early 50's. In 1967, the "Vilnius Ethnological Romuva" was founded and began public celebrations of Lithuanian Religious holidays. The group continued for three years. When the Soviet authorities learned the true nature of the organization, it was disbanded. Other groups and individuals secretly continued meeting. Romuva was reestablished in the late 80s.

Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994) documented the mythological history of Lithuanian Religion through a series of enormously popular books and articles.

After Lithuania regained its independence in 1991, Romuva

congregations were founded and registered in Vilnius, Kaunas and Madison, Wisconsin, USA.

Followers of Lithuanian Religion chose the name "Romuva" in the 20th Century. The word "Romuva" means *temple* or *sanctuary* as well as *abode of inner peace*. The main Prussian temple was called "Romuva", and there were temples by the name in other places as well.

The 1st WCER Congress

Vilnius, Lithuania, June 1998
by Jonas Trinkunas (Lithuania)



The Rasa festival, at the summer solstice of 1998 in Vilnius, saw the gathering of a large group of representatives of old pre-Christian or pagan faiths from Europe, the United States and India. Such groups exist everywhere in the world, including almost all countries of Europe. Their isolation had to come to an end, and it was time to exchange ideas and overcome common obstacles.

The Conference started on 22nd June in Vilnius. The great hall of the Teachers house was full. This was a unique opportunity for native faith believers from several countries to get acquainted. The participants of the Conference were welcomed by Romualdas Ozolas, vice chairman of the Lithuanian Parliament. Their speeches were read through two days.

At the start the Conference, the participants paid homage to the memory of Duke Gediminas with a short ceremony held at his statue, built in 1996, in

Vilnius' central square. He was the 14th century Pagan ruler who defended Lithuania against Christian crusaders seeking to convert his nation by force. This ceremony was organised with active participation of members of Romuva, the Baltic faith community.

Romuva, who took the initiative of calling this international gathering, already had experience in working together with other like-minded organizations, beginning with its neighbours: Latvians, Russians and Belorussians. In 1997, a meeting was held in Uzpaliai, Lithuania, between representatives of Baltic countries, Russia, Ukraine and Poland. Through these intensive contacts, it became clear that "pagan" movements have common ideas, concerns and stimulus, as well as interesting differences. We can learn from each other and exchange experiences. At the same time, pagans activities were intensifying in Western Europe, among others with the Pagan Federation in England and the Asatrufelagidh in Iceland. The time had come to establish communications between old faith believers from Eastern and Western Europe.



the Slavic delegation at the first WCER conference

Romuva started with calling the World Congress of Ethnic Religions. The word "world" emphasizes the wide scope of traditions and cultural areas we wish to reach, and opens the possibility to join the Congress to any groups of native faith believers and individuals.

This first meeting had two goals:

- 1.** To get acquainted with each other, our problems and ideas;
- 2.** To come to an understanding concerning further co-operation and found an organization.

At the end of the conference, participants met and decided to create their own organisation. A majority agreed to call it World Congress of Ethnic

Religions (WCER). Many expressed the opinion that the WCER should be based in Vilnius, as a spirit of toleration and benevolence was still alive in Lithuania, and in Vilnius the spirit of Grand Duke Gediminas reigned. Romuva was asked to make the necessary arrangements. A declaration was drafted, expressing a heathen standpoint in modern society.



QUOTATION:

From the constitution of Forn Sed (Norway)

"The old tradition is not a secret order and it has neither a hierarchy, nor leaders with extravagant titles, as in many modern Asatru organisations in Norway and abroad. We do not wish to have a priesthood either, as this is not in our traditions. The Old Tradition is not a reconstructions as some claim, but it has survived through popular beliefs, traditions and mythical tales through thousand years without any religious leaders or hierarchy."

