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Baltic diaspora and the rise of Neo-Paganism

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ANCIENT RELIGION: A Romuva lady seeks harmony amongst many diets. Even though religion was banned under the Soviet regime, believers kept their faith alive.

RIGA - An interesting follow-up to last week's article on the status of religion in the Baltics concerns the religious beliefs of the Baltic diaspora. Not often discussed, the religious tendencies of Latvians abroad do differ from Latvians in the homeland. In addition, the revival of ancient religions and neo-pagan movements also tend to have their base, not in the land where they began, but in the U.S. and Canada.

Ruta, age 86, came to Minnesota from a German displaced persons (DP) camp sponsored by the Lutheran church in 1950. Her story is nearly identical to thousands of others from Balts seeking to start a new life abroad after World War II. She explains in her own words what religion means to her.

"The church here is where everything happens. It is the Latvian center here, if there was no church, there may not have been a community in the beginning. Young people are still baptized and confirmed into the Lutheran church, unlike what I hear of present-day Latvia, where many do not care about such things," explains Ruta.

The church sponsorship, coupled together with the religious freedoms of Canada, Australia, Germany and the United States created perhaps stronger religious ties between Latvians and the church. Free from the oppression of religion under the Soviets, the Latvian Lutherans abroad may have grown stronger, while the faiths of Lutherans in Latvia may have waned.

In fact, the Lutheran World Information Statistics lists the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church Abroad under Germany, keeping it separate from the statistics on Lutherans in Latvia proper.

Aso Rudzitis, a lawyer in Riga's city center explains that religion still plays a role in Latvia, but not the same role as before.

"Religion still plays on a level role with politics of Latvia. Nevertheless, if I would have to refer to the average joe's and the population I would say people are less religious right now. This is generally evidenced by more and more young people joining or having great interest in the eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. But if you had to categorize people in general I would say that most of them are agnostic," explained Rudzitis.

NEO-PAGANISM

However, these well established religions are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Evangelical movements along with neo-pagan movements locally and abroad are possibly the beginnings of something much larger. Next, we take a look at the rebirth of ancient religions. To call it an actual rebirth is somewhat of a misnomer since the neo-pagan movements are not a true revival of a religion once practiced in the region. Instead, as with the example of the Latvian Dievturiba (literally 'keeping God') movement, we see religion constructed from ancient practices.

Dievturiba is an interesting case as it was solely created by using the Latvian Dainas, the ancient four line poems/songs which depict ancient life and traditions through an estimated million poems. Like the other popular pagan movements in the Baltic's, Dievturiba was established after the first independence of Latvia, followed by a revival after the second independence. Of course, the fact that religion was banned under the Soviet regime did not keep believers from practicing.

"I have been a Dievturi since I was 16. Dievturiba is my people's ancient religion that provides answers to all of life's questions. How one fits in the world, what is one's path through life," said 50 year old Andrejs Pinka, of Ogre.

While the Dievturi center (as well as the Lithuanian Romuva center) is located in the U.S. (in Wisconsin and Indiana respectively), practice is still high locally.

Gunta Saule of the local Dievturi said that members are very active in terms of worship, learning and writing. "Currently in Latvia the Dievturi congregation is very active in organizing school lectures, gatherings and discussions about various Dievturi questions."

In the countryside, as might be expected, the movement is more popular. "In Latvian regions outside Riga, most notably Jelgava, Ventspils and Valmiera have the most active members," said Saule.

"Anyone of any faith or background is welcome to our events and nightly meetings and can find answers to important questions from a Dievturi perspective," added Saule.

Saule has worked in the field of folkloristics as well as taking part in folk choirs and traditional holidays but has not been a Dievturi for long.

"I have been a Dievturi only for a few years, but in reality this world outlook and way of life has been with me for a long time," said Saule.

She went on to explain the importance of the Latvian Dainas not only to the identity of Latvians as a people, but also to the faith.

"In reality one could say that the Dainas are our holy texts as they hold explanations of our god, life and living. Dainas have very many hidden meanings and symbols, but not everything that is written there has to be taken literally," said Saule.

"It is important to mention that modern Dievturi are not members of some kind of new religion-it is only new in the way that it has formed recently, but the foundations are as old as the proto-indo-European language, and since the first Balts arrived in the region," explained Saule.

In speaking to representatives and members of these neo-pagan movements, one thing has been made clear by all. Their beliefs should not be called a "religion" by conventional definitions, but instead a natural way of life.

Estonia has two similar pagan movements, Maausk and Taaralased.

The Maausk explain that their beliefs are "something much more than a religion. Maausk is our vernacular, our songs, our customs, our beliefs, our archetypes and culture. Maausk is thousands of years old, a tradition that binds us to our land."

While the Estonian language is often made fun of for having "no sex and no future" (as it is genderless and has no future tense), Ahto Kaasik of the Maausk writes that the "ideology of Maausk is reflected in the Estonian language where there is neither gender nor future tense. Therefore there is no polarity of opposites, nor absolute goodness and evil in Maausk."

The Estonian pagan movement is unique in that its centre is in Estonia, with Tartu being a centre for the Taaralased (a movement loosely based on the god Taarapita who was born on Ebavere Hill and flew to Saaremaa)

The Lithuanian version of the neopagan nature worship movement is Romuva, and should be regarded as a revival of an old religion (as it was the official state religion in Lithuania until 1387). Similarly to the Latvian Dievturi, Romuva is practiced in the US and Canada as well as Lithuania in addition to being reconstructed from archeological findings and folklore.

Romuva identifies the idea of a Baltic Religion, a way of looking at the world and living within this world that has been present in the Baltic tribes and cultures of the Lithuanians, Latvians, Prussians, Yotvingians, Curonians, Zemgalians, Selians, Latgalians for thousands of years. The beliefs are based on seeking harmony (darna) with the help of over a hundred deities.

While all three Baltic pagan movements have a multitude of deities, it should be viewed as pantheistic, with deities and nature being one (as can be seen by the Lithuanian goddesses of bees, woods, hazelnuts, sun and morning dew: Austeja, Medeine, Lazdona, Saule and Rasa)

Since the area was the last to be Christianized, it stands to reason that many of these old beliefs are still present in everyday life, and none as strongly as during the holidays.

The end of autumn and the beginning of winter marks the period known in Latvia and the other Baltic countries as “Velu Laiks” or “the time of spirits” generally observed as the time between St. Michael's day and St. Martin's day. This period (which sometimes goes until Christmas) is the time when spirits are known to walk the earth. A familiar theme throughout the world as Halloween, All Saints Day and All Souls day approaches. For Latvians it is a time to solve riddles, symbolizing the rebirth of light that will eventually mark the end of a long, dark winter. It is also a time of feasting and eating, to celebrate a (hopefully) bountiful harvest year and to celebrate the spirits that blessed them in the past year.

In Lithuania on Nov. 1, head to a graveyard for a breathtaking sight of an endless sea of candles as families gather to remember and honor those departed. In Lithuania and Estonia as well, this is a somber time, with no laughing or joking and was traditionally a time to fast.