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Last bastions of paganism tell all

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LET IT BURN: High priest Jonas Trinkunas celebrates his religion's god of fire at a setting outside of Vilnius. Paganism is polytheistic, but many of its practices parallel those of modern religions.

VILNIUS - Christianity took a long time to get to Lithuania. It wasn't officially adopted until the 14th century. And once it got here, it suffered quite a bit, and then again much later during the Soviet regime. But though it may be dominant, it still hasn't fully replaced the belief system Lithuania started off with, as you can tell just by taking a look at Vilnius Romuva, a community of 30 self-identified pagans.

Romuva was founded in 1967 during a summer solstice festival. In 1992, shortly after re-independence, it was officially registered with the Ministry of Justice as a Baltic faith community.

"We are all pagan when we are born as all belong to the Earth," says group leader Inija Trinkuniene, 54. "Paganism is the natural state of

man."

Trinkuniene's husband of 32 years, Jonas Trinkunas, is the group's highest priest. His successor is set to be chosen in another three years.

Paganism is a polytheistic religion, and as such, has, some would say, little in common with the three Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And as we all know, "pagan" (from a Latin word that means "village people") has some serious derogatory connotations.

That said, most of the rituals Trinkuniene and Trinkunas perform seem harmless, fun and spiritual, more in line with the old-style Druids, Greeks or Romans. There may even be something of nationalist pride in what they do. Romuva celebrates every summer solstice at Kernave hills, the site of Lithuania's old capital.

"We inaugurate the summertime with different custom songs and rituals," says Trinkuniene. "We look at the sunset to say goodbye to the sun. Then we tend a fire all night singing to our major gods and goddesses: Perkunas is the god of thunder, Zemyna is the goddess of mother earth, Laima is the goddess of destiny and Gabija is the goddess of fire."

She goes on: "We ask for prosperity and good luck by offering [the gods and goddesses] salt and flowers. Salt symbolizes strength as it feeds the fire."

"Paganism is not dead!" says Trinkunas.

"Pagans resisted Christian aggression for 400 years," he adds. "In the 10th century [four centuries before King Mindaugas was baptized], a missionary from the West came to Poland to bring Christianity."

Trinkunas has personally suffered quite a bit for his faith, being rejected from university in 1973. His pagan self-identification made him a suspicious figure and it wasn't until 1988 that he was able to gain employment.

In some ways it may be misleading to think of Romuva as a group of total outsiders. Christianity in Lithuania is rooted in pagan customs. Officially, 86 percent of the country regards itself as Christian (the

vast majority Roman Catholic with a smattering of Russian Orthodox), but according to Trinkuniene's own work at the Institute of Social Research, 26 percent of the country still worships gods and goddesses of nature.

"The Christian church considers paganism as a natural and as a non-continuous religion," says Brother Algirdas Malakauskis, who has served as a vicar priest at the St. Bernardina Church in Vilnius for 10 years. Paganism, Malakauskis believes, was "a step toward Christianity" and Romuva should "reinvent their concept."

Malakauskis points out places where Christianity is rooted in paganism. St. Francis of Assisi often took to thanking God for the fruits of nature, like trees, the sun and stones.

"In Christianity, we don't need to reach the love of God, because we are representing the love of God. For instance, the Pagan sees God in trees, in stones, in the sun. The Christian will see the creature of God in the stones, in the sun, in each of us."

"The point of Christianity is that we are the most beautiful creature of God, we are the image of God," says Malakauskis. "We can see God in each of us."

This is obviously a touchy subject. Malakauskis' church has itself undergone quite a bit of religious persecution, having been shut down and wrecked under Soviet occupation. The Holy Mass is now celebrated everyday but the church will be undergoing renovation for another 10 years.

Perhaps because of his own experiences, Malakauskis is reluctant to censor Trinkuniene, Trinkunas and Romuva. "Each of us should have the freedom of faith."

Still in 2002, when four members of Parliament, recognizing paganism's ties to national pride, made an appeal for the faith to be treated as a traditional religion, the Catholic Church resisted.

Trinkuniene sees some strong similarities between paganism and Catholicism and suggests that the fears of the Catholic Church may very well be driven more by the two faiths' "concurrence."

"Pax et Bonum" (Peace and Goodness) is the main concept of a Franciscan brother. Paganism celebrates harmony on earth through hymns, songs and rituals.

"The earth is polluted," she says. "As pagans we aim to respect mother earth and we aim to be tolerant toward other religions which are also part of the cosmic world."

On March 19, the pagans will be celebrating the spring equinox outside Vilnius. On April 29 and 30, the Jore Festival (the first Green Grass Festival) will take place in Molieta, 60 kilometers outside of Vilnius. The celebration, to which everyone is invited, involves eggs (a symbol of life's beginning) and beer. They also celebrate their own Velykos (Easter), in which they paint eggs just like everyone else in Europe. The next world Congress of Ethnic religions will be held in Latvia near Riga.

Malakauskis has his own way of reconciling the issues. "I am often asked to bless some houses and I always notice a space for spirituality even if it's not related to Christianity. For instance, the other day, I saw a room where a statue of Buddha was standing. It seems like people need some guidance somehow."