

Romuva Looks East: Indian Inspiration in Lithuanian Paganism

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Introduction

Modern Lithuanian Paganism can be most readily defined as a form of contemporary Lithuanian (or Baltic) religion inspired by Lithuanian ethnic culture and folklore and pre-Christian, nature-centered, Baltic polytheism. Its most prominent organizational form in Lithuania in the current time is the *Romuva* association founded and still led by the cultural historian and folklorist Jonas Trinkūnas (1939 -), assisted by his wife, the sociologist and folk singer Inija Trinkūnienė (1951 -), with affiliated chapters in Canada and the USA.¹ *Romuva*'s name comes from an important Pagan sanctuary known

¹ For general accounts of *Romuva*, see Michael York, "Pan-Baltic Identity and Religio-Cultural Expression in Contemporary Lithuania," in Robert Towler (ed.), *New Religions and the New Europe* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995), pp. 72-86, Jonas Trinkūnas, (ed.), *Of Gods and Holidays: The Baltic Heritage* (Vilnius: Tverme, 1999), pp. 140-162 and *passim*; Michael Strmiska and Vilius Rudra Dundzila, "Romuva: Lithuanian Paganism in Lithuania and America," in Michael Strmiska (ed.), *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Denver and Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), pp. 241-298; and most recently and most comprehensively, Vilius Rudra Dundzila, "Baltic Lithuanian Religion and Romuva," in *Tyr: Myth-Culture-Tradition* 3 (2007-8): pp. 279-360. Trinkūnas prefers to speak of Baltic Religion rather than Lithuanian Paganism, but in keeping with scholarship in Religious Studies that has been developing for the last decade, this author finds it useful to refer to Paganism, and to specify Lithuanian Paganism to distinguish it from Paganism in the other Baltic lands, such as the Dievturi and Vilki movements in Latvia, described in Agita Misāne, "The Traditional Latvian religion of Dievturība in the Discourse of Latvian Nationalism," *Religious Minorities in Latvia* 4, 2 (2000): pp. 33-52, and Michael Strmiska, "The

to have existed in pre-Christian, Old Baltic Prussia.²

Romuva's rituals and festivals range from the jolly summer solstice *Rasa* festival, also known as *Kupolė* in honor of the eponymous fertility goddess, and Christianized as *Joninės*, a feast of St. John, which features songs and dances of tribute to the sun, performed around crackling bonfires, to the winter solstice *Kūčios* and *Kalėdos* holidays, the first of which honors the ancestors of the past, and the second a festive anticipation of the coming year. There is also the carnival-like *Užgavėnės* festival in early March, which looks to the end of winter, and *Vėlinės*, the solemn day of the dead at the beginning of the dreary, grey month of November, in which the souls (*vėlės*) of the departed are honored. All of these Romuva celebrations involve living traditions from Lithuanian folklore whose long histories are known from folkloric research and historical and ethnographical documents. There are also distinctive Pagan wedding, name-giving and funeral ceremonies.³ Its most sacred texts are musical texts, the *dainos*, poetic traditional songs with mythological and mystical associations drawn from the rural folk culture of

Music of the Past in Modern Baltic Paganism," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8, 3 (2005): pp. 39-58.

² Elvyra Usačiovaitė, "Customs of the Ancient Prussians in German," in Karlene Jones-Bley and Martin E. Huld (eds) *The Indo-Europeanization of Northern Europe, Papers Presented at the International Conference held at the University of Vilnius, September 1-7, 1994* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of Man, 1996), pp. 204-217.

³ Dundzila, "Baltic Lithuanian Religion," pp. 338-346, Pranė Dundulienė, *Lietuvių šventės-Tradacijos, papročiai, apeigos* (Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų, 2005), excerpts translated into English as "Ancient Lithuanian Mythology and Religion," published online at <http://covenantofrhiannon.org/lith.htm>, accessed June 4, 2010; Jonas Balys, *Lietuvių kalendorinės šventės* (Vilnius, Mintis, 1993).

Lithuania.⁴

Romuva worships pre-Christian Lithuanian deities understood to embody the sacredness of the natural world.⁵ A partial list of the major deities would include Žemyna, the earth and fertility goddess, Dievas, the sky and creator god, Perkūnas, the thunderstorm and justice god, Velnias, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld, who became associated with the Devil in Christian tradition, Laima, goddess of fate and fortune, Gabija, goddess of home, hearth and fire, Milda, goddess of love, Saulė, the sun goddess, Mėnulis or Mėnuo, the moon god, Aušrinė, the dawn goddess, Rasa, the goddess of the morning dew, Austėja, the bee goddess, Gvyatė, the snake goddess, Kupuolė, another goddess of fertility, and Giltinė and Ragana, both goddesses of death. Many of these gods and goddesses have opposite gender counterparts, such as Žemepatis, god of the farm and a

⁴ Strmiska, “The Music of the Past.”

⁵ Marija Gimbutas, *The Balts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), *Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), *The Language of the Goddess* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991), *The Living Goddesses*, edited and supplemented by Miriam Robbins Dexter (Berkeley: University of California, 2001); Jaan Puhvel, “Indo-European Structure of the Baltic Pantheon,” in Gerald Larson (ed.) *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 74-85, “Baltic and Slavic Myth,” in *Comparative Mythology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1987), pp. 222-240; Algirdas Greimas, *Of Gods and Men: Studies in Lithuanian Mythology*, translated by Milda Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Dundulienė, *Senovės lietuvių mitologija ir religija*, Vytautas Straižys and Libertas Klimka, “The Cosmology of the Ancient Balts,” *Archaeo-Astronomy, supplement to Journal for the History of Astronomy*, no. 22, supplement to vol. 28 (1997), pp. S57-S81; Norbertas Vėlius, *Sėnoves baltų pasaulėžiūra* (Vilnius: Mintis 1983), translated into English as *The World-Outlook of the Ancient Balts* (Vilnius: Mintis, 1989).

male counterpart to the earth goddess Žemyna, Velionas, goddess of the dead and a female counterpart to Velnias, and Kupolinis, a male counterpart to the female fertility goddess Kupuolė. There are also other, lesser supernatural beings and nature spirits such as the *kaukai*, diminutive, chthonic beings resembling the elves, fairies and other such magical creatures often found in European folklore, and the *aitvarai*, aerial beings who live in the sky and provide riches to those able to subdue them.

From the preceding overview, Romuva might seem to be exclusively Lithuanian in its identity and associations, and while this is largely true in a general sense, there is one particular dimension of this Pagan movement that transcends a strictly Lithuanian or Baltic cultural framework. There is a certain connection with Indian religion and culture that functions on several different levels of significance, from the historical to the linguistic to the mythological to the political. Romuva is therefore distinctly Lithuanian yet also more-than-Lithuanian. It will be the task of this essay to explain the nature and implications of this paradoxical nexus between these two facets of Romuva.

Historical Background of Lithuanian Paganism

Looking first to the history of Lithuanian Paganism, leading up to its modern expression as Romuva, it must first of all be acknowledged that “Lithuanian Paganism” does not exist as a single, discrete, clearly-delimited, easily-definable religious tradition in the early history of Lithuania. The term “Lithuanian Paganism” only becomes necessary and attains a certain functional validity because of the need for *some* label to attach to polytheistic, nature-centered religious traditions of pre-Christian Lithuania that have been preserved in folklore and other aspects of Lithuania culture, providing the basis of Romuva

in the current time. These traditions have undergone millennia of change and transformation, as different waves of settlement and culture have washed over the region from the tenth millennium BCE onwards,⁶ implanting new influences and traditions while displacing or coalescing with others, as scholars from Marija Gimbutas to Pranė Dundulienė to Gintaras Beresnevičius have variously observed and theorized.⁷

It is open to discussion how far back in the historical and archaeological record the mythology and ritual practices upheld by Romuva can be traced, but the working assumption of the movement is that its gods and rituals became established in two successive historical periods and later blended. The first period is the establishment of “Old European” communities in the Neolithic period of the fourth and third millennium, with the second, the arrival of Indo-European immigrants at the end of the third millennium or beginning of the second, close to the time of the Bronze Age in this region. These newcomers from the East brought with them the Baltic branch of the Indo-European language family, which would later give rise to Latvian, Lithuanian and the now-extinct Old Prussian language. The religion of the earlier Neolithic or Old European Balts is

⁶ Albinas Kuncevičius, “Lithuanian Prehistory,” in Zugmantas Kiaupa, Jūrate Kiaupienė, and Albinas Kuncevičius (eds), *The History of Lithuania Before 1795* (Vilnius: Lithuanian Institute of History, 2000), pp. 15-42.

⁷ Marija Gimbutas, *The Kurgan Culture and the Indo-Europeanization of Europe, Selected articles from 1952-1993, Journal of Indo-European Studies Monograph No. 18*, edited by Miriam Robbins Dexter and Karlene Jones-Bley (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of Man, 1997), Gintaras Beresnevičius, *Baltų Religijos Reformos* (Baltic Religious Reforms) (Vilnius: Taura, 1995), Dundulienė, *Senovės lietuvių mitologija ir religija*.

believed to have centered on the worship of an earth goddess and other female deities, while the religion introduced by the Indo-Europeans emphasized a sky god and male deities.

Following the views of Gimbutas, the merging of Old European and Indo-European peoples and culture is believed to have also produced a blending on the religious level, resulting in a mixed pantheon in which such prominent female deities as Žemyna, the earth goddess and Laima, the goddess of fate and fortune, derive from the earlier, Old European period, while principal gods like Dievas, the sky god, and Perkūnas, the god of storm and justice derive from the Indo-European era. Beresnevičius judges that the Lithuanian Pagan pantheon had reached its definitive form by the fifth century CE, and that the Pagan religion began to lose coherence and vitality after the thirteenth century.⁸

The next major event in the history of Lithuanian Paganism was the adoption of Christianity in 1386 by the Grand Duke Jogaila as a condition of Lithuania's alliance with Poland against the German crusading order known as the Teutonic Knights, which was intent upon Germanic colonization and Christianization of Lithuania as had earlier been accomplished in the lands now known as Estonia and Latvia. When the Teutonic Knights were decisively defeated in July of 1410 at the Battle of Žalgiris, also known as the Battle of Grünwald or Tannenberg, by a combined force of Lithuanians, Poles, Tatars,

⁸ Gintaras Beresnevičius, "Lithuanian Mythology," in Jūrate Baranova (ed.), *Lithuanian Philosophy: Persons and Ideas (Lithuanian Philosophical Studies, Volume II), Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change, Series IVA, Eastern and Central Europe, Volume XVII*. (Washington, DC: The Council for Research and Values and Philosophy, 2000), accessed October 18, 2009, at http://www.crvp.org/book/Series04/IVA-17/chapter_iv.htm .

Bohemians, Russians and other allies, Germanic colonization of Lithuania was halted, but not the process of Christianization. From this time on, Lithuanian high culture and elite society increasingly favored Christianity and turned away from the Grand Duchy's former Pagan traditions, which mainly lived on in the folk culture of the peasants. For modern day Lithuanian Pagans, as well as other European Pagans, a primary objective of their religious activities is to not merely preserve the Pagan traditions that were abandoned and suppressed under Christianization, but to restore them to a position of prestige within the society.

A renewed appreciation of Lithuanian Paganism among the educated classes became possible only in the nineteenth century, as the new political and cultural trends of romanticism and nationalism sweeping across Europe also reached Lithuania, most of which was now under Tsarist Russian domination. New interest in Lithuanian ethnic culture, including folk songs and religious art, exposed the Pagan roots of many folkloric traditions.

Indo-European Linkages to India and Hinduism

At the same time as interest in Lithuanian folklore and Paganism was catching fire, the new discipline of comparative linguistics revealed the kinship of the Lithuanian language with other Indo-European languages, most surprisingly and spectacularly, Sanskrit, the classical language of ancient India and Hinduism. This is shown quite clearly in the following pairing of a Lithuanian proverb and its Sanskrit translation. Rendered in English, the Lithuanian proverb translates as "God gave teeth, God will give bread." The Lithuanian original is "Dievas dave dantis; Dievas duos duonos." Translated into

Sanskrit, the text becomes “Devas adadat datas; Devas dat dhanas.”⁹ Dievas, the Lithuanian sky god, has a name with widespread Indo-European resonance, echoing the Sanskrit term *Devas*, the Latin *Deus*, the Old Irish *Día*, the Norse-Germanic *Tiwaz*, later transforming into *Týr*, all meaning “God,” as well as the modern English terms *divine* and *divinity*, all originating from a hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root of **Deiwos*. As the linguist Philip Baldi comments,

The Baltic sub-group of Indo-European has played a significant role in comparative Indo-European linguistics from the beginning.... The conservative and archaic character of Lithuanian in particular has even been the source of popular fantasy, with some account maintaining that native speakers of Lithuanian were capable of conversing with Brahmin speakers of Sanskrit, each in his own language, with almost complete intelligibility. Such an assertion is, of course, wildly untrue, but it does underscore the conservative nature of the Baltic languages.¹⁰

The exploration of linguistic and etymological parallels led in turn to a delineation of the various mythological parallels between Lithuanian Pagan gods and the Hindu deities of ancient India.¹¹ The linkage of Lithuanian *Dievas* with Sanskrit, Hindu *Devas* has already been mentioned. The Lithuanian god *Perkunas* displays much the same character and function as the early Hindu god *Indra*, both being gods of thunder and storm who are also rulers over their respective pantheons. Though the names are not etymologically

⁹ J.P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans: Language, Archaeology and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 82.

¹⁰ Philip Baldi, *An Introduction to the Indo-European Languages* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), p. 84.

¹¹ Sunitri Kumar Chatterji, *Balts and Aryans in their Indo-European Background*, (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1968).

linked, the functional parallel is unmistakable. The Lithuanian *Velnias* compares in several aspects to the Hindu deity *Varuna* in their shared associations with death, the underworld and water, and their tense, sometimes antagonistic relations with their respective thunder gods, who compete with them for supreme authority. *Ausra*, the Lithuanian goddess of the dawn, compares both functionally and etymologically with the Hindu dawn goddess *Ushas*. In both pantheons, the sky god has twin sons who are helpers and rescuers of men, with the Lithuanian pair being the *diewo sunelei*, the Hindu pair the *Asvins*.¹² When all of these etymological and/or functional parallels are taken together, the argument for an original common basis of these religious and mythological traditions is indeed compelling.

These linkages with ancient Indian civilization and religion both fortified Lithuanian national pride in the quest for independence from the Russian and Prussian (German) empires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and stimulated an enduring fascination with the religion and culture of Asia. As the philosopher Antanas Andrijauskas comments, “Lithuanians were encouraged to take a deeper interest in the countries of the East not only by the growing ideology of national rebirth but also by widespread theories about the origin of the Lithuanian nation in India and about the closeness of Lithuanian to Sanskrit.”¹³

¹² Sukumari Bhattacharji, *The Indian Theogony* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Publications, 1988 [1970]), p. 244.

¹³ Antanas Andrijauskas, “Searching for Lithuanian Identity Between East West,” in Aida Savicka (ed.), *Lithuanian Identity and Values (Lithuanian Philosophical Studies, Volume V), Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change, Series IVA, Eastern and Central Europe, Volume XXXI*. (Washington, DC: The

Proponents of the revival of Lithuanian Paganism from the nineteenth century to the present have also followed this track, repeatedly expressing a positive regard for Hinduism as a kindred non-Christian religious tradition, related to Lithuanian Paganism by linguistic and mythological parallels and common Indo-European origins. This has led to the interesting paradox of a highly nationalistic religious movement dedicated to native forms of religion and ethnic culture making a continuing effort to associate itself with the religion and culture of a land and people far to the East.

One of the chief architects in the construction of this bridge between the Paganism of Lithuania and the Hinduism of India was the late nineteenth and early twentieth century writer, teacher, philosopher, playwright, and local community leader, Vilius Storosta (1868-1953), better known as *Vydūnas*, a native of Prussian-dominated Lithuania Minor. As an energetic champion of Lithuanian ethnic culture in his time, Vydūnas is now regarded as a Lithuanian national hero, worthy of portrayal on the country's 200 *lita* banknote. Though he never explicitly attempted to organize a Pagan congregation such as today's Romuva, Vydūnas did much to stimulate interest in Pagan customs such as the summer and winter solstice celebrations, and his philosophical treatises, dramas, and other writings provided an ideological foundation for later Pagan revival efforts. In his drama trilogy *Amžina Ugnis* (The Eternal Flame), Vydūnas linked preservation of ethnic culture,

Council for Research and Values and Philosophy, 2008), accessed October 17, 2009, at

<http://www.crvp.org/book/Series04/IVA-31/chapter-4.htm>

including Pagan religious traditions such as the fire altars referred to in the title of the drama, with Lithuanian resistance to foreign domination.¹⁴

Vydūnas' philosophical and religious aspirations transcended national and ethno-cultural boundaries, however, and he became fascinated with the spiritual traditions of India, beginning with summer classes in Oriental studies at several German universities in the late nineteenth century. Vydūnas was deeply affected by Indian religion and philosophy, particularly the Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy.¹⁵ He became involved in the turn-of-the-century syncretic Hindu movement known as Theosophy, and in the last decade of his life, published a Lithuanian translation of the classic Sanskrit Hindu text, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Building on the Indo-European affinities noted by earlier generations of scholars and adding his own more metaphysical explorations, Vydūnas became an eloquent advocate of Lithuania's spiritual kinship with India, seeing no conflict between celebrating the uniqueness of Lithuanian ethnic religion and culture and acknowledging its points of kinship with Indian religious and cultural traditions. In this way, he established something of a template for later Indo-Lithuanian/Hindu-Pagan contact and cooperation.

¹⁴ Albertas Zalatorius, "The Beginning of the Twentieth Century: Literature at the Turning Point," translated by Rita Dapkutė, in Vytautas Kubilius, (ed.), *Lithuanian Literature* (Vilnius, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore/Vaga, 1997), pp. 105-167, at p. 158.

¹⁵ Vaclovas Bagdonavicius, "Vyduanas: The Essential Features of his Philosophy," in Jūrate Baranova (ed.), *Lithuanian Philosophy: Persons and Ideas (Lithuanian Philosophical Studies, Volume II), Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change, Series IVA, Eastern and Central Europe, Volume XVII*. (Washington, DC: The Council for Research and Values and Philosophy, 2000), accessed October 12, 2009 at http://www.crvp.org/book/Series04/IVA-17/chapter_vii.htm .

There was also a political dimension to his interest in Indian religion and culture. Vydūnas' examination of Hindu systems of philosophy might seem to have represented a detour from the cause of Lithuanian nationalism, but in fact, the two projects were complementary rather than contradictory. In tandem with exploring the classical texts and traditions of Hindu philosophy and religion, Vydūnas enthusiastically supported the contemporary efforts of Indian thinkers and nationalist leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi to advance the cause of Indian independence from the British empire by mobilizing Indian pride in Hindu traditions and identity. Vydūnas saw this as analogous to Lithuanians' need to establish a strong sense of cultural identity as an important precondition for achieving political independence. For Vydūnas no less than later Lithuanian Pagan leaders like Trinkūnas, the bridge that connects Lithuania to India carries many different kinds of cargo, from the linguistic to the mythological to the religious, and also, to some extent, the political, with multiple interlacing discourses ranging from ancient etymology to modern ethno-nationalism.

The first half of the twentieth century also saw a number of other prominent cultural and academic figures simultaneously celebrating Lithuanian ethnic culture and highlighting its kinship with religious and cultural traditions of India and other Asian lands. The most important such figure was Vinčas Krėvė-Mickevičius (1882-1954), who pursued comparative Indo-European studies at the Universities of Kiev and Lvov in the first decade of the twentieth century and completed a dissertation on Indo-European origins. In 1909, Krėvė-Mickevičius took up a teaching position further to the east in Azerbaijan, where he later assisted in the establishment of the University of Baku and then

served as the Lithuanian Ambassador to Azerbaijan for one year before returning to Lithuania in 1920 to pursue a brilliant academic and literary career, including serving as Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the Lithuanian University in Kaunas, now Vytautas Magnus University, from 1925-1937. Krėvė-Mickevičius's enormous output alternated between studies of Indian religion and philosophy, collections of Lithuanian folklore such as *dainos*, and literary works that dramatized Lithuanian history and culture, yet alluded to Indian elements as well, in this way expressing his continuing interest in Indo-European, Hindu-Pagan affinities.¹⁶ His most famous and celebrated work is the historical drama *Skirgaila*, which explores the clash between Paganism and Christianity in the time of the Teutonic Knights and laments the decision to accept Christianity over native Lithuanian Paganism as the necessary price for gaining Poland's support against the Germanic Crusaders.¹⁷ Krėvė-Mickevičius's stature in the country as one of its most prominent and popular authors and intellectuals would culminate in his serving as foreign minister in the Lithuanian government which was forced to capitulate to Soviet occupation of the Lithuanian Republic in 1940. This star of Lithuanian learning and letters would ironically end his days teaching Russian and Polish in the United States.¹⁸

¹⁶ Andrijauskas, "Searching for Lithuanian Identity;" Zalatorius, "The Beginning of the Twentieth Century," pp. 159-166, "Vinčas Krėvė 1882-1954," in *Lithuanian Classic Literature Anthology* (Vilnius: Institute of Lithuanian Scientific Society/Mokslininkų sąjungos institutas, 1999-2009), available online at <http://antologija.lt/texts/32/autor.html>, accessed May 26, 2010.

¹⁷ Zalatorius, "The Beginning of the Twentieth Century," pp. 163-64.

¹⁸ George von Rauch, *The Baltic States-The Years of Independence, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania 1917-1940*, translated by Gerald Onn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1974), p. 225;

During the interwar period of Lithuanian independence, Indological studies flourished at the University of Lithuania in Kaunas, which received its current name of Vytautas Magnus University (Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas) in 1930. Vytautas Magnus professor Ričardas Mironas was active in translating Indian texts from Sanskrit to Lithuanian and his colleague Marija Rudzinskaitė-Arcimavičienė published a series of works on Asian civilization, with other academics also pursuing Asian interests.¹⁹ Though the work of these and other Indological scholars did not specifically concern Lithuanian ethnic culture and Paganism, the expanding public awareness of Indian religion and culture which their academic activities signified may well have helped lay the foundation for future Pagan-Hindu interaction.

From Repression to Revival: Ramuva and Romuva

Despite the harsh conditions of German and Soviet occupation during World War II and Lithuania's subsequent involuntary incorporation into the Soviet Union, interest in the cultures of the East, including their religious and philosophical traditions, continued to grow in Lithuania during the Soviet period.²⁰ The relatively warm relationship between the Soviet Union and the government of India allowed a number of scholarly exchanges to take place, notably several brief visits of the Indian linguist S.N. Chatterji to the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania in the 1960s, which resulted in the eventual publication of a classic comparative Indo-European study, *The Balts and the Aryans in Their Indo-*

Ronald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States-Years of Dependence, 1940-1980* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1983), pp. 20-25.

¹⁹ Andrijauskas, "Searching for Lithuanian Identity."

²⁰ Ibid.

European Setting, which testified to numerous parallels in language, mythology and customs between the ancient cultures of India and the Baltic region.²¹ Lithuanian interest in Asian culture seems to have further intensified in the 1980s, the final decade of Soviet domination, with Centers for Eastern Studies established at Lithuania's three largest universities, Vilnius University, Vytautas Magnus University, and Klaipeda University, with a steady stream of scholarly publications treating various aspects of Asian culture, art and philosophy.²²

Soviet rule in Lithuania was less propitious for the study of Paganism, and Lithuanians interested in the country's native Pagan traditions experienced varying degrees and forms of suppression and persecution, which waxed and waned over time. In the 1960s, a partial easing of Soviet education policies allowed Jonas Trinkūnas, then a graduate student in the Department of Philosophy at Vilnius University, to pursue his interest in Lithuanian Paganism within the officially approved field of ethnographic and folkloric research. Trinkūnas took advantage of this situation of official toleration or indifference to join with other like-minded individuals in establishing an early form of the modern Romuva movement in 1967 as a folkloric association, *Ramuva*, which was officially devoted to collecting and studying folklore from rural communities for scientific, ethnographical purposes acceptable to Soviet authorities, but unofficially dedicated to renewing appreciation for the Pagan spiritual elements encoded in the folklore. The name

²¹ Chatterji, Sunitri Kumar, *Balts and Aryans in their Indo-European Background*, (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1968).

²² Andrijauskas, "Searching for Lithuanian Identity."

Ramuva was an intentional camouflaging of the more overtly Paganistic term *Romuva*, which originally referred to a Pagan sanctuary in Old Prussia.²³ Trinkūnas became a knowledgeable and skilled singer of the *dainos* and other folk music genres, as would his future wife Inija. The sharing of Baltic spirituality through song would become one of the hallmarks of the mature Romuva movement, and it remains so today.²⁴

Taking a page from the playbook of Vydūnas in an earlier era, Trinkūnas and his Ramuva colleagues organized increasingly popular and song-filled summer solstice *Rasa* or *Jonines* celebrations at Kernave and other sites of cultural and historical significance. The Soviet government eventually became suspicious of the nationalistic and religious dimensions of these growing gatherings, and Ramuva was banned in 1971. Trinkūnas was punished by dismissal from the university where he had been completing his graduate studies, and had to take employment in the countryside chiseling tombstones.²⁵ He still

²³ Trinkūnas has been dedicated to research into Old Prussian language and religion from his graduate school days up to the present time, as he explained in an interview with the author in Vilnius in December 2004. Since 1994, he has been a leading member of the Club Prusa (Prussian Club) research association, and with his folk music ensemble, Kūlgrinda, released a CD of “Prussian Chants” (Prūsų Giesmės) in 2005 (Vilnius: Dangus Productions, <http://www.dangus.net>).

²⁴ Strmiska, “The Music of the Past.”

²⁵ There is a certain irony in Trinkūnas taking up this employment as punishment for his folkloric activities, including the exploration and performance of folk songs. The singing of formerly repressed folk songs in the late 1980s would help to mobilize the people of the three Baltic States to rise up and assert their independence from the USSR, for which reason the revolt came to be known as the “Singing Revolution.” Therefore, the final epitaph of Soviet domination of the Baltic might be said to have been carved not in stone, but in song.

managed to participate in unofficial folklore groups of a similar type to Ramuva, until the more relaxed political conditions of Soviet Premier's Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy in the 1980s provided the opportunity for a second birth of Ramuva in 1988 as an officially recognized cultural organization, which soon had ten chapters across the country.

Beginning in 1989, Ramuva began to operate summer folklore camps which remain popular to the present day. Ramuva's celebrations of Lithuanian ethnic folklore were now perfectly in tune with the surge in ethnic pride and nationalistic sentiment spreading among Lithuanians, and Trinkūnas was no longer a political pariah, but a national hero. As the "Singing Revolution" movement across the Baltic States progressed toward full independence for a reborn Republic of Lithuania, Trinkūnas was appointed to serve as the head of the Ethic Culture Department within the Ministry of Culture, holding this post from 1990-93.

No longer needing to fear government persecution, Trinkūnas took the bold and fateful step of openly declaring the religious purpose of Ramuva's folkloric explorations and celebration in 1991, launching a new, unabashedly religious organization with the undisguised name of Romuva, the ancient Baltic sanctuary, to fully express its Pagan religious orientation and intentions. Ramuva, which was by now well-established as a folkloric association, continued as such, with Romuva registered with the government in 1992 as an official religious organization, as it remains to the present. Ramuva continues to exist today. Trinkūnas and his wife Inija have also established a successful and respected folk music ensemble, Kūlgrinda, which exclusively focuses on traditional music with Pagan content and associations.

As might be expected, Trinkūnas's open espousal of Lithuania Paganism led to some tension with the Catholic Church, which had long been the dominant religious institution in Lithuania and a staunch opponent of Paganism. Ramuva's folkloric activities had provided a channel for the expression of Lithuanian nationalist sentiment, appealing to patriotic Lithuanians of all religious views and backgrounds, including Catholics enthusiastic about Lithuanian folklore and ethnic culture, but disinterested in pre-Christian Lithuanian religion. According to Vilnius University literature professor, journalist, and radio commentator Paulius Subačius, a prominent member of various Lithuanian Catholic organizations, Catholics like him who had participated in Ramuva activities in the period leading up to independence felt not merely disappointed, but betrayed when they learned of Ramuva's concealment of a non-Christian religious agenda behind a folkloric façade.²⁶

Rejecting Subačius' accusation as greatly exaggerating the extent of anti-Romuva reaction among Lithuanian Catholics, Jonas Trinkūnas countered that many Catholics have remained involved in Ramuva activities down to the present, including some who participate in Romuva as well.²⁷ The author can attest that during a visit to Lithuania in June of 1998 in which he participated in Rasa summer solstice festivities, he met a number of participants who identified themselves as following both the Catholic Church AND Romuva as cherished spiritual paths, without seeming to worry about any possible logical or theological contradictions between the two. This type of casual religious syncreticism,

²⁶ Interview with Paulius Subačius by Michael Strmiska, interpreting by Dangis Verseckas, in Vilnius, February 2002.

²⁷ Interview with Trinkūnas by Michael Strmiska, in Vilnius, December 2004 .

similar to the “dual faith” noted in Russian religious history by George Fedotov, is deserving of future study.²⁸

Jonas Trinkūnas’s many years of active leadership in Romuva were eventually honored with the bestowal of the title of *Krivis*, the high priest of Romuva, on the 19th of October in 2002.²⁹ The original *Krivis* is known from historical documents as the religious leader of the Old Prussian sanctuary of *Romuve*.³⁰ Trinkūnas’s status as *Krivis* does not quite confer upon him the powers of a “Pagan Pope,” but mainly testifies to the respect in which he is held.

The 1990s also saw the proliferation of imported and adapted forms of Eastern religion in Lithuania, from the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) movement to the Tibetan Buddhism organization Karma Kagyu (Diamond Way) to yoga institutes offering classes.³¹ Though Romuva has had little interaction with these groups to the present time, their presence on the Lithuanian cultural landscape in the 1990s was in

²⁸ George P. Fedotov, *The Russian Religious Mind: Kievan Christianity, the Tenth to the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Harper, 1960).

²⁹ For an account of the ceremony and a speech delivered by Trinkūnas, see <http://www.stregoneriapagana.it/rumovainglese1.html> .

³⁰ Usačiovaitė, “Customs of the Ancient Prussians.”

³¹ Michael Strmiska, “Eastern Religions in Eastern Europe,” paper presented at the American Academy of Religion annual conference in Montréal, Québec, Canada, November 7-10, 2009, and “Turning to the East: The Influence of Eastern Religions on New Religious Movements in Lithuania,” paper presented at the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies annual conference held in Seattle, Washington, USA, April 22-24, 2010. See also the chapter by Donatas Glodenis in this volume.

harmony with an opening to Asian religious influence that would ultimately involve Romuva as well.

The WCER and Emerging Pagan-Hindu Solidarity

With the successful establishment of Romuva in the 1990s as a modern-day form of Lithuanian Paganism, Jonas Trinkūnas began to reach out to religious movements in other countries in Europe and beyond that were likewise dedicated to the cause of preserving and promoting native or indigenous forms of religion and spirituality. His communications with such groups resulted in their coming together in Vilnius in June, 1998 for the first meeting of an international organization initially entitled the “World Pagan Congress,” but renamed the “World Congress of Ethnic Religions” (WCER) after much heated discussion among the participants.³² The change in nomenclature signified a consensus among the participating delegates that the word “Pagan” was overly problematic, owing to its long history of pejorative connotations in the religious discourse of various nations, and that “Ethnic” better conveyed the close relationship of the religious movements under discussion with ethnic culture and folk traditions.³³

³² Basic information about the WCER, from its founding documents and declarations to accounts of annual Congress meetings and several speeches and articles contributed by members, can be found at <http://www.wcer.org> .

³³ Strmiska and Dundzila, “Romuva: Lithuanian Paganism in Lithuania and America,” pp. 274-278, for more discussion of the Congress, which both authors attended, Dundzila as a leader of American Romuva who served as an interpreter for a number of presentations, Strmiska as a sympathetic scholar. In the discussions of nomenclature, Strmiska opposed “ethnic” out of concern for its linkage in Western media of the time with “ethnic cleansing,” and advocated keeping “pagan” as a descriptive term in order to directly

The inaugural WCER conference revolved around two types of activities. The first involved delegates making speeches on their respective religious traditions and discussing their ongoing efforts to gain public sympathy and official acceptance. The second set of activities was more experiential in nature, moving out of the conference hall for visits to historic Lithuanian sites like the medieval fortress at Trakai and the ancient capital of Kernavė, where participants were able to experience the summer solstice festival of Rasa. There was also a walking tour of Vilnius culminating in a fire altar ritual on a sacred hill side and a festive meal in the rural village where the Romuva/Ramuva summer camps take place. These assorted activities served to cement a sense of common purpose and mutual appreciation among participants.

The countries of origin of conference delegates included Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, France, Germany, Poland, Greece, Czech Republic, and America as well as Lithuania. Though the vast majority of delegates were European nationals, representing European ethnic religion movements, there were three participants of Indian national background as well, though none of these three were current citizens of India, having emigrated to other lands earlier in their lives. Arvind Ghosh and Surinder Paul Attri were American citizens, and Rajinder Singh, a British citizen. The conference program also included a concert of Indian classical music played by Lithuanian students of Indian music. The presence of these Indian

confront the negative history associated with the term and to use this as a platform for public discussions and education. Though the majority of delegates strongly favored “ethnic,” the issue was never decisively settled, with various parties continuing to use one term or another according to their own views.

delegates as well as the concert demonstrated Trinkūnas's intention, as the main organizer of the WCER, to expand the range of Paganism or ethnic religion beyond a strictly European definition, and to specifically include Indian-Hindu religion as a kindred tradition.

In the course of the conference, Trinkūnas and other European Pagans frequently spoke of feeling a genuine bond with Hindus, based on their knowledge of a common Indo-European heritage, their respect for Hinduism as the most vibrant and successful continuation of that spiritual heritage and the only one never completely suppressed by any invading or colonizing force, and their shared sense of threat in the current time from opposing cultural and religious forces, especially global consumer culture and Christianity.

Ironically, this same sense of threat that contributed to the feeling of Hindu-Pagan, Indo-European solidarity among WCER participants would also prove a cause of division, in that the Indian delegates expressed a much more vehement antagonism toward Christianity, and also Islam, than most of other participants were comfortable with. The Indian delegates' conference presentations, as well as their subsequent email communications on an e-mail forum shared by conference participants, focused obsessively on expressing unrestrained and unrelenting animosity toward Christianity and Islam, which they categorically denounced as evil, imperialistic and inhumane enemies of humanity in general and Hinduism and Paganism in particular.³⁴ The following excerpts

³⁴ Arvind Ghosh, now deceased, was formerly associated with a web site called "Sword of Truth" which called for militant action against Islam and provided links to various anti-Muslim publications and organizations.

from speeches delivered by Mr. Singh and Mr. Attri at the seventh annual WCER conference, held in Athens, Greece in June of 2004 convey the same general tone and contents as their speeches at the first meeting of the WCER in 1998.

The major threat to the Pagans comes from the Christians and the Muslims... I see the world today divided into two camps- one actively advancing and the other passively resting, even relaxing. One can imagine which of the two will advance and attack, to conquer, convert and prevail, and which will like to be left alone, to live in peace. Spare a thought for a Muslim's idea of Jihad, to remove all opposition and obstacles in his way. He will not rest until the whole world is converted to Islam. The same goes for the Christian soul, too, that will not rest until all opposition is eliminated. For both of them, their innermost urges rest on the negative pillar of removing opposition. That is only possible by converting or killing....³⁵

Neither Christianity nor Islam is a religion, both are ideologies, disguised as religions, hidden behind pretentious verbiage of pompous priestcraft. Both hypocritically dish out lectures on individual freedom, and rule of law. In reality... they are ruthless pursuers of barbarism, acting as animals, in the camouflage of men.³⁶

A number of the other delegates present at the Congress as well as participants in the post-Congress e-mail forums voiced concern and embarrassment, as well as a certain

³⁵ Rajinder Singh, "Survival of Pagan Faith," in *7th World Congress of Ethnic Religions, Athens 2004 Hellas, Conference Proceedings* (pamphlet), published by the host organization, the YSEE (Supreme Council for the Ancient Hellenic Religion), Athens, 2004, pp. 21-25.

³⁶ Surinder Paul Attri, "Hitting the Basackwards Pyramid of Islam and Christianity," *7th World Congress of Ethnic Religions, Athens 2004*, pp. 51-56. The ferocity of the two men's attacks on Islam and Christianity is grounded in their common childhood trauma of barely surviving the mass killings that accompanied the division of British India into the Hindu-majority state of India and the Muslim-majority state of Pakistan in 1947.

degree of amusement, at the unrelenting and single-minded hostility of such statements, and questioned whether the speakers were more interested in using the organization to oppose and denounce Christianity and Islam than to promote any more positive agenda about Ethnic and/or Pagan religions. The author of this chapter observed that this angry discourse seemed to mirror the rhetoric of right-wing Hindu nationalists in India, who see Christianity and Islam as threats to the “Hindutva” (Hindu-ness) of India, and cautioned against the WCER getting overly involved with Hindu nationalism of this type. Koenraad Elst, a Belgian scholar of contemporary Hinduism, disputed these negative characterizations of the Indian-born delegates and of Hindu nationalists, and complained that the author and others were not sufficiently well-informed on the phenomenon of so-called “Hindu Nationalism” to pass such judgment. This debate raged on for some weeks in the email forums.³⁷

Trinkūnas was aware of these concerns, both at the conference and in the forums, but did not step in to cut off the unending stream of anti-Christian, anti-Muslim rhetoric by Singh, Attri and Ghosh, preferring to tolerate a certain amount of excess vitriol than

³⁷ WCER mailing list discussion, September through December, 1998. Concerning Hindu nationalism, see Christopher Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). A more sympathetic view of the so-called Hindu nationalists as well as a thoughtful critique of hostile Western media representations of Hinduism is presented in Koenraad Elst, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind: Ideological Development of Hindu Revivalism* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2005). Though not present at the first WCER conference, Elst was active in the email forums, and charged that the author and others were misjudging the expressions of Singh, Attri and Ghosh out of a lack of understanding of so-called Hindu nationalism, which Elst prefers to describe as “Hindu revivalism.”

engage in censorship at this early point in the life of the organization. In an interview with the author years later, Trinkūnas explained his personal belief that the best way for any organization to cope with such excess is to allow free and open discussion, which in his view will usually tend to moderate extreme opinions and ideas.³⁸ However, in light of Trinkūnas's repeated and continuing efforts to reach out to representatives of Hindu organizations, it seems likely that he was also reluctant to alienate individuals with personal connections to India and Hinduism.

The debate around the expressions of anti-Christian and anti-Muslim sentiments and Hindu nationalism exposed a difficult issue inherent in the founding of the WCER. While participants shared a common understanding that it is historical fact that Christianity and Islam, as dominant, even hegemonic religious systems in many areas of the world, have typically opposed and acted to suppress non-monotheistic, non-Abrahamic religions across the last two millennia of history, the delegates parted ways on the question of the proper stance to take in relation to Christianity and Islam and other hostile or potentially hostile social forces. The majority of European participants in the WCER favored peaceful, respectful ways of resisting religious and political oppression and advancing the rights and status of Pagan and/or Ethnic religions, through public education and involvement in political processes and international organizations where appropriate, rather than the more confrontational, mud-slinging approach that the Indian-born delegates seemed to be advocating. While the final consensus among the majority of WCER members was to focus on being pro-Pagan and pro-Ethnic rather than anti-Christian and anti-Muslim, the

³⁸ Interview with Jonas Trinkūnas by Michael Strmiska in Vilnius, March 2009.

debate illustrated that there were both positive and negative potentials in linking together European Paganism and Indian Hinduism.

The three Indian delegates remained involved with the WCER in subsequent years, and continued to use the organization as a platform for their anti-Muslim, anti-Christian views. Arvind Ghosh passed away in 2003, but Surinder Paul Attri remains dedicated to anti-Christian and anti-Muslim diatribes, which he now posts on a blog, *Hinduism Defense*.³⁹ Rajinder Singh found a surprising outlet for his own hostility to Islam in 2009. The quasi-fascist and reputedly racist, but also staunchly anti-Islamic British National Party (BNP) came under pressure to allow non-white Britons to become members of the party. According to the British newspaper *The Times of London*, Singh decided to join the party, and thereby become its first non-white or non-caucasian member, because of his feeling that “Britain was in danger of being taken over by Muslims and the BNP was the only party prepared to do anything about it.” The article further explained that Singh “blames Islam for the death of his father during the partition of India in 1947, which led to the deaths of an estimated two million Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus.”⁴⁰

³⁹ The blog is published online at <http://hinduismdefense.blogspot.com> .

⁴⁰ “Sikh Rajinder Singh set to become BNP’s first non-white member,” *Times of London* 21 November 2009, accessed June 1, 2010 at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article6926180.ece> . It should be noted that Attri and Ghosh likewise suffered terribly at a personal level during the bloody massacres that accompanied the 1947 division of British India into the modern states of India and Pakistan, which is the primary reason for their extreme hostility toward Islam. Their animosity toward Christianity seems to have been a later development, based on their experiences as non-Christians living in Christian majority countries and their concerns about missionary activity in India.

A less angrily political, more spiritual and peaceful engagement with India and Hinduism was provided at the first WCER meeting by Romuva-USA leader Audrius Dundzila, who has since changed his name to Vilius Rudra Dundzila.⁴¹ He gave an eloquent summary of various commonalities between Baltic Pagan religion and Hinduism, drawing on Indo-European linguistic and comparative mythology, while also referring to his years of study of yoga and Hindu philosophy with an Indian guru in the Chicago area. Dr. Dundzila's emphasis on spiritual rather than political associations with India nicely complemented the Indian classical music performed at the Congress, offering not a call to arms against real or imagined enemies, but rather a path of peace and spirituality.

The final declaration of the Congress focused on positive themes such as a shared sense that the current historical moment and world situation provides a unique opportunity for the revitalization of "Ethnic and/or Pagan" religious traditions after centuries of neglect and disadvantage and the need to join together for mutual support against social forces of oppression and intolerance. The declaration also praised the diversity of religious traditions represented in the Congress and a shared dedication to the worship and protection of nature

⁴¹ Since the time of the first WCER meeting described here, Dr. Dundzila has changed his name to Vilius Rudra Dundzila. This name change has Indian-Hindu resonances worth noting. Dundzila's adoption of "Vilius" is a tribute to the philosopher Vyāṣa, whose original name was *Vilius* Storosta, who as noted played such an important role in promoting the discussion of Indo-Baltic, Hindu-Pagan linkages and commonalities. "Rudra" is a Hindu god from the Vedic period later transformed into one of the aspects of the god Shiva, a deity closely associated with meditation and yoga.

as core common values of those assembled.⁴²

The Hindu-Pagan cooperation initiated at the first WCER congress has continued both at subsequent annual WCER meetings, and in other venues as well.⁴³ Indian participation in the WCER has expanded significantly beyond the three Indian delegates mentioned previously, bringing in less bellicose Indian viewpoints that are more in tune with the general tenor of the organization. A speech entitled “Paganism as a Metagrid for the Future,” written by Indian scholar and politician Lokesh Chandra for the second WCER conference in 1999, serves as a fine example. In this text, Professor Chandra explores the philosophical and spiritual significance of the contemporary revival of European Paganism in relation to the long history of Hinduism. Though Chandra includes some discussion of episodes of Christian and Muslim opposition and persecution, he does this without allowing his discourse to degenerate into the kind of Muslim-baiting and Christian-bashing that marked the earlier contributions of Attri, Singh and Ghosh.⁴⁴

Romuva Goes to India

⁴² The final declaration of the Congress is published on the WCER web site (<http://www.wcer.org>) and also included in an appendix to the Trinkūnas-edited volume *Of Gods and Holidays*.

⁴³ Most of the WCER’s annual meetings have taken place in Vilnius and other locations in Lithuania, but Pagan groups in other parts of Europe have also hosted the organization. The 2004 conference was held in Athens, Greece, the 2005 meeting in Antwerp, Belgium, the 2007 conference in Riga, Latvia, and the 2008 gathering took place in Glogow, Poland. The 2006 and 2009 meetings, which were held in India, will be explored later in the chapter.

⁴⁴ Lokesh Chandra, “Paganism as a Metagrid for the Future, a paper by Prof. Lokesh Chandra, written for the 2nd conference of the WCER,” published in the WCER newsletter *The Oaks* Issue 2, Summer 2000, available on the WCER web site, <http://www.wcer.org> .

The year 2003 saw several events which greatly deepened the relationship between Romuva and Hinduism. First, some thirty or so members of Romuva and other Baltic Pagan groups traveled to India in February to attend an assembly of a wide variety of indigenous and native religion groups in Mumbai (Bombay). This meeting was called the First International Conference of the Elders of Ancient Traditions and Cultures, organized by the World Council of Elders of Ancient Traditions and Cultures (WCEAT), in affiliation with an Indian-based, Hinduism-centered organization called the International Center for Cultural Studies (ICCS), which has since shifted its headquarters to the United States but retains a predominantly Indian and Hindu character and leadership, with a substantial presence continuing in India.

Founded in 1993, the ICCS has organized a wide variety of conferences devoted to fostering bonds of communication and understanding between Indian religion and spiritual traditions of other regions.⁴⁵ The purposes of the WCEAT and ICCS are indeed quite similar to and compatible with those of the WCER, insofar as all are concerned with establishing solidarity between indigenous and native religious traditions that have often suffered suppression and persecution. Prior to this 2003 meeting, the ICCS had previously sponsored conferences in South Africa, Texas, and New Zealand, which had provided forums for sharing commonalities of myth, belief, history and ritual practices, as well as common experiences in asserting religious rights and identities in often oppressive social contexts, among religious groups representing African, Mayan, Maori and Hindu traditions. The 2003 conference was more ambitious, bringing together a still larger

⁴⁵ A wealth of information about the organization is available at its web site, <http://www.iccsus.org/>

variety of religious traditions from around the world, including Romuva as the first representative of European Paganism, as a result of Trinkūnas establishing contact with ICCS.⁴⁶

The conference was organized so that each group present was not only given time to make an address about its own history and traditions, but also to demonstrate its religious practices for the other attendees to experience in a more than merely intellectual manner. When a Hindu participant came upon Trinkūnas early one morning as he was chanting a Lithuanian *daina* greeting the sun, he was struck by similarities to the daily Hindu prayer delivered for the same purpose. There was a similar shock of recognition when Hindu attendees witnessed Romuva performing an offering ritual at a fire altar.⁴⁷ Trinkūnas for his part was greatly moved by the folk religiosity he saw among ordinary Hindus, sensing a deep piety that he found more impressive than the more erudite and philosophical speeches offered at the conference. The brilliant colors and vitality of Indian culture also affected him. Recalling his Indian experiences some six years later, Trinkūnas chuckled at the memory of how he experienced a temporary sense of disorientation when he returned to Lithuania after the conference and found gray, snowy Vilnius in the depths of Baltic winter extremely drab and dull in comparison to life in India.⁴⁸

The positive relations with Hindu colleagues were further deepened at another ICCS-sponsored meeting significantly titled the “Indo-Romuva Conference,” which took

⁴⁶ Telephone interview by Michael Strmiska with Dr. Yash Patak, International Coordinator and a co-founder of the International Centre for Cultural Studies (ICCS), June 4, 2010.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Interview with Trinkūnas, March 2009.

place at Atlantic City, New Jersey, in the USA, with the three main delegations consisting of Jonas Trinkūnas and his wife Inija representing Lithuanian Romuva, a Latvian delegation of Dievuri members, and Indian participants representing various sects of Hinduism as well as Sikhism.⁴⁹ A volume of the conference proceedings was later published under the provocative title of *Syncretism: An Indo-Romuva Strategy of Integration*.⁵⁰ Though none of the speeches actually lived up to the promise of blending Baltic and Indian religion in any thorough-going “syncretism,” the various speakers all repeatedly referred to the common original heritage of both Balts and Hindus.

In the speech which gave the conference volume its name, Indian-Canadian delegate Shrinivas Tilak discussed syncretism as the manner in which religions adapt to changing social and cultural conditions without losing their essential moral and cosmological outlook, and named Baltic paganism and Hinduism as prime examples of

⁴⁹ The presence of the Latvian Dievturi members at an “Indo-Romuva” conference is a good example of the close and sympathetic relations that pertain between Lithuanian Romuva and Latvian Dievturi, whose members often employ the broader term “Baltic Paganism” or even “Baltic Religion” to underline their essential commonality of religious worldview. Certain key differences include Dievturi’s interpretation of Baltic mythology in a more monotheistic and somewhat trinitarian manner, and Romuva’s insistence on maintaining an unmodified polytheism. See Misāne, “The Traditional Latvian religion of Dievturība,” and Strmiska, “The Music of the Past.”

⁵⁰ *Syncretism: An Indo-Romuva Strategy of Integration: A collection of papers presented at the Indo Romuva cultures conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey, USA*, edited by Jonas Trinkunas, Inija Trinkuniene, Dr. Shekhar Patel, Abhimanyu Gupta, and Dr. Yashwant Pathak (Bensalem PA: International Center for Cultural Studies, 2005).

such syncretism.⁵¹ He contrasted this flexible attitude with the more rigid doctrines of the “Semitic” (Judeo-Christian-Islamic) religions, argued that both the Vedic hymns and the Lithuanian Dainos articulate a similar vision of underlying oneness in the universe, and drew an etymological link between the Lithuanian word *daina* (traditional song, which from a Pagan point of view is a sacred song) and the Vedic term *dhena* (speech expressing deep understanding), relating both to the Indo-European root *dhi/dhya* (think, remember). Shrinivas also compared the Hindu concept of *karma*, the causal law of each person’s actions creating the conditions of their future existence, with humanity’s relationship to the Lithuanian and Latvian divinity *Laima*, the goddess of fortune who sets men’s and women’s fates in motion within a given range of possibilities.

Dr. Yashwant Pathak, a leading figure in the ICCS, discussed such parallels in a still broader context, including allusions to African, Maori and Mayan traditions, to argue that indigenous forms of religion from around the world partake of a common, ancient heritage.⁵² Inija Trinkūnienė provided a very detailed presentation and analysis of Romuva rituals and beliefs, centering on the fire ritual which had so captivated Hindu colleagues at the World Council of the Elders conference.⁵³

⁵¹ Shrinivas Tilak, “Syncretism: An Indo-Romuva Strategy of Integration,” in *Syncretism*, pp. 49-55.

⁵² Yashwant Pathak, “Dharmic Traditions of the World,” in *Syncretism: An Indo-Romuva Strategy of Integration*, pp. 90-95.

⁵³ Inija Trinkūnienė, “Lithuanian Folklore as a source of Baltic religion: the fire ritual,” in *Syncretism*, pp. 9-18.

Jonas Trinkūnas focused his presentation on drawing a parallel between the Lithuanian term *darna*, which roughly translates as “harmony,” and the Hindu concept of *dharma*, which possesses multiple levels of meaning from social duty to cosmic order. Trinkūnas had already asserted this Indo-Baltic parallel in his 1999 book *Of Gods and Holidays: The Baltic Heritage*, wherein he wrote, “Baltic *darna* morality is a very similar concept to the Hindu *Dharma*—the moral core of the world.”⁵⁴ Dundzila has noted that the equation of the two terms on the etymological level is not fully borne out by comparative linguistic research.⁵⁵ However, the parallel in meaning of the two terms, both denoting a belief in a cosmic moral order that is inherent in the structure of the universe, and not imposed by an omniscient, omnipotent deity, as found in the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is valid in a more general sense. The assertion of the parallel is also significant for further demonstrating Trinkūnas’s desire to interpret Baltic Pagan spirituality in Indian Hindu terms, and vice versa.

A new peak of Romuva involvement with Indian religion came in 2006, when the WCER was held in Jaipur, India, in conjunction with the World Council of Elders of Ancient Traditions previously mentioned. The WCER participants’ overwhelmingly positive experience of this conference can be measured by the decision taken that from this point onwards, the WCER would convene every third year in India, to continue the connection with India and Hinduism. The promise was kept in 2009 with the WCER again

⁵⁴ Trinkūnas, ed., *Of Gods and Holidays*, p. 159.

⁵⁵ Dundzila, “Baltic Lithuanian Religion and Romuva,” p. 349.

meeting with the World Council of Elders of Ancient Traditions in Nagpur, India.⁵⁶

Concluding Analysis

In traveling to India and back and developing a strong affection for Hinduism, Jonas Trinkūnas has followed much the same spiritual path that Vydūnas first traced out nearly a century ago, from Lithuanian folklore to Indian spirituality and back again, leading Romuva into an ever more confident relationship with the rich religious traditions of India. In this concluding section, some of the implications of this emerging relationship will be briefly considered.

The relationship with Hinduism is helpful to Romuva on a number of fronts. First of all, it enhances the prestige of Romuva, bolstering its claims to immense antiquity and refuting the charge that it is less a revived form of ancient Baltic religion than a repackaging of nineteenth century folklore by highlighting the ancient Indo-European commonalities that link Lithuania to India and thus Baltic Paganism to Hinduism.

Second, the relationship to India compensates for the relatively small size of Romuva as a religious congregation by attaching it to a massive religious community with many hundreds of millions of followers in India and a total of more than a billion adherents around the world. The obvious advantage of small-scale religious communities like Romuva, Dievturi and other European Pagan movements banding together for mutual support and protection was one of the main reasons for the establishment of the WCER, and the further connection with Hinduism provides even greater strength and solidarity.

⁵⁶ The ICCS provides an account of the 2009 conference at <http://iccsus.org/iccs-nagpur-india-chapter/sanskriti-sangam-a-unique-experiment-to-realize-unity-in-diversity/> , accessed June 4, 2010.

The apex of Romuva's continually expanding outreach to other religious groups and organizations came when Jonas Trinkūnas was invited to participate in the largest interreligious assembly on the face of the earth, the Parliament of the World's Religions, with 6500 participants from 80 different countries, held in Melbourne, Australia, December 4-9, 2009.⁵⁷ With Trinkūnas sharing a stage with world-famous political and spiritual leaders from former United States President Jimmy Carter to the Tibetan Buddhist leader, the Dalai Lama, Romuva had come a very long way from the days when it had to disguise itself as a strictly folkloric organization. In a letter to the parliament's organizers later published on a parliament-related web site, Trinkūnas expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to represent "Lithuania's ancient, indigenous religion" to the world community as an example of the reawakening of indigenous religions in Europe.⁵⁸ There can be no doubt that Romuva's involvement with Hindu religious groups, first through the WCER and then the World Council of Elders, paved the way for this momentous achievement.

A third way in which the association with Hinduism may be of assistance to Romuva is in regards to advancing its official status as a religious organization in Lithuania. By using its kinship with Hinduism to demonstrate the antiquity of Baltic Pagan

⁵⁷ Information on the Parliament is available at <http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/index.cfm>, accessed June 7, 2010.

⁵⁸ Trinkūnas's letter is quoted on pp. 76-77 in a report on the Parliament by Kusumita Pedersen, "Interreligious Insight: the Parliament of the World's Religions, 2009," available at <http://www.interreligiousinsight.org/January2010/Jan10Pedersen.pdf>, accessed May 18, 2010, pp. 70-78. It is notable that Trinkūnas avoids the terms "pagan" and "ethnic" in his letter and instead describes Lithuanian Paganism as "indigenous," showing the fluidity of these terms in different contexts.

traditions and participating in the various international forums just noted, Romuva may be able to strengthen its case for legal recognition as a “traditional” religious community within the current Lithuanian governmental framework. The government currently recognizes only nine “traditional” religious communities in Lithuania: the Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Uniate), Evangelical Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Russian Orthodox and Old Believer forms of Christianity, along with Sunni Islam and the Rabbinical and Karaite forms of Judaism. Such so-called “traditional” religious communities receive a considerable degree of preferential treatment from the government, including financial assistance for religious education and the maintenance of churches and other such religious buildings, along with the right to perform marriages and provide religious education in public educational institutions.⁵⁹

As the law now stands, it is virtually impossible for more recently established religious communities to obtain “traditional” status, as the law requires a religion to have been established in Lithuania for at least 300 years to be considered “traditional,” and Romuva was only registered with the government as an official religious community in 1992. Trinkūnas and his Romuva colleagues have argued to state authorities that they deserve “traditional” status insofar as Romuva represents the continuation of hundreds, if not thousands, of years of Lithuanian indigenous and folkloric religion, much of which is

⁵⁹ Donatas Glodenis, “Legislation on Religion and the Challenge of Pluralism in Lithuania,” published online, January 7th, 2005, at <http://en.religija.lt/showarticle.php?articleID=17> , accessed October 19, 2009.

clearly related to pre-Christian religious traditions.⁶⁰ State authorities have to this point been unreceptive to Romuva's position, but the ancient Indo-European linkage with Hinduism, the continuing cooperation with contemporary Hindu groups, and the further recognition of Romuva at the Parliament of the World's Religions, may prove of use as further points in support of Romuva's claims.

A fourth benefit that Romuva derives from its relationship with Hinduism is the potential to borrow and adapt elements of Hindu religion and philosophy to add to the religious vocabulary and ritual repertoire of modern-day Lithuanian Paganism. The only example of such borrowing to the current time is Trinkūnas's drawing on the Indian *dharma* concept to enhance the range of meaning of the Lithuanian term *darna*, as previously discussed, but this is only the tip of the iceberg, or of Lord Shiva's glacier, to use a more appropriately Hindu metaphor. Though Romuva is firmly rooted in Lithuanian folklore and ethnic culture, there can be no disputing the greater range and depth of Hindu religious literature and philosophy, owing to its much longer period of uninterrupted development. With Baltic Paganism having been persecuted and driven underground by the forces of European colonialism and Christianization, it has never undergone the kind of continual development and refinement that was achievable in Hinduism. The main sacred texts of Baltic Paganism, the Latvian *dainas* and the Lithuanian *dainos*, are comparable only to the first phase of Indian Hindu scripture, the hymns of the Rig Veda, with nothing to match the further stages of Hindu sacred literature and philosophy. This is no doubt part of the reason that Vydūnas took such interest in exploring Indian philosophy.

⁶⁰ Interview with Jonas Trinkūnas by Michael Strmiska in Vilnius, December 2004.

This raises an inherent problem which modern Baltic Pagans, as well as other European Pagans, face in their attempts to construct or reconstruct modern religious movements on essentially folkloric foundations, which is the inevitably restricted nature of the source materials. Folkloric texts such as myths and folk songs undoubtedly contain immense metaphorical richness and may be interpreted to express a mystical kinship with nature and the universe, poignant meditations on the human life cycle, and many other themes, but this wealth of potential meaning is only hinted, not fully expressed. If Lithuanian Paganism is to move beyond simply reiterating the glorification of nature inherent in the beloved folkloric traditions and the importance of preserving and continuing these traditions as cherished expressions of ethnic or national identity; if it is to engage in the further development of interpretation and reflection, then additional philosophical and/or theological tools and techniques are needed beyond what is available in the folklore itself. Hinduism offers such resources. If Romuva ever wished to travel down this path, sophisticated, Indo-European-kindred, Hindu concepts developed over many centuries of Indian religion and philosophy could be adapted to the Lithuanian Pagan context, providing additional conceptual vocabulary with which to articulate further dimensions of philosophical meaning in folkloric beliefs and practices. The same could be done with other elements of Hindu tradition, such as ritual practices or spiritual disciplines like yoga or meditation, as noted by Vilius Rudra Dundzila in his 1998 WCER speech.

In a 2009 interview with the author, Jonas Trinkūnas dismissed this possibility of borrowing from Hinduism, stressing that he was less interested in the philosophical refinements of Hinduism than the everyday religiosity of ordinary Hindus that he

witnessed during his visits to India, such as the worship and display of statues representing Hindu deities, which he found extremely moving and inspiring.⁶¹ It is however possible that future generations of Romuva believers may seek a more philosophical, less folkloric faith, and may wish to graft Indian spiritual practices like yoga and meditation onto the sacred oak tree of Lithuanian Paganism. In that case, the bridge from Lithuania to India, from Paganism to Hinduism and back again, whose first stones were laid by nineteenth century, comparative Indo-European scholars, followed by further extensions contributed by Vydūnas, Krėvė-Mickevičius, Trinkūnas and Dundzila, may prove a spiritual crossroads of great importance to the further development of modern-day Paganism, not only in Lithuania, but across Europe and beyond.

⁶¹ Interview with Jonas Trinkūnas by Michael Strmiska in Vilnius, March 2009.

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