

Article

A Reconstructed Indigenous Religious Tradition in Latvia

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Received: 31 January 2019; Accepted: 11 March 2019; Published: 14 March 2019



Abstract: In the early 20th century, *Dievturība*, a reconstructed form of paganism, laid claim to the status of an indigenous religious tradition in Latvia. Having experienced various changes over the course of the century, *Dievturība* has not disappeared from the Latvian cultural space and gained new manifestations with an increase in attempts to strengthen indigenous identity as a result of the pressures of globalization. This article provides a historical analytical overview about the conditions that have determined the reconstruction of the indigenous Latvian religious tradition in the early 20th century, how its form changed in the late 20th century and the types of new features it has acquired nowadays. The beginnings of the *Dievturi* movement show how dynamic the relationship has been between indigeneity and nationalism: indigenous, cultural and ethnic roots were put forward as the criteria of authenticity for reconstructed paganism, and they fitted in perfectly with nativist discourse, which is based on the conviction that a nation's ethnic composition must correspond with the state's *titular nation*. With the weakening of the Soviet regime, attempts emerged amongst folklore groups to revive ancient Latvian traditions, including religious rituals as well. Distancing itself from the folk tradition preservation movement, *Dievturība* nowadays nonetheless strives to identify itself as a Latvian lifestyle movement and emphasizes that it represents an ethnic religion which is the people's spiritual foundation and a part of intangible cultural heritage. In the 21st century, *Dievturība* is characterized by conflicting aspects: on the one hand, a desire is expressed to contrast itself and its ethnic views from globalization tendencies in its activities, but on the other hand New Age concepts and a self-reflexive character has entered its discourse.

Keywords: Dievturība; paganism; indigeneity; reconstructionist movement; nativism; nationalism

1. Introduction

The movement which has been described using various terms: paganism, neopaganism, contemporary paganism and revival paganism, encompasses “a collection of modern religious, spiritual, and magical traditions that are self-consciously inspired by the pre-Judaic, pre-Christian, and pre-Islamic belief systems of Europe, North Africa, and the near East” (Doyle White 2016, p. 6). It is a global movement without one single, unified, centralized teaching and organizing structure, which includes within it, the most diverse views and individual interpretations (Cf. Saunders 2013) and which is characterized by one common feature—the idealization of pre-Christian era religion. This article looks at a reconstructed form of paganism which developed in Latvia in the 1920s and continues to exist, expressing various constructions and stereotypes about “Latvian” myths, religion and culture.

In the early 20th century, *Dievturība*¹, a reconstructed form of paganism, laid a claim to the status of an indigenous religious tradition. Having experienced various changes over the course of the century,

¹ *Dievturība* (Latvian)—‘the Keepers of God’. An adherent of the movement is *Dievturis* (Latvian)—‘God keeper’, plural *Dievturi*.

Dievturība has still not disappeared from the Latvian cultural space, even though it has been unable to gain strength. As it has never been and, probably also never will be, a numerically broad movement, nowadays, *Dievturība* is presented by the movement adherents, to be a way of life rather than a religion. As a result of the powerful pressure of globalization, attempts to strengthen indigenous identity have increased, and everybody who tries to preserve Latvian traditional craftsmanship, singing and dancing traditions, folklore etc., gets included within the *Dievturība*.

The awareness of, and consolidation of Latvian identity becomes a significant factor in the circumstances of globalization. For almost fifty years, the Ethnographic Open-Air Museum of Latvia has been holding the traditional annual crafts market on the first weekend in June every year, with more than 36,000 people attending it in 2018 (Fotoreportāža 2018). This event has become a celebration of the Latvian lifestyle. The annual market is a place for meeting and exchanging professional experience for various generations and trades, makers of Latvian folk applied arts products from all regions of Latvia. Folklore groups, dance groups, bands, experts in ancient games and producers of traditional Latvian foods also take part in the festival. Therefore, everybody who maintains, creatively transforms or introduces today's society to the Latvian traditional culture.

The Latvian Ethnographic Open-Air Museum of Latvia is a place where Latvian traditional events are also celebrated: the winter solstice (*Ziemassvētki*), the summer solstice (*Jāņi*), Martin's Day (*Mārtiņdiena*), the Eve of the Dead Souls (*Velu vakars*) etc. Folklore groups are the organizers of the events, but museum visitors also willingly participate in them. The authentic and indigenous is valued highly in Latvia, so one could imagine that this is good ground for the rebirth of the ancient Latvian traditional religion. Thus, on the one hand, we can observe attempts nowadays to reanimate archaic religious traditions and even construct sacred sites, but on the other hand, *Dievturība* is still the interest of a group of enthusiasts who are small in number.

Dievturība is characterized by contrasting aspects in the 21st century: on the one hand, it is presented as an authentic component of Latvian culture, but on the other hand, non-local (mainly New Age) sources are used for it to transform from theoretical teachings into a living religion. Another contradiction is expressed in the context of globalization: the reconstructed Latvian religious tradition is attempting to adapt to an increasingly multicultural society, emphasizing that it is not a religion, but a way of life. This is a striking example of how contemporary paganism is striving to breach narrow ethnic boundaries, absorbing other ethnicities living in Latvia.

In this article, we will review the conditions which have determined the reconstruction of the indigenous religious tradition in the early 20th century, what sorts of forms it initially gained and how these changed over the course of history. The issue of the sources which were used in reconstructing the Latvian traditional religion will remain untouched. Well known Baltic religious researcher Haralds Biezais (1906–1995), whose most important work has been dedicated to the archaic Latvian religion (Biezais 1955, 1961, 1972), has undertaken research on this aspect. In evaluating folk songs as a source of information on the ancient Latvian religion, he has come to the conclusion that research on Latvian mythology in the early 20th century was undertaken without a defined methodology and folk songs were used uncritically. This criticism was focussed first of all on the founders of *Dievturība*, as it was them specifically who tried to find Latvian archaic religious elements in folklore.²

2. Between Indigeneity and Nationalism

The *Dievturi*³ movement began in the 1920s not long after the creation of the Republic of Latvia (1918), when, with the collapse of the Russian Tsarist Empire, the Latvians also finally gained political power. Up until 1918, Latvia was part of Tsarist Russia, moreover, it was administratively divided: the

² For more about the development of research on religion in Latvia, see (Priede 2015).

³ It is significant that not all actors described by social researchers as *pagans*, *neo-pagans* or *contemporary pagans* would necessarily call themselves *pagans* etc., and this is particularly the case in Latvia.

Courland Governorate existed in the west and the Livonian Governorate in the central part where political power belonged to the Baltic-Germans, while the eastern part of Latvia, which fell within the Vitebsk Governorate (currently Byelorussia), was dominated by the Poles. The administrative disunity was the main hurdle on the road to the takeover of political power by the Latvians. It was for this reason specifically, that the unification of the various territories inhabited by the Latvians became the central idea in the creation of the new state. The slogan *United for Latvia* was the foundation on which the new democratic republic was built. The Latgale⁴ liberation monument *Vienoti Latvijai* (United for Latvia), known as *Latgale's Māra*,⁵ which has a young woman in a traditional Latvian costume with a cross held high in her right hand, and was erected in the eastern Latvian city of Rēzekne, was evidence of its importance and long-term urgency. Several symbolic levels flow together in this image: the mythical, the religious and the political, but its central message is the unification of the Latvians.

To understand the socio-political context in which the *Dievturi* movement came about, one should take into account that Latvia was a markedly multi-ethnic and multi-denominational country at the time that the nation was created. For example, there were 54.89% Latvians, 15.75% Germans, 13.63% Jews, 6.68% Russians, and 4.33% Polish and other ethnicities among the residents of Rīga in 1920 (Švābe et al. 1933, p. 20442). The religious landscape was just as diverse: 57.29% Lutherans, 23.51% Catholics, 8.7% Orthodox, 4.99 Jews, 4.59% Old Believers et al. The situation in politics was even more complex, where the need to create *consensus* was particularly important, as 46 candidate lists had gained mandates in the Republic of Latvia's parliament's (*Saeima*) first elections (1922) (Latvijas Republikas Saeima). This kind of socio-political division threatened attempts to put unity into practice, while it created the pre-conditions to search for new solutions, and not just in the administrative political sphere, but also on issues which affected the interests of the various ethnic and religious communities.

In this context, the *Dievturība* movement was one of the proposals for solving the important socio-political issues of the time. Researcher Agita Misāne considers that “*Dievturība* is the religious answer to questions about the place of ethnic Latvians in the Latvian nation, the character of Latvian identity and its religious dimension in particular, the titular nation's responsibility for processes taking place in the country, the state's relationships with religious organizations, the attitude of Latvians to minorities and relationships with them, and the possibility of formalizing and legitimizing the aggregate of all of these relationships not just on the political but also the religious level” (author's translation) (Misāne 2005, p. 101). The activities of the *Dievturi* were interwoven with the idea of a special mission—to unite the Latvians, putting forward indigenous religious values as the unifying element.

Even though there were attempts to make Christianity more Latvian, they were destined for failure. The desire to make a radical change—to return to pre-Christian religion—was determined by the collapse in the authority of the Church at that time. In the early 20th century, Christianity in Latvia was weak, not just because of the denominational divisions, but also due to the special socio-political conditions. The Evangelical Lutheran Church which dominated in most parts of the country was perceived as a bulwark of the Tsarist system, and in the light of the 1905 revolution, it appeared to be a reactionary institution. The Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church's position was against the social changes proposed by revolutionaries, as a result of which Lutheran priests (especially the Baltic Germans) gained an image as being enemies of the people. Christianity was treated as a religion, which had been forced onto the Latvians by *fire and sword*. It should be added that representatives of the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church, in particular, were the most active opponents of *Dievturība*, and also took a very strong position against the strategic goal of the *Dievturi*—to achieve the recognition of the reconstructed Latvian religion as the state religion.

⁴ Latgale is the eastern part of Latvia which was a part of the Vitebsk Governorate till 1918.

⁵ Sculptor K. Jansons, design by L. Tomašickis. As the monument was dedicated to the liberation of Latgale from the bolsheviks (1939), it was destroyed twice (1940 and 1950) by communists and renewed twice (1943 and 1992).

The intellectual atmosphere of the time should also be taken into account. A narrative about an enslaved and long-suffering people was born as it was necessary to substantiate the right of the Latvians to create their nation: the Latvians lost their independence in the 13th century, were Christened by *fire and sword* and ended up under the German yoke for 700 years. Fitting in with the intellectual atmosphere of their time, historians began to unequivocally interpret the spread of Christianity in the territory of Latvia as an expression of colonial policy, its instrument being religion, respectively, Christianity. This interpretation turned out to be so sustainable that it was still repeated in encyclopaedias published by exile Latvians in the mid-20th century.⁶

In 1925, Ernests Brastiņš (1892–1942) and Kārlis Marovskis-Bergžis (1885–1958) published a small brochure *Latviešu dievturības atjaunojums* (The Renewal of Latvian *Dievturība*) (Brastiņš and Bregžis 1925), which appealed for the renewal of the ancient Latvian religion. The *Latviešu Dievturu Sadraudze* (Community of Latvian *Dievturi*) was registered in 1926 as a religious organization, but experienced internal division soon enough. Brastiņš' confrere Marovskis-Bergžis (1885–1958) did not hold out hope that *Dievturība* could become the religion of all of the Latvian people. In his view, the religion of the ancient Latvians was for worship within the family and in small groups. In contrast, Brastiņš, as befitting a graduate of the St. Petersburg Military College, had great ambitions, including political ones. If Marovskis-Bergžis consistently objected to the involvement of *Dievturi* in politics, then Brastiņš searched for opportunities to strengthen *Dievturība* with political instruments as well.

One could expect that Brastiņš was operating in a favourable political situation for the *Dievturi*, especially after Kārlis Ulmanis' (1877–1942) coup, as his authoritarian regime (1934–1940) emphasized Latvian traditional values and tried to create a Latvian Latvia. However, *Dievturība* was unable to reinforce its position, as Ulmanis gave preference to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, which turned against the *Dievturi*. Searching for allies in politics, the *Dievturi* leaders established contacts with the *Pērkonkrusts* (Thunder Cross) organization, which propagated the ideology of Latvian nationalism. Brastiņš, who emphasized the special historical and religious mission of the Latvian people, found common ground with the *Pērkonkrusts* group,⁷ and their collaboration strongly illustrates the tendency of religious nationalism to gain political influence in pre-war Latvia.

Brastiņš' ideal was *Naciokrātisms* (Natiocracy) (Brastiņš 1936, p. 248), respectively, a theocratic state, where political power would be concentrated in the hands of one religious leader (Brastiņš 1929, p. 11). His political programme included a plan for allocating the right to vote only to Latvians and to get rid of the influence of ethnic minorities in Latvia (Brastiņš 1935, p. 92). In this way, the *Dievturi* political programme corresponded completely with the basic principles of the radical right-wing *Pērkonkrusts* political organization. Moreover, the ideologues of both organizations were united not only by the slogan *Latvia for Latvians*, the turning against ethnic minorities in Latvia (particularly Jews and Baltic Germans), dissatisfaction with the Ulmanis regime, but also criticism of left-wing political parties.⁸

Even though the view prevails that *Pērkonkrusts* merely took advantage of the *Dievturi*, maintaining the secular character of their own organization, it should be pointed out that individual members of the *Pērkonkrusts* group were members of the *Dievturi* community. It is significant that Brastiņš was the generator of the *Pērkonkrusts* group's name.⁹ Even though it is not clear which organization, the *Dievturi* or *Pērkonkrusts*, were the initiators of the collaboration, it is obvious, that they were brought closer together by Ulmanis' coup (15 May 1934). It can even be confirmed that up

⁶ See the entry about the oldest chronicle of Latvia's and Estonia's history, *Heinrici Chronicon*, in the encyclopedia produced under historian Arveds Švābe's editorship: "the history of salvation, which took place by fire and sword" (Švābe 1950, p. 798).

⁷ Brastiņš was already a member of the *Pērkonkrusts* group in 1933. (Cf. Paeglis 2005, pp. 10–11, 129).

⁸ The collaboration between *Dievturi* and *Pērkonkrusts* is analysed in more depth in an earlier publication (Cf. Stasulane 2013a, pp. 31–46).

⁹ On 12 April 1932, the *Ugunskrusts* (Fire Cross) organization was closed down, but on 12th May it was reregistered with a different name—*Pērkonkrusts*.

until the coup, it was mainly the *Dievturi*, whose numbers did not even reach a thousand, that were mainly interested in collaborating. They hoped that they could become more than a marginal religious movement through collaboration with *Pērkonkrusts*. However, after the coup, when *Pērkonkrusts* was forced to operate illegally, collaboration became vitally important for *Perkonkrusts* members as well, who came together for meetings at *Dievturi* buildings.

The beginnings of the *Dievturi* movement and its history up until the Second World War was a striking reminder of how dynamic and fruitful the relationship was between indigeneity and nationalism. The indigenous, cultural and ethnic roots of *Dievturība* were selected as the criteria for the authenticity of reconstructed paganism, and they fitted into nativist discourse perfectly, which is based on the conviction that the ethnic composition of a nation should correspond with the state's *titular nation*. Even though nativism cannot be equated with racism because nativism is centred in ethnopluralism which stresses the equality but incompatibility of different ethnicities living together (Cf. Rydgren 2005), it has still had its role in the development of extreme forms of nationalism (Italian Fascism and German National Socialism). Nowadays too, nativism, which is still the central element of right-wing political discourse, sustains the conviction that a nation has to be congruent with the titular nation. In sum, nativism with its exclusionist ideology, as a form of cultural racism, insists on the preferential treatment of locals (natives) in protecting their culture.

3. *Dievturība* as a Reconstructionist Movement

Following the usual contemporary classification of paganism (Cf. Davy 2007), the existing form of paganism in Latvia, *Dievturība*, can be classified as a reconstructionist movement, which emphasizes in particular the importance of historical passing down and searches for evidence of ancient Latvian religion in folk traditions, folklore, archaeology etc. It is particularly significant that *Dievturība* has never been a numerically broad movement,¹⁰ and it could sooner be considered as an intellectual movement. In addition to Brastiņš, who was mentioned previously, the most active representatives of *Dievturi* in the 1920s and 1930s were painter Jēkabs Bīne (1895–1955), writers Voldemārs Dambergs (1886–1960), Viktors Eglītis (1877–1945), and Juris Kosa (1878–1967), literature historian and critic Alfrēds Goba (1889–1972), and composers Jānis Norvilis (1906–1994) and Artūrs Salaks (1891–1984). These cultural figures each provided their own contribution to the reconstruction of Latvian paganism.

The founders and most active *Dievturi* members hoped to create a theoretical base for Latvian paganism and to renew the ancient Latvian beliefs as a religious system. Brastiņš was the most productive¹¹, but not the only creator of *Dievturi* literature. For example, Kosa published a brochure, in which the basic ideas of *Dievturi* were formulated (Kosa 1940). *Labietis* magazine (1931–1940), in which other members of the *Dievturi* movement publicised their ideas, was published. Among the books by Brastiņš, *Dievturu Cerokslis* (*Dievturi Catechism*) (1931), which is structured according to Martin Luther's *Der Kleine Katechismus* (*Small Catechism*), is worthy of particular attention.

In the book's introduction, Brastiņš points out that the teachings that he offers are based on folk songs, which express "everything which our people thought about God, Laima and Māra" (Brastiņš 1932, p. 9). Just like in a Christian catechism, in his catechism too, Brastiņš offers a brief account of what God is, what a person's fundamental laws or commandments for life are and explains the *Credo* of his teachings. Furthermore, each chapter opens with two folk songs, respectively, two short quatrains, followed by Brastiņš' interpretation. In this way, Brastiņš' teachings have been developed almost like justifications based on *revelations*.

Dievturi tried to offer an alternative to Christianity but were unable to escape its influence. In this case, it was mainly the influence of Protestantism. After an examination of available

¹⁰ As shown by historical documents, about 200–300 persons attended *Dievturi* events prior to the Second World War (Politiskās 1939).

¹¹ Brastiņš' most outstanding works: (Brastiņš 1929, 1935, 1936).

archival documents, evidence has not been found that persons with roots in Catholicism, i.e., from eastern Latvia, which is the territory inhabited by Catholics, were active in the *Dievturība* movement (Politiskās 1939, p. 18). Whereas, it is quite credible that there may have been some nominal Orthodox believers among the *Dievturi*,¹² but this would be an issue worthy of further research.

In maintaining that the teachings which they offered were passed down from ancient times, the *Dievturi* encountered a problem. The ancient Latvian religion, like other traditional religions of the European people, had not gained a systematized religious form prior to the entry of Christianity into Latvia. The ancient Latvian religion existed and was passed on from generation to generation in the form of tradition. In the 1920s–1930s, *Dievturi* did not pay a lot of attention to folk traditions in reconstructing the rituals. Evidence of this is found in archival documents, in which the structure of *Dievturi* religious service *svētrīts* (morning service) is described: the entry of the choir, the opening address, choir music, poetry, the main speech and choir music.¹³ There is no doubt that this type of scenario is more like a cultural event than a religious service. It is obvious that the *Dievturi* themselves were aware of this, as composer and prominent music teacher Artūrs Salaks had planned for the construction of a special building, where *Dievturi* weddings and funerals would be held. Being a musician, he popularized the Latvian folk instrument, the *kokle*, and this specific instrument was always played at *Dievturi* events.

In the view of Gatis Ozoliņš, “it is evident that *Dievturi* groups treat Latvian folklore as the source of their ethnic religion” (Ozoliņš 2013, p. 101). Calling their prayers *daudzīnājumi* (exaltation), *Dievturi* built them on the base of folklore, respectively, they recited folk songs in place of prayers. The selections of folk songs compiled by Brastiņš, *Latvju Dieva dziesmas* (The Songs to God of the Latvians) (1928), *Latvju tikumu dziesmas* (The Songs of Virtue of the Latvians) (1929) and *Latvju gadskārtu dziesmas* (The Seasonal Songs of the Latvians) (1929) performed the function of sacral text. In this way, the invention of tradition took place by making folklore materials sacred and at the same time, emphasizing the ethical principles in folk songs.

Dievturi also constructed a special iconography. Artist Jēkabs Bīne, who was the closest confrere of the group leader Brastiņš, researched the symbolism of Latvian signs. In evaluating his work, it should be admitted that Bīne was not an original researcher, as his ideas did not breach “the canon” boundaries marked down in Brastiņš’s work *Latvju rakstu kompozīcija* (Composition of Latvian Signs) (1925). However, Bīne’s activities made a substantial contribution to popularizing the *Dievturi* concept. His painting *Dievs, Māra, Laima*¹⁴ (1931) is the most striking example of *Dievturi* iconography.¹⁵ It clearly shows that *Dievturi* perceived the Divine as both masculine and feminine. However, the masculine was the most dominant: in the *Dievs-Māra-Laima* trinity, the feminine deities (Māra and Laima) were subordinated to the masculine *Dievs* (God).

In highlighting the indigeneity of reconstructed paganism, *Dievturi* considered that Latvians were the chosen people, and that it had a special mission: “*Dievturība* contains within it, the very best that has been created by the Aryans which has existed from very ancient times until today. God has made Latvians preserve this religion, to teach the wisdom to other Aryan peoples at the time that foreign Christian teaching eventually comes to an end” (Brastiņš 1932, p. 11). The ethnic link and continuity between the ancient inhabitants of Latvia and *Dievturi* were emphasized in this way. One can agree completely that reconstructionist groups “emphasize ethnic connections with a particular place and people and are often feared by other Pagans, rightly or wrongly, to be politically right-wing” (Rountree 2015, p. 16). Latvia’s *Dievturi* accurately correspond to this description, as through the

¹² In the late 19th century, a number of Latvians converted to Orthodoxy, adopting the Tsar’s religion for economic reasons.

¹³ For a more detailed analysis of *Dievturi* religious services, see (Stasulane 2013a).

¹⁴ Jēkabs Bīne’s painting *Māra, Dievs un Laima* (1931) is on display at the Latvian National Museum of Art’s permanent exposition, and it can be easily found on the internet as well.

¹⁵ For more about the *Dievturi* iconography created by Bīne, see (Ogle 2013, pp. 57–59).

offering of the Latvian national religion, they fitted in with the early 20th century nationalist politics in Europe.

4. Indigenous Traditions as an Element of Political Resistance

After the entry of the USSR's (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) forces into Latvia (1940) and the introduction of the Soviet regime, the most active *Dievturi* were subject to repression.¹⁶ Right up until the death of Stalin, the USSR continued on the path of growing centralization in all areas of life, and "it is understandable that after the suppression of national culture and the persecution of the people, increasing interest developed about national culture in general during the Stalinist period and particularly about those elements, which can strengthen the will of the people to survive" (Biezais 1992, p. 48). In the post-war years, the attempts of the official powers to get people involved in various amateur collectives was expressed quite strongly, and folk dancing groups were formed as a result. Professionals were invited, who could adapt folk songs and dances for stage performances (Cf. Klotiņš 2007; Muktupāvels 2007). Ethnographic ensembles operated in a similar way, creating so-called ethnographic performances (Muktupāvels 2007, p. 94). However, the communists monitored the choir and folk dancing groups, particularly modern song and dance groups with the goal of restricting young people from following western cultural trends.

In the 1970s, when the broader society began to find out about its heritage of traditions, the folklore groups brought together like-minded people. The folklore movement developed, focussing its attention on folklore heritage, its reclamation, inheritance and interpretation. Without doubt, information from countries outside of Latvia also had its influence: large-scale ethno-music festivals were organized behind the Iron Curtain. The new ideas inspired ethno-musicologists in Latvia as well, but the Soviet politicians who were involved in culture called ethno-music primitive and amateurish.

The Soviet regime did not permit the existence of uncontrolled organizations within it, which is why the folklore movement was forced to adopt the forms allowed by this political system. Folklore ensembles were established, which began to be called folklore groups in the early 1980s. Folklore groups already attempted to dissociate themselves from stage collectives from the beginnings of the folklore movement, emphasizing their differing nature. The folklore movement became a type of sub-culture, which differed with their diverse behaviour, language and interpretation of folklore. Participants in the folklore groups invited people to get involved in the preservation and cultivation of cultural heritage, for example, to collect the songs and beliefs of the areas from whence they came, to keep ancient customs, make musical instruments etc.

The renewal of traditions turned out to have unbelievably great power: the first folklore festival called *Baltica*¹⁷ took place in Latvia in 1988, strengthening the Independence movement or the so-called *Singing Revolution*. That folklore groups became involved in the political movement in the Baltics is extremely significant. In Lithuania, the leading role was played by *Sadauja*, which Emilija Zaukaitė-Kuzavinienė, who had returned from exile in Siberia, had begun to lead in the late 1960s. This was a folklore group which operated in defiance of Soviet ideology. In Latvia, a similar role was played by *Skandinieki*, with others following its example.

Andris Slapiņš' documentary *Latvišu folklore: Gadskārtu dziesmas* (Latvia Folklore: Anniversary Songs) (1983), which reflected the activities of participants in the *Savieši* ('our own people') folklore group over the course of a year, was a significant stimulus for the renewal of traditions. The romantic film showed untouched Latvian natural landscapes and the celebration of annual customs, as if it was beyond time, respectively, in the way that celebrations were conducted in ancient times. The majority of these traditions were not practiced in Soviet Latvia—they had either been transformed with the

¹⁶ For more information about this, see (Stasulane and Ozoliņš 2017, pp. 238–41).

¹⁷ The *Baltica* international festival demonstrated traditional forms of culture with ethnographic ensembles, folklore groups, folk music groups, storytellers etc. taking part in it.

changing times or been forgotten. It is important that the director had tried to create an impression of authenticity. The principles of authenticity were observed in the selecting folklore materials and the keeping in line of the film's plot with the instructions of researchers about the celebration of traditions. In the 1980s, there were attempts to revive ancient Latvian traditions among the folklore groups, including religious rituals as well. It is understandable that these were fertile grounds for the revival of *Dievturība*, and the *Dievturi* movement gradually recommenced in the late 1980s. It was officially registered as a religious organization in 1990.

5. Between Local and Global

Nowadays, paganism in Latvia is represented by several pagan groups, of which eight have joined together in the Community of Latvian *Dievturi* ([Latvijas Dievturu Sadraudze](#)), but some are the so-called independent groups, whose activities are not even registered. In describing contemporary *Dievturi* groups, their heterogeneous composition needs to be emphasized: "In one congregation, there are those who believe to the letter, everything that Brastiņš wrote and created. There are those who had been fervent Christians and now want to be *Dievturi* Christians. There are free-thinking artists who do not want to be registered anywhere, but who like traditional values, and there are those congregation members who like to sing" ([Raups](#)). However, *Dievturi* also have a common feature, which can be considered a universal feature of contemporary pagans—they are "mainly urbanized literate people who have long ago lost their links with traditional peasant culture, commonly considered the last fortress of pre-Christian beliefs" ([Shnirelman 2002](#), p. 197).

Dievturi consider that they represent ethnic religion, which is the spiritual foundation of the people and a part of the non-material cultural heritage. That the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2006) also protects ethnic religions, their belonging to a specific land, people, language, world view and tradition, has been emphasized. At the same time, public regret has been expressed by *Dievturi* that the Faculty of Theology at the University of Latvia has still not introduced a study course on the most ancient philosophy of God, i.e., *Dievturība* (Cf. [Kokareviča 2012](#)). There have been attempts to introduce *Dievturība* as a subject to be taught in schools. As this has not been successful, the *Austra* group submitted a constitutional grievance, in which the compliance of the Law on Religious Organizations to the Latvian Constitution (*Satversme*) was disputed. Those submitting the grievance objected that state and local government schools can teach only Christian religious education, in this way creating an advantage for Christian believers and restricting the rights of people whose faith corresponds to the Latvian religion—*Dievturība*. The court proceedings were concluded with a non-appealable decision: that the Law on Religious Organizations corresponds to the Latvian Constitution ([Latvijas Republikas Satversmes tiesas lēmums 2002](#)).

Prior to the visit of Pope Francis to the Baltic states (2018), the Community of Latvian *Dievturi* and the Lithuanian group *Romuva* turned to him with a joint letter of greeting, at the same time inviting him to support the recognition of the ancient Baltic religions at a national level. The letter expressed the hope that, bearing in mind the history of the Baltic peoples and the contemporary understanding of human rights, that the Pope would facilitate Christian tolerance and the recognition of the equal rights of the Baltic religions ([Lukjanovs 2018](#)).

The chairman of the board of the Community of Latvian *Dievturi* is Andrejs Broks, whose confrere Ivo Rubīns is also active in the Latvian Nationalist Club. A connection with politics can continue to be observed in the activities of the *Dievturi* in this way. As explained by Rubīns, the torch procession from the Brethren Cemetery to the Freedom Monument on 11th November, in collaboration with the *Vilki* (Wolves) folklore group, is becoming increasingly more popular ([Kokareviča 2012](#)). On 11th November, the victory in defending Rīga in the Battles for Independence (1919) is commemorated in Latvia, (1919), but the *Dievturi* group is connecting commemorative day for fallen soldiers with the ancient Latvian traditional religion's departed ancestors' (*veļi*) cult.

The latest trend—nowadays *Dievturība* is being consolidated not as a religious organization, but as a lifestyle of Latvians, due to the activities of artisans: "Our representatives are being invited more and more

often to various lecturers and seminars, and we can conclude that a lot of people have come to the conclusion about a Latvian lifestyle, not through Dievturība, but through their professional activities. For example, pirtnieki [sauna masters] have found out that many things have been said in a specific way about the pirts [sauna] in folk songs” (Kokareviča 2012). *The authentic ancient Latvian lifestyle is being reconstructed through turning to folklore as a reference source. Ethnographic heritage is being activated to develop rural tourism and attract foreign travellers. Dievturi consider themselves to be experts on this, and actively provide consultations to businesses which “need an understanding about their identity, and they can go out into the world with it and even earn money”* (Kokareviča 2012).

Dievturība is trying to go beyond the boundaries of the group, as broad collaboration networks are being developed. In 2012, the Zaltis (Adder) Latvian Life Wisdom Centre was established. It is an association which includes the Community of Latvian *Dievturi*, the Folklore Association, the Folklore Information Centre, the *Lauku pirtnieki* Association and other organizations, the aim of which is to reconstruct Latvian traditions. Meanwhile the *Baltu krivule*¹⁸ (Baltic Gathering) is an annual meeting of the Baltic pagan groups, in which guests from Slavic countries like Poland and Byelorussia also participate. The need to remain faithful to indigenous values, which can ensure the survival of the nation in circumstances of globalization was highlighted during the event. The motive for this event about the exchange of ideas and maintenance of traditions is: the Baltic peoples are united by their living space—the Baltic Sea and lands, the common history and closeness of the culture, deities and traditions. To the question about what is unique, one-off and absolutely original about the Latvians, the *Dievturi* respond—with the ancient Baltic culture, which continues to be maintained by folklore groups, and the ancient religion, which is expressed in folk songs.

The National Alliance’s City of Jūrmala branch’s home page offers a Latvian ancient religion renewal project. Its leader, Modris Slava explains that the “Latvian religion has almost been preserved the best out of the European first nations’ pre-Christian religion” (Slava 2017). It is surprising that, in offering to restore the ancient religion, criticism has been focussed against Brastiņš, who has not understood the essence of the religion and through *Dievturība* has provided “materialistic and limited reconstructions” (Slava 2017). The idea of the project is to create a centre of Latvian traditional culture and religion, which would coordinate organizations and groups, which research and practice Latvian traditional culture. Firstly, this means folklore researchers and the leaders of folklore groups. It should be explained that the author of the idea for the project is a populariser of esotericism¹⁹, and in his view, “the former remains of high religion” can be found in folklore (Slava 2017). According to his plan, Latvians should return to the so-called original religion, which has overgrown with unnecessary layers with the passing of thousands of years, although its elements have been preserved in various religions. In his opinion, “the essence of religion is not some kinds of specific rituals, nor even some kinds of specific teachings, but quite simply the road back to the Divine, to God, which is like a return to the home of one’s birth after a journey into the world. This road can be travelled, and is also travelled by any person, whether he/she belongs to some external religion, or not, as the religious road is an internal road, and it takes place within a person, not in churches or temples, and it is of no concern to what the person belongs or does not belong in their outside life” (Slava 2017).

Dievturi consider not just the group members of the movement founded by Ernests Brastiņš as their own, but also folklorists and all of those, to whom the ancient Latvian religious tradition is close, who gain enlightenment and support in it in their daily life. Contemporary members of the *Dievturi* movement emphasize that *Dievturība* is a renewal of the Latvian world-view interwoven in folk songs, as the main source of Latvia’s pagan theoretical interpretation continues to be folklore, especially folk songs, but religious practice is being created, based on evidence of the Latvian traditional lifestyle, mainly through ethnographic descriptions. Despite the references to Latvian folklore and ethnography,

¹⁸ *Krivule* (in Latvian)—‘gathering’, but the *krivulis* was the ancient tribe’s priest’s *krīvs*, the mace or staff of office.

¹⁹ The powerful influence of Theosophy, which was established by Helena Blavatsky, exists in Latvia, especially in its new version which was offered by Nicholas Roerich (see Stasulane 2013b).

the movement's leaders offer creative interpretations. However, even in searching for new and more modern ways of expression, contemporary pagans in Latvia still adopt uncritically *Dievturi* ideas which were created in the 1920s–1930s and derive their tradition from the theories of the movement's founder.

Currently, a tendency to seek new ideas for the development and popularization of pagan ideas has appeared, which is why the movement is characterized by the entry of creative ideas which are expressed as a rediscovery of “culturally and historically significant objects, including ‘Pagan’ cultic places” (Muktupāvela 2013, p. 69). The phenomena of new sacred places flourished in Latvia in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, at the moment when Latvia regained its independence, which encouraged searches for Latvian identity, and also when the official atheism was rapidly replaced by religious pluralism. Lokstene Shrine, which is the first *Dievturi* sacred building in Latvia was built in 2017 on an island on Latvia's largest river, the Daugava. Believing that the state should support this, the Community of Latvian *Dievturi* requested financial support from the Ministry of Culture (Cf. Liepiņa 2017). Other people from Lithuania who practice the ancient Baltic religions, as well as several other folklore groups, also participated in the opening of the shrine along with Latvian *Dievturi* and exile *Dievturi* representatives (Cf. Uz salas Daugavā atklāta dievturu svētnīca 2017).

A more widely known Latvian sacred site is Pokaiņi, which is located in the Zemgale region not far from the City of Dobeles. Pokaiņi Forest has become famous with its piles of stones: the concentration of stones of various sizes and forms in one place make many people sense peculiar currents of energy: some see visions, but others perceive a flow of information.²⁰ Pokaiņi was widely talked about already in the 1930s, although a full-fledged discovery of the place did not occur until the 1990s. In 1996, Ivars Vīks²¹ told journalists about strange anomalies and the mysterious features of stones. The information brought up a multitude of discussions and Pokaiņi forest became a place of pilgrimage for many tourists attracted by rumours about the healing power of this place.²² A number of implausible explanations and bizarre assumptions have been created about the stones at Pokaiņi,²³ and the guides talk about anomalous natural phenomena that have been observed, but New Age type spiritual mentors and healers consider Pokaiņi to be the “ancient Latvian civilization's sacred centre” (Kas ir Pokaiņi?). The Pokaiņi Forest's Valley of Spirits is visited by strange lit-up balls invisible to the naked eye, but appearing on photographs.

Individual *Dievturi* have been involved in the work of various political parties, but *Dievturi*, overall as an organization, have not created their own party. The only exception was Irēna Saprovska's *Māras zeme*, which has participated several times in Latvian parliamentary elections, and last time received 0.54% votes. In fact, it was one person's party, and 4899 voters cast their ballots for it. Other *Dievturi* criticized this party after the loss in the elections: “The worst thing is that in the election, in the *Māras zeme*'s programme, *Dievturība* rang out as its goal. But in actual fact, *Dievturība* is a means for preserving what is Latvian in nature” (Sprūde 2006).

Just like in the early 20th century, today too, *Dievturība* is characterized by a powerful ethnic dimension. However, Latvians as the chosen ethnicity is not highlighted now, as the view is that each ethnicity has its land, language and traditions. Highlighting tolerance towards the cultural values of all ethnicities and the peaceful co-existence of various peoples, participants in *Dievturi* groups express an important point of view for Latvian society. However, the concept of being Latvian is an important concept, and all *Dievturi* activities are subordinated to this: rituals, cultural historical excursions,

²⁰ A local historian Jānis Graudonis believes that the stones were brought by peasants who removed them from their fields. Another theory says that the stones were brought to Pokaiņi for construction of a castle that was never built.

²¹ Ivars Vīks (1933–2002)—engineer, metalworking specialist, published articles and books about fortune-telling, the esoteric features of water and the sacred Baltic tribal site at Pokaiņi. He collaborated with the *Baltis aplis* New Age group.

²² The stones are considered to have healing properties: some cure joint diseases, some cure osteochondrosis, and other cure gynecological diseases. There are also “dangerous” stones that cause negative consequences if touched.

²³ It is voiced that Pokaiņi was a meeting place of thirty druids, where each druid controlled the weather from his own hill. Another legend says that some strange object is hidden under one of the rocks. Some say it is a radioactive meteorite; some are convinced it is an ancient tomb. The rocks on the hill called Zikkurat face the four parts of the world. It looks like the rocks used to serve as a compass. (See Troitsina).

tidying up working bees at sacred sites, folklore events, publications in the press, interviews in the media, summer thematic camps, and the celebration of Latvian national celebrations and significant commemorative days.

In the latest research conducted in Latvia, it has been concluded that adherents of Latvian paganism are more religiously and patriotically inclined than Christians and the majority consider that Latvia should be more Latvian (Nastevičs 2018, p. 149). Paganism in Latvia in the near future is dependent on its capacity to respond to the challenges of the era, but, in predicting the more distant future, one comes to express doubts about the *Dievturība* as a phenomenon that is capable of surviving. *Dievturi* in Latvia already currently exist on the periphery of life in society and providing vitally important answers only to the movement's participants, the numbers of which have never exceeded a thousand people, and in fact, we can talk about only a few hundred *Dievturi*.

Today's paganism movement in Latvia is characterized by contradictory aspects: on the one hand, there is the desire in the activities of the pagans to contrast themselves and their ethnic view against globalization tendencies, which do not conform to traditional culture's unhurried and meditative lifestyle. On the other hand, the processes, which can be observed in contemporary *Dievturi* groups in Latvia, provide evidence that the form of reconstructed paganism in Latvia falls within the trend of the *new spiritual ecology* which has come about under the influence of the globalization process (Kale 2004, p. 102). The newest tendencies show that in Latvia too, paganism follows a similar trajectory as Anglo-American paganism, respectively, it is gaining New Age features: esoteric terminology and a self-reflexive nature is also entering pagan discourse.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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