Pagan Power in Modern Europe
Category : July 1999
Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1999

TRENDS

Pagan Power in Modern Europe

Pagan revivalists draw inspiration from Hinduism in their quest to reclaim their own ancestral heritage

In this special report for Hinduism Today, Belgian writer Hughes Henry profiles a leader of Europe's Pagan renaissance

Christopher GÃ©rard uncovered his Pagan past at the age of 14 with his bare hands--literally. A precocious child in a Belgian family which three generations before had parted company with the Christian church, he was fascinated at the age of ten by a book on Greek mythology provided by his father. Two years later, he was learning Greek and Latin and, by 14, ready to explore Europe's Pagan past first hand. He joined in with a team of archeologists in the south of Belgium to excavate a 4th-century Gallo-Roman temple. "When I dug into this temple, which had been destroyed by the Christians, I was shocked," he recounts. "I was barely 15, yet I understood in a powerful hands-on, nonintellectual way, how harsh had been Europe's conversion to Christianity. They burned temples, smashed statues, massacred the priests and established extremely harsh laws. By 392 ce, Paganism died."

Now 36, GÃ©rard stands at his altar to answer my questions. He points out the diverse array of religious objects set in a

helter-skelter arrangement. There is a Ganesha which he found in the Ganges, a Cernunnos made of Irish bog clay, the horned god of the continental Gallic celts, and here's a trisula... "The trisula looks just like a Celtic artifact," states GÃ©rard, "but it comes from Nepal. It's unbelievable how certain items which appeared to be perfectly Celtic are found in the Himalayas." What means so much to GÃ©rard is that these artifacts symbolize for him "the vast Indo-European culture that existed from one end to the other of the European and Asiatic continents, from Iceland all the way to Korea." He finds endless inspiration in this idea that our roots--be we European, Indian, Asian--are common and deep. His dedication to that vision earned him little more than derision in his native Belgium. But when he went to India, he found what used to happen in Europe 10,000 years ago still goes on there and can be observed daily at home and in temples.

GÃ©rard is the influential editor of Antaios, a journal of polytheistic studies which he resurrected in 1992. It had been created and directed by Mircea Eliade and Ernst JÃ¼nger from 1959 to 1971. Both Eliade, a renowned scholar of religion, and JÃ¼nger, a German novelist, had great influence on Europe's Pagan revival at the highest intellectual levels. GÃ©rard counts as among his greatest blessings the compliments on his work paid him by the famed JÃ¼nger, who died last year at age 103.

Antaios has become the main publication of the SociÃ©tÃ© d'Etudes PolythÃ©istes. Founded last year, the "Society for the Study of Polytheism" is composed of intellectuals for whom Pagan memories are indispensible in the face of ruinous modern trends. They have a specifically European view of

these trends, which needs to be understood to grasp the approach of GÃ©rard and others.

The new Europe: GÃ©rard, like many great European thinkers today (and including Christians), believes that Europe has, in fact, already entered its "post-Christian" and "post-rationalist" phase. The church is becoming decreasingly important. Membership is dropping daily, the priesthood is declining, historical challenges are being made to the theology (such as those which resulted from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls) and multiple scandals have reduced the influence of the church. The current European mind is no longer significantly shaped in its thinking and activities by the Christian theology, whose basic tenets have become largely irrelevant to modern Euro-life.

"Post-rationalist" means that many have abandoned "rationalism," the philosophical position--popular for the last 300 years--that men should resolve their differences through reason, which provides the most valid basis for action or spiritual truth. Out of rationalism developed science, and the now-abandoned hope that mankind was on the brink of creating Utopia--a socially, politically and morally perfect society--by its own efforts, without the help of Gods or religion.

The waning of both rationalism and Christianity has left a mental, moral and spiritual vacuum. Mostly, say GÃ©rard and others, that vacuum has not been filled, except inadequately by mindless consumerism. The worst aspect of this consumerism is its awful power to obliterate ethnicity and cultures all over the world, making it potentially the most

destructive imperialism ever. The only sustainable culture that these elite Pagans can imagine to fill this vacuum would be one based on a return to a conscious polytheism, a return to the Gods. The 19th century French poet, GÃ©rard de Nerval, even prophesied, "They will return, these Gods you have never stopped longing for. Time will bring back the order of ancient days."

Hindu Connection: The term Pagan, which means "of the countryside," was the term applied by the converted Christians of the cities to the unconverted country folk. Later, as Christianity became dominant, it acquired a twisted, negative connotation. Today it specifically means "one who is not a Christian, Muslim or Jew." The term has become so abusive, that many Pagans today will not use it. But because it makes such a clear division with the monotheistic religions, Gerard and others of a like mind proudly claim it.

Europe's Pagans have not failed to observe that Hindus, too, are Pagans. GÃ©rard has been to India many times. He said, "India is a conservatory of traditions going back into our most ancient prehistory. The Paganism of our ancestors has miraculously survived there in spite of Muslim invasions, Christian missions and all the other agents of ethnocide [the systematic destruction of a culture]. The brahmins, brothers to our Druids, have never stopped offering ritual worship as we used to do 40 centuries ago. Pilgrimage to India is basic for every European Pagan because it allows him to reconnect with the living tradition, which is moreover Indo-European.

"Yes, India is the land of the Gods par excellence," he went on.

"The experience of the divine presence in India is within the reach of anyone who searches even a little bit. The temples are full of flowers and offerings, and you only have to flow along with the crowd, melt into it and place yourself in the hands of the Gods. I do not advocate conversion to Hinduism, but I do recommend its inspiration. I told this to the brahmins that took me into their homes. One said, 'Establish your reawakened Paganism on a valid foundation and there'll come a day when it will catch on. It won't be long.' As true Pagans, they feel no need to convert anyone. "

While still in Europe, GÃ©rard developed a correspondence with the late Ram Swarup, one of the great Hindu thinkers of our day. They met on GÃ©rard's first trip to India. "This extraordinary person and delectable Indian gentlemen was one of my only contacts. He welcomed me as his son. We had long conversations in his Delhi house, and he introduced me into Indian society that would have been closed to me otherwise. He helped me take my first steps toward a more real and concrete knowledge of the Indian concept of karma." In 1996, two issues of Antaios were dedicated to the Hindu renaissance which seems to GÃ©rard to exactly parallel the Pagan renaissance in many important ways. It included interviews with Ram Swarup, Sita Ram Goel, Alain DaniÃ©lou and others.

His personal life: Christopher GÃ©rard is a classical philologist and studied ancient languages, including Sanskrit. He has been trained through three academic specializations: literature, philosophy and linguistics into which he immersed himself at the l'UniversitÃ© Libre de Bruxelles, a liberal, non-Catholic "positivistic" university. He has published in French a highly acclaimed translation of Against the Galileans

written by Emperor Julien, the last Pagan emperor of Rome. Today GÃ©rard teaches languages, a professional career which he separates from the philosophical itinerary that brought him to create the Society for the Study of Polytheism. "The Society is my personal unfoldment which I am sharing with others who have made the same choice. One can convert to the major, organized religions or to a school of ethics, but one cannot convert to Paganism. One simply belongs to it.".

In his daily life, his affiliations to Paganism have been mostly philosophical. "I have two small altars where I burn incense when I have time and I'm in the mood, but I'm not really a pious practitioner. Modern living being what it is, I am not much into practice, but my thought, on the other hand, goes on uninterrupted."

Modern-day Pagans hold a wide variety of beliefs, but most believe in the divinity of nature, in enthusiastic tolerance, and in icons and rituals. People like GÃ©rard feel that specific creeds and mystical traditions will eventually evolve. As do Hindus, the Pagans value plurality and diversity.

To be a European Pagan at the dawn of the 21st century is not always easy. If GÃ©rard does it in a discrete manner by appearing to emphasize thought, it is because he has already experienced pressure from the still-influential Catholic Church in Belgium, which is wary of Paganism's revival. "A hundred years ago," GÃ©rard explains, "the idea was rampant in public opinion that Pagans were barbarians, grown-up children who worshiped pieces of wood. Today one tends to describe them as villains, as Nazis. In a very subtle way, Paganism is

disenfranchised as a faith and presented as a highly dangerous and regressive movement."

Unfortunately, GÃ©rard says, this idea is encouraged by certain groups who call themselves Pagans, but who at the same time participate in reinforcing the characterization that Christianity made of Paganism--that it is some form of devil worship. He mentions as examples some marginal provocateurs who have mixed satanism, revisionism and witchcraft to the point of caricature. "This current of thought, which has developed mainly in the United States in the Protestant context, claims witchcraft as its own, which makes me boil. They start off with the principle that in the European countryside a tradition of black magic has survived as an aspect of Paganism. They claim to be bringing forth an organized, conscious religion which has survived through the centuries as an underground movement. This is a historical hallucination and, alas, they are founding a Pagan renaissance upon this decadence."

"Moreover, we find in Wicca," GÃ©rard complained, "a consumeristic aspect. Certain of these people will present themselves as Druids somewhere in Oregon for six months, then suddenly somewhere else they are Egyptian priests. It is neither profound, nor constructive. It is a parody." "But," he said at another time, "All that will evolve and there will come inevitably some self-generated discipline into it. The second generation and the third will undergo mutations that we can hardly foresee today."

GÃ©rard launched anew the French-language Antaios on

November 8, 1992, the anniversary of the day Christian emperor Theodose banned all Pagan worship in the Roman Empire. "I was motivated not so much by belief," explains GÃ©rard, "as by loyalty to my Pagan ancestors, who were loyal to their Gods, worshiping underground, always resisting, and who punctuate our history." The journal's intent is to "reestablish the bond with the natural religions of our continent which were repressed by the official culture and layered over with Christianity," as well as bond with all polytheists, including Hindus, Shamanists, Taoists and Shintoists.

"I am taking the high road," GÃ©rard asserts, "an ascetic path, but one which to my way of thinking is the only valid path which in the long run has got what it takes. It's a slow and sometimes discouraging undertaking. At times it can seem a little bewildering. Europe is yet far from being re-Paganized, but little by little, thinkers catch the idea and feel reconquered. Generally, it doesn't take much: an image, an attitude, an experience, rather than a speech, and everything that has been repressed has come back ever so strongly. Our role is that of waker-uppers."

Despite the short-term challenges, GÃ©rard is optimistic. In his 1997 interview with Samain journal, he stated quite emphatically that "The rennaisance of pre-Christian religions in Europe is an objective, unquestionable fact! In less than 30 years, and especially since the 80s, the Pagan groupings have multiplied, for better or for worse. From Belgium to Estonia, from Sicily to Ireland, the Pagan rennaisance is obvious. Bookstores are full of books on the ancient native religions. In Great Britain, you cannot avoid the Pagan network. They even

have university professors who are openly Pagan. In Iceland, Paganism became an official religion in 1973. Everywhere in Europe, Christian dominion over the mind is gradually but surely vanishing. Witness the return of the Druids, the shamans and the priests of the Gods."

"I have no idea what forms this Paganism will have in another 30 years," he went on. "I think we will be surprised. The Gods will manifest more and more--it's a matter of survival for the Earth, our Mother. That we Pagans are ever more numerous to worry over Her future is surely a sign of the Gods who act through us."

A religion has clergy, followers and joint projects. Hindus are awaiting the time when there is less defensive talk and more dynamic religious action from Pagans in Europe. Following the example of Hindus in India and other countries would be the good start. The world waits to welcome the Pagan clergy to sit with all others at the December Parliment of World Religions in South Africa.

By Hughes Henry, Belgium
ANTAIOS, 168 RUE WASHINGTON, BTE 2, B 1050, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

Sri Ram Swarup on Europe's Pagans

Rediscover the ancient spiritual truths to heal the wounded present

In an interview in the June, 1996, issue of Antaios, Hindu thinker, Ram Swarup, explained how Hinduism could assist with the renaissance of Paganism in Europe.

Pagan renaissance is overdue. It is necessary for Europe to heal its psyche. Under Christianity, Europe learned to reject its ancestors, its past, which cannot be good for its future also. Europe became sick because it tore apart from its own heritage, it had to deny its very roots. If Europe is to be healed spiritually, it must recover its spiritual past--at least, it should not hold it in such dishonor.

There is a lot for European thinkers to do. The task won't be easy, and it will require decades of fervent dedication and a lot of introspection as well. Europe has been subjected for centuries to a systematic spiritual Semitization. It will be no small task to change this situation. Europe shall have to rediscover its ancient sensibilities about its people, environment, animals, nature. Earlier, the European Renaissance of the 17th century was incomplete. It was revival of Greek and Roman literature and art-forms without Greek and Roman gods. If the Renaissance had taken its full course, it would also have become aware of its Eastern, its Hindu, links, but it was soon aborted. In fact, an opposite movement started, an anti-renaissance movement, in the shape of Protestantism, a movement of "back to the Bible," "back to the Apostles."

I hope that the Neopagan movement will understand the importance and the immensity of the task. In certain Western milieux, Paganism has been welcomed because it was supposed to usher in sensuality and hedonism, sexual freedom. But those Pagans must understand that the ancient Pagan philosophers were great mystics and great moralists, and the European Pagan movement will have to understand Paganism in this way.

I believe that Hinduism has a very important role in the religious self-recovery of humanity, particularly of Europe. The reason is simple. Hinduism represents the most ancient tradition which is still alive. It has preserved in its bosom the whole spiritual past of humanity.

For self-recovery, these countries have to revive their old gods. But this is a task which cannot be done mechanically. They have to recapture the consciousness which expressed itself in the language of many gods. Here, India can help them with its tradition of yoga. In my book, The Word as Revelation: Names of Gods, I spoke of a new kind of pilgrimage: a return to the time of the Gods. Meanwhile, European scholars can do a lot. They should write a history of Europe from the Pagan point of view, which would show how profoundly persecuted Paganism was. They should compile a directory of Pagan temples destroyed, Pagan groves and sacred spots desecrated. European Pagans should also revive some of these sites as their places of pilgrimage.