Hindus and Neo-Paganism

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The late Ram Swarup (1920-98), definitely the most important Hindu philosopher of independent India’s first half-century, liked to point out that other cultures had traditions similar to Hinduism before Christianity or Islam wiped them out. As he put it in his path-breaking study of polytheism, The Word as Revelation (1980):

“There was a time when the old Pagan Gods were pretty fulfilling and they inspired the best of men and women to acts of greatness, love, nobility, sacrifice and heroism. It is, therefore, a good thing to turn to them in thought and pay them our homage. We know pilgrimage, as ordinarily understood, as wayfaring to visit a shrine or a holy place. But there can also be a pilgrimage in time and we can journey back and make our offerings of the heart to those Names and Forms and Forces which once incarnated and expressed man’s higher life. (...) The peoples of Egypt, Persia, Greece, Germany and the Scandinavian countries are no less ancient than the peoples of India; but they lost their Gods, and therefore they lost their sense of historical continuity and identity. (...) What is true of Europe is also true of Africa and South America. The countries of these continents have recently gained political freedom of a sort, but (...) if they wish to rise in a deeper sense, they must recover their soul, their Gods (...) If they do enough self-churning, then their own Gods will put forth new meanings in response to their new needs. (...) If there is sufficient aspiration, invoking and soliciting, there is no doubt that even Gods apparently lost could come back again. They are there all the time.” (p.131-133)

The cultural process of self-rediscovery after centuries of Christianity is already in full swing in many parts of Europe and North America (I have only little information about other continents and will leave them outside the scope of this article). In Europe, two organizations try to unite the various national groups: the England based ‘Pagan Federation’ and the Lithuania based ‘World Congress of Ethnic Religions’. Both have made a brief acquaintance with Hinduism. Leading Pagan thinker Prudence Jones had a correspondence with Ram Swarup, whose articles on polytheism have also been published in other Pagan media, e.g. in the California based Church of All Worlds’ magazine ‘Green Egg’. The opening conference of the WCER (Vilnius 1998 was attended by three NRI Hindus; one of them was present again this year, and a delegation from India itself was on its way but couldn’t make it because of Lithuania’s slowness in handling the visa applications. The WCER’s leading ideologues Jonas Trinkunas (Lithuania) and Denis Dornoy (French, living in Denmark) also sent a message to the Dharma Sansad, the “religious parliament”, in February 1999:

To the delegates at the Dharma Sansad, Ahmedabad, 5-8 February 1999:

Respectful greetings,

As workers for the revival of the religion of our ancestors, and as convenors of the World Congress of Ethnic Religions, we are happy and honoured to communicate with the
representatives of the world’s largest surviving ancient religion, the Sanatana Dharma. We want to pay our respect to the people who have kept alight the Vedic fire for thousands of years, even when besieged by hostile forces, and who are currently guiding Hindu society through the challenges of the modern age.

We wish to draw the attention of the Hindu leaders to the efforts currently made to maintain the ancestral religions of the Native Americans, Africans, and other “Pagan” peoples in the face of the subversion of their cultures and aggression against their dharmic practices by agents of self-righteous missionary religions. We support the peaceful efforts of all nations to safeguard their cultural and spiritual heritage against subversion and destruction. We also wish to draw your attention to the efforts to revive or reconstruct the ancestral religions of those nations who were overwhelmed by Christianization or Islamization in the past. By common origin or simply by a common inspiration, these ancient religions share a lot with the Sanatana Dharma, in both its tribal and its Sanskritic manifestations. We therefore wish to express our hope and intention of establishing a friendly cooperation.”

Clearly, there is a measure of common ground between Hinduism and Pagan revivalism, both typologically (as non-Abrahamic religions) and strategically. At Ram Swarup’s suggestion, I have done some participant observation of this movement, or spectrum of movements, in the last couple of years. I have made many friends in these circles, and I sympathize with the whole idea of the revival of the wrongfully eliminated ancestral religions. That said, I do have mixed feelings about the actual performance of this fledgling new incarnation of the old religion, which suffers from some serious childhood diseases. In particular, I would like to draw attention at present to a few problems in the encounter and budding cooperation between Hinduism and Pagan revivalism.

**Lifestyle** : One thing which is bound to strike Hindu newcomers in certain neo-Pagan circles as uncomfortable, is the seeming predominance of what Indians know all too well as hippyism, the kind of loose and undisciplined behaviour which Western rucksack travellers have displayed while sojourning in India. Wiccas (neo-witches) dancing naked in the moonlight may not be the Shankaracharya’s idea of Dharma. And while nakedness as such need not be immoral in any way, the fact is that the looser morality which Asians tend to identify as typically modern-Western is entirely the norm in most neo-Pagan circles. As Fred Lamond candidly admits in his must read introduction Religion without Beliefs, Essays in Pantheist Theology, Comparative Religion and Ethics (Janus Publ., London 1997, p.111): “Our practical ethics are 90% the same” as those of established religions, but “the only area where our principles differ sharply from theirs is in sexual ethics. To Pagans, sexual intimacy before marriage is neither sinful nor immoral (...) we regard shared sexual passion under most circumstances as a sacrament which, far from harming our souls, can be a gateway to self-transcendence and unity with the divine.”

The Church of All Worlds even promotes “polyamory” as an alternative to the monogamous household. The Germanic oriented neo-Pagans (Odinism, Asatru / “loyalty to the gods”) are more mainstream in this regard, partly because they recruit more among working class people, who are less attracted to artistic variations in lifestyle; nonetheless, one of their most gifted ideologues in the 1980s, Stephen Flowers a.k.a. Edred Thorsson, subsequently touted himself as ¾ in Freudian terms ¾ a zealous polymorphous pervert. Hindus in India, and perhaps even more the overseas Hindus who have experienced a close knit family structure and the concomitant “family values”
as a great asset in their professional success (Margaret Thatcher’s “model immigrant community”), would probably feel closer to the prudish morality of Evangelicals than to the libertine neo-pagans.

Other Hindu taboos, as on beef-eating or meat-eating in general, are equally foreign to Western neo-Pagans. Though vegetarianism is a major trend in some circles, others celebrate hunting and do-it-yourself slaughtering of your next meal as part of the return to a more natural way of life. Even among the vegetarians, the motive is more often health and ecology (meat production requiring a much larger land surface than the production of vegetable food with the same nutritional value) rather than Hindu considerations such as compassion with all sentient beings and the taboo on touching, let alone digesting, animal tissue in a state of decomposition.

From an orthodox Hindu viewpoint, most neo-Pagan groups would have a status similar to the tribals of forested Central India. Though the tribals are recognized as Indian fellow Pagans, Hindus by Savarkar’s definition, they are nonetheless commonly perceived as savages because of their disregard for certain taboos and because of their not so strict morality (as in the common youth dormitories where sexual experimentation is encouraged). The city jungles of the West have somehow spawned a lifestyle similar to that of the tiger infested and snake haunted jungles of India.

**Absence of a yogic tradition**: Another point which neo-Pagans have in common with the Indian tribals as compared with the literate Hindu-Buddhist mainstream, is that they do not have an established tradition of yoga.

One of the most important fruits of civilization is a system of techniques allowing man to reach beyond the ordinary, world-absorbed (c.q. dream-absorbed) consciousness. This does create an inequality within the broad category of non-Abrahamic or “Pagan” religions. I am aware that this is bound to put some readers off as being elitist, but there is a real difference between the systematically developed techniques of consciousness as practised in Hindu and Buddhist monasteries (and by laymen every morning and evening), on the one hand, and the whole spectrum of ordinary religious experience on the other: ritual, celebration, devotional practices, even erratic mystical experiences as anyone may have in exceptional moments (from first love to near death experiences).

The best way to realize this difference is to meet an accomplished yogi: the quality of profound peace he radiates is unlike anything else. This doesn’t mean that other activities, religious and secular, are somehow bad and to be shunned. Not at all: whereas Western adepts of yoga often deride “organized religion” with its rituals, I have never heard of an Indian or East Asian practitioner who did not observe some calendar of rituals (e.g. Zen as a tradition of meditation is heavily ritualized). Advanced students of yogic techniques don’t set themselves against the surrounding folk religion, but adapt to it and add their own insights to it as a jewel to the crown. Both in Chinese Taoism and in Hinduism, we see how folk religion gets transformed by having the spiritual tradition as a point of reference in its midst. Contrary to what early Orientalists imagined, 99% of the people in the Orient are not sages; yet, they are aware of the existence and nearness of such a class of seers, and this infuses their religion with a quality absent in the purely naturalistic Pagan religions.

Did such a spiritual tradition exist within the pre-Christian religions of Europe? In Greek and Hellenistic culture, we certainly see traces of it, but they are usually attributed to Egyptian or Asian influence. The Druids are usually credited with such a tradition, but as
far as we can see, their central claim to honour within Celtic society was their memorization of a whole library of mythological and historical narratives. This was similar to the Brahmins learning the Vedas and other classics by heart, which is part of their “karmakanda”, “ritualism”, distinct from the “jnanakanda”, the search for absolute knowledge developed in the younger layers of the Vedas, the Upanishads. Moreover, as a serious blemish on their reputation as dreamy sages, the Druids were also officiates at bloody sacrifices, allegedly even human sacrifice, which even the robust Romans found repulsive and barbaric. In the development of Vedic religion, we see animal sacrifice phased out in favour of symbolic replacement sacrifices (coconuts etc.), but Druidic religion was prevented from making such progress from barbarity to civilization because it was killed by Roman armies and Christian missionaries. When the neo-Druids in organizations like OBOD, the “Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids”, practise an altogether more peaceful religion, they can justify that (e.g. when The Times derided them on 22 June 1998 as “milk-and-water Pagans” for not even sacrificing human virgins on Summer Solstice in Stonehenge) by explaining that they supply the evolution which Druidry would have gone through, had it survived through the last two thousand years.

At any rate, a perusal of the remaining (often distorted) Pagan literature of the Celts and also of the Germanic peoples shows a lot of celebration of life, of courage and passion, and some insightful meditations on the mysteries of life and death, but nothing like a yogic tradition. Neo-Pagans who understand that something is missing make up for it by borrowing heavily from the living traditions of Asia. Thus, the OBOD has imported a lot of Hindu-Buddhist lore into its curriculum as a substitute for the unknown and irretrievable doctrines which the ancient Druids must have taught. To some extent, this is historically justified because European and Asian Pagan traditions did have certain doctrines in common, e.g. the belief in reincarnation is well-attested by Greco-Roman observers of the Druidic tradition, in Virgil’s Aeneis and other European Pagan sources. But to some extent, it may be just fantasy: it is really possible that our Celtic and Germanic ancestors did miss out on some philosophical developments which were taking place in more civilized parts of the world. And whatever they did know and teach has largely been lost, or only been registered by Christian monks who didn’t understand much of it anymore. So, either way, neo-Pagans trying to supply the innermost teachings to a tradition of which folklore and scanty surviving texts have only preserved a skeleton, have no choice but to look to surviving traditions like Hinduism.

Xenophobia: Alternatively, some neo-Pagan ideologues reject any input from Asian or other traditions. In the Netherlands, the late Noud van den Eerenbeemt, a Germanic heathen, used to teach something he called “Runic yoga”, meaning a series of body postures imitating the shapes of the old Germanic alphabet signs or Runes. I think this was a bit silly, as Hatha-yogic postures are designed to produce certain effects in the energetics of the body, not to impersonate certain visual shapes. However, some heathens rejected it for a wholly different reason: yoga is a non-European invention, hence “unfit for European people”. They were apparently unaware that the Runic alphabet itself was once imported from the south, and that the Indo-European languages themselves, and the religious lore they carried, were once imported from the East: at least from Russia, according to the dominant theory, or perhaps even from Afghanistan or India.

Those are the people who reject Christianity on grounds of its foreign origin: an “Asian religion unfit for Europeans”, just like Hinduism. That is wholly mistaken: if Christianity was an erroneous belief system, it was erroneous even for people in its countries of
origin, just as Islam was initially rejected even by the compatriots of the Prophet, the Arabs. Conversely, if Christianity is true, it stands to reason that we should all drop our ancestral religion and embrace Christianity, just like Paul did, and Constantine, and Clovis, and Vladimir.

Hindus stand warned that a minoritarian but activist strand within the Pagan reawakening is motivated by such xenophobia, which is largely based on ignorance or at least on the insufficient realization of the syncretic nature of even their own ancestral religions. Often they are people who care little about religion and more about ethnicity, using religion only to give some colour to their assertion of ethnic identity. My impression is that in the Odinist movement in the USA, with its increasing racial polarization, this “white pride” tendency is not just an embarrassing fringe, as it is in Europe, but may well represent the mainstream. And if it isn’t that yet, it will become predominant in the near future: as whites slip into minority status in the USA, those whites who are on the receiving end of the social changes (remember that Odinists are largely working-class) will probably lose their current inhibitions about racial self-identification on the African-American model. Whereas Christians have their own variety of white racism (KKK, Christian Identity), the large floating mass of secularized white Americans will increasingly find a cultural rallying-point in European, esp. Germanic neo-Paganism. Those Odinists who take their distances from such development will soon find themselves outnumbered by the new recruits for whom colour is more important than religious experiences.

In Europe too we see that purely secular nationalist or racist circles affect Pagan terminology (the Flemish group Odal, the Austrian periodical Ostarra, the German periodical Sleipnir, the widespread use of the Celtic Cross by Euro-nationalists), but because of the more thorough secularization of European culture, this remains more purely a political code which does not interfere with the actual revival of ancestral religion. Most neo-Pagan including Odinist groups in Europe statutorily exclude neo-Nazis, Satanists and other such fringe characters.

In efforts at cooperation, Hindus will not much come into contact with the xenophobic faction among the Pagan revivalists, precisely because the latter are not interested in brown immigrants, except negatively. And except for the identification of Hinduism with the caste system, which in turn has been identified with a kind of racial apartheid system. As you can check in David Duke’s book My Awakening, the Bible of the racialist Right in the USA, the Hindu caste system is widely understood as a system imposed by the “Aryan invaders” on the “dark skinned natives” to preserve their racial purity. That the Indo-Aryans didn’t succeed in the alleged endeavour of race preservation and ended up brown skinned themselves is another matter; fact is that the Vedas are regarded by ignorant Westerners as a description of the subjugation of the browns by the whites, and as an injunction to racial self-preservation.

In continental Europe too, there is a movement of so-called Traditionalists, inspired by Rene’ Gue’non and Julius Evola, who take a similar view of the caste system, and who see it as part of the Indo-European heritage, hence relevant also for the European branches of the great Indo-European family. Obviously, these aren’t the friends you need, and if such people approach you, do patiently explain to them that the basis of modern science was laid by dark skinned people like the Harappans: mathematics, astronomy, writing etc. Perhaps that will change their outlook on racial and cultural differences.
Monotheism vs. polytheism: A very minor philosophical point of disagreement concerns the notion of polytheism. To many Western neo-Pagans, this is the central point of difference with the Abrahamic religions, and so they brandish their polytheism as the defining trait of their religion. Thus, the Belgian periodical Antaios calls itself a medium for “polytheist studies”. While most Hindus have no problem with polytheism, they will find the issue in itself less important: depending how you define “god”, something can be said for both monotheism and polytheism. The ancient Greek philosophers, though undoubtedly Pagan, nonetheless sought for a unifying principle underlying the whole of creation. It is only because of the Judeo-Christo-Islamic crusade against polytheism that this has become such a crucial issue for Westerners trying to revive their Pagan roots. As Ram Swarup puts it:

“And yet the birth of Many Gods will not herald the death of One God; on the other hand, it will enrich and deepen our understanding of both. For One God and Many Gods are spiritually one. (...) A purely monotheistic unity fails to represent the living unity of the Spirit and expresses merely the intellect's love of the uniform and the general. Similarly, purely polytheistic Gods without any principle of unity amongst them lose their inner coherence. (...) The Vedic approach is probably the best. It gives unity without sacrificing diversity. (...) Monotheism is not saved by polytheism, nor polytheism by monotheism, but both are saved by going deep into the life of the soul. (...) Depending on the cultures in which they were born, mystics have given monotheistic as well as polytheistic renderings and interpretations of their inner life and experiences.” (The Word as Revelation: Names of Gods, 1980, p.128-133)

Is Hinduism an ethnic religion? When the WCER constituted itself, there was a lot of discussion about how to formulate its Pagan identity. The term Pagan or Heathen was avoided because members, esp. from Eastern Europe, said that the term had come to sound so negative after centuries of Christian indoctrination, that it simply carried the wrong connotations: immorality, violence, backwardness. The term “polytheistic” was also not acceptable, because Paganism admits also of pantheistic and even atheistic viewpoints, and within polytheistic frameworks we find that religious practice often takes the form of henotheism, i.e. worship of a single god chosen from among many (what Hindus call the ishta devata, the “chosen deity”). Another proposal was the “old religion” or the “ancestral religion”, terms already used by some Pagan revivalist groups, esp. in Scandinavia (e.g. Forn Sidr, “the earlier customs”). Personally, I think that would have been the best, as it describes exactly the status of the religion being revived, regardless of its being polytheistic or pantheistic or whatever. It would also be similar to the Sanskrit term Sanatana Dharma, “the eternal mores / duty / order”.

The founding conference settled for the term “ethnic”, indeed a Greek term by which the Hellenized Jews and first Christians designated the Pagans. Note, however, that as the equivalent of Hebrew Goyim, “the nations”, it would nonetheless include Judaism itself, this being the ethnic religion par excellence. The founding declaration of the WCER (see www.wcer.org) makes it unambiguously clear that no narrow ethnic exclusivism is meant, it puts the ethnic religions in the framework of “universalism”. This will prove necessary, for the term “ethnic” all by itself may well attract all kinds of cranky political ethnicists who will need to be educated about the interwovenness of Pagan religions across ethnic frontiers. Thus, Germanic religion is at the very least composed of the pre-Indo-European native religion of northern Europe plus the religion of the incoming Indo-Europeans, the latter having lots in common with the neighbouring Baltic and Slavic
religions, and even with the more distant Greek, Roman, and Hindu religions. When we study the ancient religions, we find that they have lots in common, e.g. their focus on the starry sky as the manifest locus of the gods at play.

For Hindus, the question should be faced whether Hinduism qualifies as an “ethnic” religion. Historically, that description has a point, yet Hinduism has, starting from the riverine plains of northern India, spread to the farthest corners of the south and the inland hills and forests, assimilating ever new tribes or ethnic groups. It has also spread to Central and Southeast Asia. Today, it is spreading in the West, both by migration and by attracting spontaneous Western converts. So, that is something to think about.

**Conclusion**: Hindus should welcome the revival of the pre-Christian religions of the West, often cognate religions through the common Indo-European origins, otherwise at least typologically related religions which are not based on a monopolistic prophet or scripture. At the same time, they should be watchful for impure motives and degenerative trends, or for phenomena which may be acceptable in a multicultural framework but with which they need not involve themselves. The ancestral religions of Europe are at present in a formative stage, a stage of groping in the dark, of gradual rediscovery or self-reconstitution. At this stage they attract people with a variety of motives and divergent levels of knowledge and understanding. Still immature, these religions often look to Hinduism for guidance.

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