

Pagan Religion and Genesis 1

Obstacles and opportunities in Lithuania



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Lithuania was the last country in Europe to receive the Gospel. Although it is predominantly Catholic, it is also home to the largest pagan temple in the continent.

Lithuanians believe that the whole world is one and therefore humanity and nature should live in harmony by helping each another like a sister and a brother. Pagan teaching on the concept of the world is based on the oak tree. The tree represents all levels of life: the roots denote the underground, the past; water is the spring of new beginning. The middle of the tree represents toiling people as buzzing bees and the top of the tree is the future life and the light of heaven. Death is the continuation of the next life.

Religion is rooted in the personal experience of the Lithuanian way of life and world view. The devotee chooses a god, who will be worshiped by him until the last days of his life. People have spiritual experiences, but they are individual and difficult to describe. People seek inner peace and harmony within their families, communities, ancestors and nature.

The principle of pagan faith is to maintain harmony with all the living and the dead. Lithuanians believed that death is a transformation from one body to another. Purity is the most valuable asset in the world; holiness is the realm of unity and reconciliation.

Gods and ritual

The main goddesses in pagan religion are Zemyna and Laima. Laima is the beloved Divine Mother who protects human lives. Zemyna is the admired Mother Earth who protects animal and plant life. Dievas (God), Velnias (Satan) and Perkunas (Thunder God) are the main three Gods. Dievas is the sky God who lives at the top of the mountains. His duty is to protect agrarian work. Perkunas is the God of the weather and embodied justice. Velnias is responsible for the world of the dead. Lithuanians believe that there are no good or bad gods as each of them can harm and protect at the same time.

Ritual plays an important role in a devotee's life as it represents his life style and spiritual well being. Rituals are held outdoors. Devotees wash their faces and hands as they gather. The elders make offerings of food, flowers, and drink to the fire. Songs and prayers lead devotees to spiritual experiences and connection with the gods. Such a devotional life makes people believe that honesty and faithfulness to the gods is an assurance of wealth and prosperity.

Pagans and the Bible

Pagans in Lithuania face difficulties in understanding the Bible. Usually they read it in an overly literal way, not appreciating the need to understand the context in which it was written. They also harbour bitterness towards Christians that stems from the 13th century. At that time the Crusades reached Lithuania and people were forced to be baptised and reject their gods. The leader of pagan Lithuania, Gediminas, proclaimed that every nation had a right to its own distinctive perception of the world and its own way of worship.

Pagans and Genesis 1

The beginning of the Bible is very important to study as it talks about God and his creation and how we as humans are involved in it. What is our role and what do we do with God's

world? What is our mission in this world? Questions like these can also be found in the pagan worldview of creation. Balts are interested and passionate about creation because it is the root of their beliefs and the place where the gods come from and humans obtain harmony.

The aim of pagan faith is to live in harmony with God and gods, with the ancestors, nature and people. The Baltic faith unites all the faithful – living and dead.

The following section is an imaginary Bible study at which two Christians (Simonas and Darius) and two followers of the pagan 'Romuva' religion (Jurate and Lina) discuss Genesis 1. I hope it illustrates some of the obstacles and opportunities such a text presents when being presented to adherents to pagan religion. Their Bible study takes place in a forest, surrounded by beautiful valleys and hills.

Jurate. I'm not sure what Christians understand by the term 'God'. I believe in the goddess Zemyna. She takes care of my life and I am happy that the Creator God has given me the opportunity to worship what he has created. When they converted to Christianity, people were forced to ignore the goddess of the holy earth and were made to honour the virgin Mary, who was the mother not of the gods, but of one God. We understand that the return of the ancient goddess is unavoidable; it is demanded by nature and this is what people want. We are the children of one Mother – people, animals, trees – and that Mother lives here, near us. All that is alive is a sign of the earth's kindness. I think this whole passage talks about creation and how everything is bound together: sun to darkness, water to land, earth to plants, and so on.

Simonas. We Christians believe that there is only one God. I think God was from the beginning and this means that everything began with God. God acts alone. This is his creation. The earth was empty and with no surface; in other words it was chaos. It is something like what animals experience during a total eclipse – you must try to imagine complete darkness and no life at all [1]. Everything was created according to his will.

Lina. I agree with Jurate that it is so great to sense the goodness of the Creator's gifts to us. We are free to feel them and thank them. I read in another account of creation that the god of Babylon, Marduk, killed Tiamat who gave birth to the gods and her corpse was formed into the world. Man was made to free the gods [2]. These people lived at a time when the Christian God began to be worshipped. I believe that the world was created by God the Creator and he is the Master of Fate, the Lord of the world who ruled Heaven and Earth, while his children assisted him.

Darius. But surely the story about Marduk and Tiamut is just a myth and nothing else? I know that you believe in many gods and that you worship trees and ancestors. And this is your choice. But please take a look at what the Bible says. You misunderstand God's creation. He is the only God and there is no way there can be other gods (Lev. 20:7).

Lina and Jurate are confused. They take their Bibles and begin to read Genesis 1.

Simonas. It's interesting to me that verses 3-5 talk about light and darkness. I know in your religion you worship the sun and the moon. But Genesis makes it clear that heaven is a part of creation - it is not God or even the dwelling place of gods [3]. You should notice that the Hebrew avoids using the exact words 'sun' and 'moon' as they are not to be mistaken for deities [4].

Jurate. I think that God is too far from us and therefore we can choose to worship his divine creation as it is connected with him.

Lina. Also, I do not see very much from the lifestyle of Christians to show that they care for creation as much as we do. It doesn't exactly prove love for their Creator. Are you saying that what the Christian God created is for his glory? Well, I can say that we live in harmony (darna) with nature and each other. Darna is the most important of nature's and mankind's ideals, and is attained and maintained with constant work and toil. It depends on the efforts and concerns of man and his gods. You guys fight with one another and even with other religions just to prove that your God is the right one to believe in. Harmony is the most important thing within all creation, people and nature.

Jurate. I would like to say that nature worshippers' morals show complete respect for nature, life and man. The simplest and universal moral principle is to invite man to do to other men or living beings, that which he would want to be done to him.

Darius. I do agree with your statement about doing good to others and I think this is one of society's norms these days. Even the Bible talk about it in Matthew 7:12. But I do not agree that we should worship nature. God created the world not to be worshipped but to bring glory to Him. God created harmony within his creation; look around you - isn't it beautiful!! All that you have is made by his hands. No other god could do such things. 2 Kings 17:12 speaks about worshipping other gods and it means that people turned from God. This brought emptiness into their lives and through the worship of idols they lost their true connection with God.

Simonas. God doesn't say in Scripture that people will worship nature. What he says is that all he has created is for humans to rule over (v.26). God blessed the animals (1:22), he blessed man and woman and made them in his image (1:26). Blessing is God's fulfilment. God is also the provider of food (1:29-30).

Lina. What would you say about verse 26? This is obviously talking about other gods included in the heavenly court. Why would he say 'Let us make man in our image'? The idea of one god, rightly affirming the world's unity, however, has often prompted the emergence of slave ideologies and dictatorial powers, forcing their subjects to become submissive like sheep. We must learn to be "persons-to-themselves", truly self reliant.

Jurate. God created people and creation at the same time. We belong to one another. We cannot be better than animals or trees. We all have divine powers. Our Lithuanian word for a man is Zmogus, which shows a direct connection to the earth which we call 'zeme'. Zemyna is mother of the earth and zmona – wife. Man is a child of the earth. Because of this the most important symbol for a man is a tree – medis, whose beginning is the earth. A man has heavenly elements and this shows man's connection with the world. This relationship links man with everything that surrounds him. Man differs from his surroundings not because he is smarter, but because of his obligations to others. If a tree or an animal grows only to satisfy man's needs, and is suitable only for lumber and meat – the Bible preaches such a utilitarian outlook – in a case like that the family of man has no future.

Darius. Humanity is given a special task. People weren't created as monsters. God gave them authority over creation for a purpose. Man is responsible for the well-being and prosperity of those over whom he rules (1 Kings 4:24). I like how one commentator has put it:

"The succession of generations of the human race, however, is different from that of the animals. Implicit in being created in the image of God is the capacity for language; the succession of human generations is a succession of names (Gen. 5 and 10), and in the succession of names lies the beginning of history. History grows out of the blessing conferred on the human family." [5]

Jurate. What do you mean being made in the image of God? Doesn't that say we can be like gods?

Darius. We have spiritual, moral and rational qualities. That is what makes us in the 'image of God'. It is our capacity to relate to God. Another thing is our dominion over the rest of the world, but not over God. What distinguishes us from every other creature, and links us to God, is our capacity for self-awareness and for reflective self-consciousness. God is the supremely 'self-aware' one: to be in his image is to be aware of ourselves as his creatures [6]. But we cannot be like God.

Lina. You mentioned spirituality. Holiness gives vital power and spiritual strength. This is about your submissiveness to God. Holiness occurs in people and nature. This is where you receive your spiritual strength from. Baltic traditions preserved the ancient concept of holiness which differs considerably from the Christian concept. The whole concept of the human and his faith in a god or gods is based on knowledge. Faith and religion are understood to be man's harmony with sanctity and holiness, and also his relationship with God and the gods. It was perceived that the world and existence are manifestations of mysterious powers and holy life. The concept of the Christian God is not able to embrace the world's diversity. If it had been able to, why would there have been brutal wars against other religions and spiritual traditions?

Simonas. I think we could discuss about God and his creation for weeks. But time is running out and I think we should finish our discussion. It was interesting and challenging to hear your understanding of Genesis 1.

Lina. Why do you want to worship another nation's God? We have our own God and gods?

Conclusion

Baltic religion doesn't leave any doubts about the spirituality and faithfulness of Lithuanian people. They are zealous followers of their gods through the rituals they participate in, and their personal spiritual experiences speak about the concepts of harmony and holiness. These are just some of the issues anyone encountering pagans will need to address. Using the Old Testament is just one way of doing this; but it can be a useful way in to genuine conversation.

Notes:

1. C. Westermann, Genesis 1-11, Fortress Press, pp.7-8.
2. The Lion Handbook to the Bible, Lion Publishing, p.130.
3. C. Westermann, Genesis 1-11, p.16.
4. D. Atkinson, The Message of Genesis 1-11, Inter-Varsity Press, p.16.
5. C. Westermann, Genesis 1-11, p.11.
6. D. Atkinson, The Message of Genesis 1-11, p.37.

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