

Glory to Dazhboh (Sun-god) or to All Native Gods?: Monotheism and Polytheism in Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism

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Abstract

Contemporary Ukrainian Pagans offer an alternative way of constructing a distinct national identity, based on old Slavic traditions, during times of socio-political turmoil. Despite some unifying characteristics, including nationalist views, there are many groups whose doctrines differ markedly. One of the major polemics is connected with the notions of monotheism versus polytheism as the basis for a contemporary Ukrainian spirituality. The debate between polytheism and monotheism, related to creative interpretations of the largely unknown past and dissimilar visions of the future, forms the main focus of this article. Polytheism and monotheism are often viewed as antagonistic categories. Moreover, some scholars argue against these terms, emphasizing their modern origins and strong political connotation. They are viewed as anachronistic when applied to complex and shifting spiritual practices, especially in ancient contexts. In contrast to this, Ukrainian Paganism shows that these antagonistic models can sometimes coexist, although in debate with each other, in the complex process of identity formation even within the same religious movement. While old Slavs likely did not think about themselves in these terms, their present-day Ukrainian counterparts consciously embrace “monotheism” and “polytheism” as modern political categories. In fact, these categories help Ukrainian Pagans to negotiate (among themselves) the best way to build a “pure” national identity. Monotheistic Pagans associate monotheism with the evolutionist idea of “progress” while polytheists emphasize the “authenticity” of their own worldview. Indigenized in this way, “monotheism” and “polytheism” are valid terms for describing contemporary ideologies.¹

1. The original version of this paper was presented at the 2009 American Academy of Religion annual meeting (Contemporary Pagan Studies Group, theme: “Polytheism in Practice”). I am grateful to our panel discussant David Miller for his challenging and thought-provoking comments and questions. He inspired me to explore in greater depth polytheistic and monotheistic models of Ukrainian Paganism. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Andriy Nahachewsky and Dr. Natalie Kononenko, and two anonymous reviewers for their many useful suggestions.



Figure 1: A procession of Native Faith (*Ridna Vira*) followers in Kyiv, August 24, 2006. A stylized image of *Dazhboh* (Sun-God) is depicted on their banners and Ukrainian state flags. In the background, a banner with the slogan "Glory to our Native Gods!" (*Slava Ridnym Boham*) is visible. Photo: Taras Lesiv.

I met these people accidentally. I happened to be in Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, on the pleasant summer day of August 24, 2006. This day was characterized not only by its enjoyable weather. It had a special significance for Ukrainians all across the world because it marked the fifteenth anniversary of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union, and many celebratory activities and events were taking place in various parts of central Kyiv.

In this context, while walking along one of the main streets in downtown Kyiv, I encountered a procession of approximately one hundred people. They attracted attention by their clothing and various symbolic objects that they carried. While some members of this group wore casual everyday clothes, the majority of them were dressed in traditional Ukrainian village costumes or more modern pieces designed to evoke such costumes (Figure 1).

These people carried national symbols: the blue and yellow flag of Ukraine and variants of the Ukrainian state emblem, the trident. However, these symbols were combined with other elements, less familiar to the larger Ukrainian society. For example, the trident was incor-

porated into a stylized sun as the main image on their paper headgear. A stylized sun also appeared on the Ukrainian state flags. This symbol represents Dazhboh, the Sun-god from old Slavic mythology. These individuals also carried many banners and posters with various nationalist messages as well as slogans glorifying the gods and goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon. They were contemporary Ukrainian Pagans, specifically, representatives of the Native Faith Association of Ukraine (Ob'iednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrainy or ORU), hereafter referred to as Native Faith, a shortened version of this organization's official name.²

The term Paganism deserves special attention in this context. Unlike the representatives of Native Faith introduced above, some followers of the movement discussed find the term *iazychnytstvo* (the closest Ukrainian equivalent to Paganism) problematic due to its negative connotation imposed by the Christian church. However, the English term Paganism is widely accepted within both contemporary scholarly and popular discourses when related to the construction of a contemporary spirituality on the basis of old polytheistic beliefs and practices. In English, this term does not necessarily bear any negative connotation. Since this work is meant for English-language readers, the term Paganism will be applied with regard to all Ukrainian religious organizations that draw upon the pre-Christian past.

Now let me return to the procession I encountered in Kyiv. While walking, the representatives of Native Faith chanted: "Out with Jehovah! Glory to Dazhboh!" (Het' Iehovu! Slava Dazhbohu!), "Glory to Our Native Gods!" (Slava Ridnym Boham!) and "There should be native language and native faith on our native land!" (Na Ridnii zemli - Ridna mova, Ridna vira!).³ Their destination point was the monument to Taras Shevchenko, a famous nineteenth-century poet. As I learned later, many contemporary Ukrainian Pagans consider Shevchenko their prophet and the messiah of the Ukrainian nation.⁴ The Native Faith members

2. "Native Faith" is a Ukrainian term used by the majority, if not all, of Ukrainian Pagan groups. This term forms a part of the official names of many Pagan groups.

3. If not otherwise indicated, all translations from Ukrainian by the author. Normally, only the first word of a sentence and proper nouns are capitalized in Ukrainian. However, contemporary Ukrainian Pagans often capitalize those terms that have a special significance for them. In this article, I capitalize such terms when either transliterating or translating them from Ukrainian.

4. In the nineteenth century, the territory of contemporary Ukraine was divided between two political powers. Western Ukraine belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire while Eastern Ukraine, where Shevchenko was born into a serf peasant family, formed part of the Russian Empire. (For a detailed discussion of the history of Ukraine of this period see Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1988), 201-335. While the abolition of serfdom in the western part of Ukraine took place in 1848, in eastern Ukraine the emancipation of serfs did not happen



Figure 2: Adherents of Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith (Rodove Vohnyshche Ridnoi Pravoslavnoï Viry) near the monument to Taras Shevchenko, Kyiv, August 24, 2006. Note both Ukrainian state flags and banners featuring an eight-pointed star (a symbol called alatyř) encircled with the name of the group. Photo Taras Lesiv.

were going to honour their prophet on this important day. However, as soon as we approached the monument, we saw another Pagan group surrounding it, also chanting “Glory to our native gods!” “Ancestral

until 1861. Due to his extraordinary talents in writing and drawing, Shevchenko obtained a higher education from the Saint-Petersburg Academy of Arts, and his freedom was bought with the help of his influential friends. However, he did not witness the general abolition of serfdom in his part of Ukraine. He died prematurely, after many years of persecution by the political authorities of the Russian Empire, shortly before the abolition took place. Shevchenko was viewed by this regime as a politically dangerous figure due to the content of his writings. His humanist ideas are recurrent themes in both his poetry and prose. In particular, he devotes a great amount of attention to the unfair suffering of Ukrainian peasants under the conditions of serfdom, sharply criticizing both the ruling regime and the clergy, who each had great political and economic power at the time. Since the political oppression of Ukraine throughout its history and the dominant role of Christianity on its territory are major concerns of contemporary Ukrainian Pagans, these are exactly the themes that they select and highlight in their interpretations of Shevchenko’s works. Thus, they view Shevchenko as their hero and the messiah of the Ukrainian nation. This interpretation is inspired by Anthony Smith’s ideas about the images of “heroes” and “messiahs” in the contexts of nationalist movements. See Anthony Smith, “The Nation as a Sacred Communion,” in *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 40-42.

Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith" was inscribed on their flags (hereafter simply Ancestral Fire) (Figure 2). The adherents of Native Faith had to wait until their counterparts' ritual of honouring Shevchenko had concluded before they could begin their own ceremony. As an outsider, I wondered why these people were split into separate groups, as they seemed to proclaim very similar ideas.

Since the encounter described above, I have studied Ukrainian Pagans through their numerous published sources and archival documents. I have also conducted fieldwork among various groups in both Ukraine and the Ukrainian North American diaspora. The information collected shows that the contemporary Ukrainian Pagan movement is very diverse in terms of its denominations and leaders as well as its ideological doctrines and spiritual practices. One of the major debates of Ukrainian Pagans involves polytheism and monotheism as models for building a contemporary national identity and spirituality. This polemic in the Ukrainian Pagan discourse will form the main focus of this article. I will demonstrate how the categories of monotheism and polytheism are embraced by the two streams of Ukrainian Pagans on the ideological level and how they become instrumental in the formation and negotiation of alternative national identities. Before focusing on these issues, let me briefly introduce Ukrainian Paganism in terms of its origins and organizational history, and place it in the larger context of Eastern European Paganisms.

Origins and Development of Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism

The origins of this movement are associated with its two founding leaders. Volodymyr Shaian made the first step in reviving Paganism in Ukraine, drawing upon "Aryan" ideas popular at that time.⁵ Shaian considered the year 1934 as the date of his spiritual enlightenment, when the idea of the revival of pre-Christian religion first occurred to him on Mount Grekhit in the Carpathian Mountains. Due to his nationalist orientation, Shaian was forced to escape from Ukraine during World War II. Prior to his departure for Western Europe in 1943, he established the Orden Lytsariv Boha Sontsia (Order of the Knights of the Solar God) as a semi-religious and semi-political organization. His intention was to make it part of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in order to help

5. Adrian Ivakhiv, "In Search of Deeper Identities: Neopaganism and 'Native Faith' in Contemporary Ukraine," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 8.3 (2005): 11.

the latter in its struggle against the Soviet Red Army. (In the context of post-war Soviet Ukraine this group most likely ceased to exist). Having left Ukraine, Shaian lived in European refugee camps, where he formed a second contingent of the Order of the Knights. However, the majority of his followers eventually moved overseas and this group became inactive.⁶ One of the knights initiated by Shaian was Lev Sylenko, who later separated from his teacher and reformed Shaian's religious doctrine.

Although Shaian is credited with making the first step towards the revival of old Slavic religion before and during World War II, Ukrainian Paganism developed especially actively in the Ukrainian diaspora after World War II due to Sylenko's efforts. Having immigrated to Canada, Sylenko organized a dynamic Pagan movement called *Ridna Ukrain's'ka Natsional'na Vira* (Native Ukrainian National Faith) or RUNVira. It grew among the urban Ukrainian intelligentsia in the Western diaspora throughout the second half of the twentieth century. During this period, small congregations of RUNVira were registered in several cities of the United States and Canada as well as in Australia, England, Germany, and New Zealand.⁷

Shaian's initiative also continued to develop in the diaspora, though on a markedly smaller scale. His followers established small religious communities in Hamilton and Toronto, Ontario. Reportedly these people had originally belonged to Sylenko's RUNVira but eventually separated from Sylenko.⁸ In 1981, the group of Shaian's followers in Hamilton was re-registered as *Ob'iednannia Ukrainstiv Ridnoi Viry* (Ukrainian Native Faith Church) by Myroslav Sytnyk, the *Dostoinyi Starshyi Providnyk* (Honourable Elder) of Native Faith.⁹

The role of the Western diaspora in the development of Paganism in Ukraine cannot be overestimated. Pagan ideas began to reach Ukraine from the diaspora in the early 1980s.¹⁰ However, this movement did not begin to grow intensely in that country until shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, the first Pagan (RUNVira) organization was

6. Laryssa Murovych, Foreword to *Vira Predkiv Nashykh* (Hamilton: Publication Committee at the Sviatynia Dazhbozha, 1987), 7-9. Please see bibliography for English translations of the titles of Ukrainian and Russian publications.

7. *Mudrist' Ukrain's'koi Pravdy* (Kyiv: Oberehy, 1996), 6.

8. Volkhvynia Zoreslava (Halyna Lozko), "Sviashchennyi smysl Prysiahy na tli suspil'noho khaosu," *Svaroh* 13-14 (2003): 26.

9. *Svaroh* 17-18 (2005): 46; Ivakhiv, "In Search of Deeper Identities," 22.

10. Victor Shnirelman, "Neoiazychestvo i natsyonalizm: Vostochnoevropeiskii areal," *Arkheologiya i etnografiya Abkhazii*, http://www.kolhida.ru/index.php3?path=_etnography/arts/&source=05. See also Victor Shnirelman, "'Christians! Go Home': A Revival of Neo-Paganism between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia (An Overview)," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17, no. 2 (2002): 201.

officially registered in Kyiv on September 17, 1991, less than a month after the declaration of Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union.¹¹ As for Shaian's ideas, they formed the basis for the Native Faith Association of Ukraine led by Kyiv-based Halyna Lozko. Since the few remaining followers of Shaian in Canada were elderly people, they granted authority of leadership to Lozko, who is now in her late fifties. She was officially initiated by Myroslav Sytnyk in Hamilton in 1994.¹²

Today, the Ukrainian Pagan movement in the diaspora continues to be represented predominantly by RUNVira; however, its membership is gradually declining. Boholiub Swyrydenko, the leader of the most active North American RUNVira community in Spring Glen, New York, showed me the cemetery near their Oriiana Holy Temple. He commented poignantly, "Today, there are many more of us at the cemetery than in the Temple."¹³ This community now consists only of several families, while in the 1970s and 1980s it numbered around one hundred people.¹⁴

In contrast, Ukrainian Paganism continues to grow actively in Ukraine, where one can find a great variety of streams. Among them are two branches of RUNVira: the Association of Sons and Daughters of Ukraine RUNVira or OSIDU RUNVira (Ob'iednannia Syniv i Dochok Ukrainy RUNVira); and the Association of Sons and Daughters RUNVira or OSID RUNVira (Ob'iednannia Syniv i Dochok RUNVira). Among the numerous predominantly polytheistic communities are groups such as Native Faith (Ridna Vira), which is united under the umbrella institution The Native Faith Association of Ukraine (Ob'iednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrainy); Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith (Sobor Ridnoi

11. *Mudrist' Ukrains'koi Pravdy*, 6.

12. *Svaroh* 15-16 (2004): 18-19.

13. Boholiub Swyrydenko, personal interview, April 13, 2008. This leader was especially concerned that the youth do not join RUNVira. The situation of RUNVira in Ukraine is very similar in this respect. I note that the majority of RUNVira followers are in their late fifties and older. Although this issue is beyond the scope of the present work, it is worthwhile to mention that, in comparison with other contemporary Ukrainian Pagan organizations, RUNVira is the most politically charged. This is why, in my opinion, it is experiencing a decline in membership. The children and grandchildren of the founding members from the 1960s and 1970s cannot relate to the political sentiments of their predecessors. In contrast, other Ukrainian Pagan streams, in addition to the political aspects of their doctrines, emphasize folkloric, aesthetic, and other elements that attract the younger generation. Many young Ukrainian Pagans I interviewed stress the beauty of rituals and other practices rather than political issues that inspired them to join a particular group.

14. This approximate number is based on photographs of various events that took place at that time in the Oriiana Temple and were included in the RUNVira periodical *Samobutnia Ukraina* (Unique Ukraine), published from the 1960s-1990s.

Ukrains'koi Viry); and Ancestral Fire of the Native Orthodox Faith (Rodove Vohnyshche Ridnoi Pravoslavnoi Viry).

Contextualizing Ukrainian Paganism

Both contexts of active development of Paganism—post-World War II Ukrainian diaspora and post-Soviet Ukraine—share the experience of socio-political turmoil, where the need for constructing a distinct national identity is felt most sharply. In the diaspora, representatives of the politically conscious Ukrainian intelligentsia felt compelled to construct and emphasize their national identity, considering that Ukraine was occupied by foreign political forces (both German and Soviet) during and after World War II. In Ukraine, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the myth of the “Soviet people” was shattered, thus increasing the need for many individuals to seek out a new sense of self.

For many people, Christianity played a prominent role in the formation of a national identity in the post-Soviet context. (Christianity has been the official religion of Ukraine since 988 CE, when Kyivan Rus' was Christianized by Prince Volodymyr).¹⁵ The “spiritual renaissance” of organized Christian churches was a response to the Soviet era, when religion was officially forbidden.¹⁶ The national consciousness of many Ukrainians was raised and their spirituality built through their increased interest in traditional (Orthodox) Christianity, while, simultaneously, many others were attracted by Evangelical missionaries.¹⁷ Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism is also a response to this post-Soviet situation.

In the contexts of the post-World War II Ukrainian diaspora and post-Soviet Ukraine, Paganism represents a mode of resistance to both the political oppression of Ukraine and to the dominant role of Christianity (considered a foreign force by many Pagans) in that country. The Ukrain-

15. Kyivan Rus' was a monarchy, a federation of Slavic tribes that existed between the ninth and twelfth centuries. It is viewed as the predecessor of contemporary Ukraine (as well as of Russia and Belarus').

16. Natalie Kononenko, “Folk Orthodoxy: Popular Religion in Contemporary Ukraine,” in *Letters from Heaven*, ed. John-Paul Himka and Andriy Zayarnyuk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 46.

17. For the discussion of the active development of religion in Ukraine and in other post-Soviet countries see Mark. D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, eds., *Religion, Morality and Community in Post-Soviet Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). For the discussion of the resurgence of evangelical Christianity in post-Soviet Ukraine see Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

ian Pagan movement provides what anthropologist Galina Lindquist would call an “alternative form of hope,” often generated by a culture during turbulent socio-political times.¹⁸ This movement creates hope for the future betterment of the nation by emphasising its great cultural potential as rooted in the past. Ukrainian Pagans explore old Slavic polytheistic beliefs and practices, searching for a “true” and “pure” Ukrainian identity today.

In the post-Soviet and post-socialist settings, Paganism is not a uniquely Ukrainian phenomenon. This movement has also developed in Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Serbia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and other countries.¹⁹ Scholars studying these phenomena, although stressing their unique local characteristics, point out that Paganism has become a response to a post-socialist identity crisis.²⁰ Researchers also emphasize the ethnic nationalist orientations of these movements, their anti-Christian and anti-Semitic sentiments as well as their attempts to save the natural environment from the damaging influences of modernization.²¹

A nationalist component distinguishes many East European (including specifically Slavic) Pagans from many of their Western counterparts. As Adrian Ivakhiv points out, Slavic Pagan ideology is influenced by the ideas of European Romanticism and ethnic nationalism.²² Ethnic-

18. Galina Lindquist, *Conjuring Hope: Healing and Magic in Contemporary Russia* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), 9.

19. For discussions of Paganisms in various post-Soviet contexts, see Victor Shnirelman, ed., *Neioazychestvo na prostorakh Yevrazii*, (Moscow: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii institute sv. Apostola Andreia, 2001). For a general overview, see Shnirelman, “Neioazychestvo i natsyonalizm”; Shnirelman, “Christians! Go Home.” See also Anastasiia Kostello, “Sovremennyye iazycheskii religii Yevrazii: krainosti globalizma i antiglobalizma,” *Russkii Arkhipelag: setevoi proekt “Russkogo Mira,”* <http://www.archipelag.ru/geoculture/religions/Eurasia/extreme/>. For a Ukrainian Pagan perspective on Pagan movements in Baltic, Slavic, and other Eurasian countries, see Halyna Lozko, *Probudzhena Eneia* (Kharkiv: Dyv, 2006):120-249.

20. See Victor Shnirelman, “Etnogenez i identichnost’: natsyonalisticheskie mifologii v sovremennoi Rossii,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4 (2003): 4.

21. For a discussion of Russian Paganism as a nationalist movement, see Vladimir Pibylovskii, “Neioazycheskoie krylo v russkom natsyonalizme,” *Religiia i SMI*, <http://www.religare.ru/article490.htm>. See also Shnirelman, “Etnogenez i identichnost’,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 4 (2003): 3-14, and other works by Shnirelman indicated in footnote 19. For a discussion of specifically racist and anti-Semitic sentiments in Russian and Ukrainian Paganism, see Victor Shnirelman, “Ot ‘sovetskogo naroda’ k ‘organicheskoi obshchnosti’: obraz mira russkikh i ukrainskikh neioazychnikov,” *Slavianovedenie* 6 (2005), and Adrian Ivakhiv, “Nature and Ethnicity in East European Paganism: An Environmental Ethic of the Religious right?,” *The Pomegranate* 7, no. 2 (2005): 194-225. The latter work also addresses Pagan views on nature and preserving the natural environment.

22. Ivakhiv, “In Search of Deeper Identities,” 10-11.

ity is viewed as an “inherently territorial phenomenon” that naturally develops within a particular environment.²³ Contemporary Ukrainian and other Slavic Pagans see this kind of ethnicity as the basis of nationhood.

Slavic Pagans often actively interact with each other. The interrelationship of Ukrainian believers with their Russian counterparts is especially close and interesting. As Victor Shnirelman points out, at the outset, both Ukrainian and Russian Paganisms (as well as other forms of ethnic nationalism) were nourished by the same sources: rediscovered nineteenth-century pro-Slavic literature; works of Russian and Ukrainian émigré writers (Volodymyr Shaian, Iurii Miroljubov, Sergei Lesnoi, Iurii Lisovyi, and Lev Sylenko) that were actively republished in Ukraine and Russia in the 1990s; and *The Book of Veles* (addressed in greater detail below).²⁴

Similar to its Ukrainian counterpart, Russian Paganism has evolved into a very diverse and dynamic movement, with a variety of different branches.²⁵ The present-day relationships between Russian and Ukrainian Pagans are as diverse as the movement itself. Originally, the two founding fathers of Ukrainian Paganism—Shaian and Sylenko—although disagreeing on many issues (as will be discussed below), both viewed Russia as the main historical colonizer of Ukraine. They wished to present Ukrainians as having unique characteristics, emphasizing their difference from Russians.²⁶ Although this view continues among many Ukrainian Pagans (especially among RUNVira adherents), many other present-day followers of the movement do not share it. Halyna Lozko, while sharply criticizing some Russian forms of Paganism for the imperialist connotations in their ideologies, actively cooperates with other Russians, among them Pavel Tulaiev, editor of the Russian Pagan periodical *Atenei*.²⁷

Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi, the leader of *Ancestral Fire* (Rodove Vohnyshche), actively cooperates with Russian and other Slavic Pagans. On several occasions, I observed Kurovs'kyi and his followers sharing the idea that all Slavs are brothers and sisters in blood who when united represent a great power. It is the enemies of the Slavs who impose controversial political ideas in order to separate and weaken them. Thus

23. Ivakhiv, “Nature and Ethnicity,” 202-203.

24. Shnirelman, “Christians! Go Home,” 201.

25. For a discussion of various contemporary Russian Pagan branches see Shnirelman “Neoiazychestvo i natsyonalizm.”

26. Shnirelman, “Neoiazychestvo i natsyonalizm.”

27. For Halyna Lozko’s perspective on various branches of Russian Paganism see Lozko, *Probudzhena Eneia*, 146-167.

Kurovs'kyi insists on the unity of all Slavic Pagans. His view is partly a response to the marginal (socio-political) position contemporary Slavic Pagans occupy within their societies. Cooperation on an international level brings them more political power.

However, Kurovs'kyi's view of the central position in the "Slavic family" is very intriguing. In his opinion, this place belongs to Ukrainian Pagans because they are the closest descendants of their ancient Slavic ancestors. Kurovs'kyi strives to legitimize this view by providing a linguistic argument. He and his followers are convinced that, among contemporary Slavic languages, Ukrainian maintains the greatest number of linguistic features similar to the language spoken by the ancestors of all present-day Slavs. They support this by suggesting that the majority of contemporary Ukrainians speak at least two Slavic languages (Ukrainian and Russian) and understand all the rest. They also suggest that many Russians speak only Russian and have difficulties understanding other Slavic languages. Expanding on this, Ancestral Fire followers argue that if Ukrainians have preserved the language of their ancestors most fully, then the sacred knowledge and traditions of old Slavs must be most fully maintained in Ukraine as well. Thus, in their opinion, Ukraine is "naturally" the spiritual centre of Slavic Paganism. It is needless to say that scholars would disagree with such interpretations. However, whether or not accepted by academics, these creative interpretations of the past significantly influence the dynamics of present-day relationships among some Slavic Pagans.

Ancestral Fire has an office in Moscow and several branches in different parts of Russia. In Russian, they are called Rodovoie Ognishche Rodnoi Pravoslavnoi Very. Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi, his wife, Lada, and their followers actively publish not only in Ukrainian but also in Russian to reach out to their Russian (and other Slavic) followers.²⁸ At the two major social gatherings of Ancestral Fire that I attended in Ukraine in the summer of 2008, the majority of international Pagan guests were from Russia. I interviewed several of them. My respondents unanimously perceived Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi as their spiritual leader from whom they learn and who nourishes their spiritual growth.

As illustrated above, the attitudes of Ukrainian Pagans towards their Russian counterparts are very diverse. These attitudes include complete

28. Ancestral Fire Russian-language publications include Vladimir i Lada Kurovskii, *Diagnostika sud'by: Ispravliaiem karmu. Mudrost' Rodosveta* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2008); Vladimir i Lada Kurovskii, *Kak nauchit' doch' byt' shchastlivoi v liubvi: Stanovleniie Bogini* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2008); Bogumir Mikolaiev, *Vedicheskaia mudrost' predkov: Put' k svetu* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2008), and other works.

rejection of anything Russian, cooperation with selective Russian groups, and even attempts of “the colonized” to enlighten “the colonizer.”²⁹ This list is not exhaustive. However, interesting relationship dynamics can be traced not only between different ethnic Pagan groups but also between different streams within the same ethnic movement. These dynamics will form the focus of the rest of this paper.

*Rethinking the Past:
Monotheism vs. Polytheism Debate in Ukrainian Paganism*

When developing their belief system, the majority of Ukrainian Pagans rely on historical primary chronicles as well as rural folklore.³⁰ The chronicles are historical records of certain early periods of the territory that is present-day Ukraine. They contain some information about the pre-Christian Slavic mythological pantheon. Folk (peasant) practices in Ukrainian villages contain some remnants of the Pagan worldview.

However, despite sharing these common sources, there are many Pagan streams throughout Ukraine and the diaspora whose doctrines and practices differ markedly. One can even observe somewhat hostile relationships between specific groups and leaders. As noted above, one of the major disagreements arises from commitment to monotheism or to polytheism as the basis for contemporary Ukrainian identity and spirituality. Since the problem of monotheism versus polytheism is communicated most evocatively between two major streams, namely RUNVira and Native Faith, I will now focus predominantly on these two organizations.

Monotheistic RUNVira has undergone an internal split and is now led by several individual RUNtatos (RUNfathers or male spiritual leaders) in the diaspora and in Ukraine.³¹ As mentioned above, the polytheistic Native Faith is headed in Ukraine by Halyna Lozko (whose Pagan name is Zoreslava), the supreme Pagan priestess (Volkhvynia) of Ukraine-Rus. The conflict between monotheism and polytheism dates back to the roots of present-day Ukrainian Paganism and derives from the visions

29. This idea is inspired by Catherine Wanner, who traces similar dynamics in contemporary Ukrainian evangelical Christian missionary activities. Hundreds of Ukrainian evangelicals have visited Russia over the last ten years. The cultural and linguistic fluency of Ukrainian missionaries have proven to be very successful tools in this process. See Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, 212.

30. For other sources embraced by Ukrainian Pagans in the process of the construction of their ideology and spirituality, see Ivakhiv, “In Search of Deeper Identities,” 8-16.

31. There are also female leaders called RUNmamy (RUNmothers) but they are markedly outnumbered by their male counterparts.

of its two founding leaders – Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko.

Both Shaian and Sylenko shared the vision of the autochthonism of Ukraine. For both leaders, Paganism became a political instrument in their struggle for Ukraine's independence. Furthermore, Sylenko and Shaian are also both known for their racist sentiments and sharp rejection of Christianity as a Semitic religion or, as Sylenko often puts it, "nomadic Judaism." (These views differ significantly from those of Ancestral Fire followers. In this group, such sentiments are either markedly weaker or not communicated at all).³² Sylenko perceives Ukrainians as superior Europeans, descendants of ancient Oriians (Aryans), while he sees Kyiv the most ancient city of the "White race." Like her predecessor Shaian, Halyna Lozko is also actively engaged in the promotion of the purity of the white race. For example, in June 2006 she participated in the international conference "The White World's Future" (Maibutnie biloho svitu) organized in Moscow.³³ However, despite sharing these political ideas, Shaian and Sylenko (as well as their followers) approach the idea of the pre-Christian past and that of a present-day spirituality in different ways.

According to Volodymyr Shaian's religious doctrine, God is a manifold essence that is manifested through various Slavic mythological deities. The adherents of Native Faith believe in many different spiritual beings that are each in charge of particular natural forces and spheres of life: Rod (creator of the universe), Dazhboh (the Sun god), Stryboh (god of winds), Perun (god of thunder and lightning), Mokosha (goddess of female crafts), Svaroh (god of light and heavenly fire, "father of the Ukrainian pantheon"), and many others.³⁴ Lev Sylenko reworked the ideas of his teacher. In his RUNVira faith, he proclaimed Dazhboh as the only god of the true Ukrainian religion. Sylenko proclaimed himself the teacher and prophet of the RUNVira faith.

Although the Ukrainian Pagan movement has been enriched by other

32. Although Ancestral Fire followers view Christianity as a "foreign" form of spirituality for Ukrainians, they seem more tolerant towards "foreign" elements than their RUNVira and Native Faith counterparts. While comparing publications of these three Ukrainian Pagan streams, one can notice that Ancestral Fire followers are more actively engaged in promoting their own ideology and spirituality rather than struggling against "foreign" influences, as is often the case for RUNVira and Native Faith.

33. "Maibutnie Biloho svitu," *Svaroh* 21 (2007): 75-85.

34. Please note that different contemporary Ukrainian Pagans interpret and appropriate the old Slavic pantheon in different ways. Considering that Halyna Lozko is a successor of Volodymyr Shaian, I provided this list of old spiritual beings as described by her in "Ridni ukrains'ki Bohy" in Halyna Lozko, *Ukrains'ke narodoznavstvo* (Kharkiv: Dyv, 2005), 120-149.

leaders and ideologists since the time of its establishment, many of its followers still rely on the teachings of either Volodymyr Shaian or Lev Sylenko.³⁵ Let me illustrate some major differences in the ideologies of these two streams with the help of examples.

Sylenko's followers summarize the ideas of their prophet regarding monotheism in the following way:

Polytheism is a lower form of religion, which existed 5-7 thousand years ago, and which still exists among tribes...in [some] backward parts of our planet. Already 2500 years ago such leaders as Zarathustra, Confucius, Buddha, Mohamed and others moved away from polytheism, establishing the concept of One God among their peoples.³⁶

Ukrainians have two understandings of God. Firstly, a thousand years ago Dazhboh was one of the numerous gods in the polytheistic faith of Ukraine-Rus. This was a religion of a lower form, like any polytheistic religion. Secondly, however, Prophet Lev Sylenko is the first Person to introduce the Ukrainian understanding of One God named Dazhboh. Dazhboh is Almighty and Eternal. He has no need of any ambassadors in the forms of higher or lower gods. RUNVira is the faith of higher spiritual perfection. It represents absolute monotheism.³⁷

Lev Sylenko himself wrote:

A Ukrainian, who is able to think, does not identify the understanding of God as introduced by Prophet Sylenko in RUNVira with that understanding which existed 1000 years ago in polytheism. There is a higher form of monotheism in RUNVira.³⁸

As we can see, Sylenko legitimizes his religious reform by thinking in evolutionary terms and stressing, in particular, that monotheism represents a higher level of human spiritual development than polytheism. On the basis of the information presented in primary chronicles, Sylenko argues that polytheism, as practiced by the ancient Slavs, experienced a moral crisis that resulted in conflict and the separation of various Slavic tribes due to their pluralist religious views.³⁹ He considers his reform of old Slavic polytheism a step towards spiritual and cultural progress for the contemporary Ukrainian people.

Thus the followers of RUNVira appear to be more future-oriented,

35. Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith is a more eclectic group that incorporates the teachings of both leaders, as illustrated by A. Ivakhiv in his "In Search of Deeper Identities," 20-21.

36. *Mudrist' Ukrains'koi Pravdy*, 18-19.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Lev Sylenko, *Maha Vira: Sviate Pys'mo, Velyke Svitlo Voli* (Lviv: Scythia community, 2005), 10.

39. *Mudrist' ukrains'koi pravdy*, 9.

emphasizing the idea of progress, considering that their mission is to advance the faith of their forefathers. This attitude can be illustrated by an encounter in Ukraine in May 2008. I attended the tri-annual Congress of RUNVira that was held at the newly built temple in the village of Bohoiavlens'ke (Oleksandrivka), where Lev Sylenko was born. During the breaks between administrative meetings and holy services, delegates to the congress socialized outside the temple. During one such social gathering, I was given an album of reproductions of paintings by the Ukrainian artist Viktor Kryzhanivs'kyi.⁴⁰

These images represented various polytheistic themes, predominantly the gods and goddesses of the old Slavic pantheon. Each reproduction was accompanied by a detailed explanation of old beliefs connected with particular spiritual beings as interpreted by the Ancestral Fire followers today (the publication of this album was initiated by this particular group). For example, from these reproductions one can learn that Lada is the goddess of universal harmony and the protectress of birth, women, marriage, harvest, and fertility. Dana is the goddess of heavenly water and rivers as well as the female origin of the world, who descended to earth, accompanied by fire and light, during the birth of the universe given by Lada. Kupailo is the god of summer solstice, love, and married couples and connected with water and fire. In total, there are seventeen images presented in this album.

As I was flipping through these pages, admiring the contemporary artistic interpretations of the past, one male RUNvira adherent approached me. He began to comment on the paintings with an air of superiority in his voice: "This is all paganism (*iazychnytstvo*). Think about it. We cannot believe in various forest, field, and water spirits today. Yes, our ancestors believed in these things but we should not any longer." His comment emphasized that he and his RUNvira colleagues view the doctrines and practices of their polytheistic counterparts as backward and past-oriented.

The term paganism (*iazychnytstvo*) as used by this person and other RUNVira followers deserves special attention. While this term is widely accepted on both the academic and popular level within Western Pagan discourse in regards to both old and new polytheistic beliefs and practices, its closest Ukrainian equivalent, *iazychnytstvo*, is strongly rejected by the followers of RUNVira and some other groups. On the one hand, they explain this attitude by the negative connotation imposed on it by

40. Viktor Kryzhanivs'kyi, *Pravo Slavymo: Bohy Nashi Sut' Velyki Rodychi* (Album) (Kyiv: Ridna Pravoslavna Vira, year of 7511 since the time of the creation of the world [2003]).

the Christian church, which equated it with barbarianism. On the other hand, since they wish to emphasize the difference between the faith of their forefathers and contemporary RUNVira, considering RUNVira to be an advanced version of the old Slavic faith, they introduce different terminology. In particular, they prefer to be called *runvisty* (believers of RUNVira) and/or *ridnoviry* (native believers).

In contrast to this, while completely accepting the term *ridnoviry*, the followers of Native Faith also embrace the term *iazychnytstvo*, interpreting it their own way and “cleansing” it from its Christian connotation. For example, Halyna Lozko provides her own definition of this term, applying a comparative linguistic method. In particular, she stresses that the root of the term *iazychnytstvo* is *iazyk*, which means “tongue” in contemporary Ukrainian, but which also meant “language” as well as “a tribe, a people who share one language” in old Slavic languages. This term has a Greek analogue signifying *ethnos*.⁴¹ The latter argument leads her to link the concept of *iazychnytstvo* to that of ethnic/native religion:

Ethnos—is a community of people who have common territory (native land), common language (native language), common kin, legends about its origins, common historic memory, customs and rituals, namely—a native religion. Thus this term [*iazychnytstvo*] is connected with ethnic (national) religion as the basis for spiritual culture for every people.⁴²

Thus, linked to the concept that Ivakhiv calls “territorial” ethnicity, the term *iazychnytstvo* acquires a positive connotation for the Native Faith adherents.

Let me now focus on some other factors that distinguish polytheistic Native Faith adherents from their monotheistic RUNVira counterparts. While RUNVira members tend to consciously modify their ancestors’ worldview, Native Faith followers fully idealize and consecrate the past. They strive to legitimize their contemporary beliefs and practices by emphasizing direct continuity with ancient polytheistic traditions and thus, “authenticity.” Halyna Lozko views contemporary Paganism in Ukraine as a “direct inheritor of the old paganism, differing from the latter only by some modernized way of communication of the same primordial laws.” Lozko rejects the term *neo-iazychnytstvo* (neo-paganism). In her opinion, the prefix “neo,” if added to the term *iazychnytstvo*, symbolically deprives the Native Faith adherents of their “hereditary rights for the continuation of [their] tradition.”⁴³

41. Halyna Lozko, “Shcho oznachaie slovo ‘iazychnytstvo’,” *Svaroh* 8 (1998): 48.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Halyna Lozko, “Iazychnytstvo – svitohliad i sposib zhyttiediiial’nosti,” *Svaroh*

While emphasizing the significant role of the past in the continuation of this tradition in her 2001 book *Ethnology of Ukraine*, Halyna Lozko strongly disapproves of Sylenko's reform. In this publication, she provides two charts, one of which is entitled "Monotheism and polytheism as binary oppositions," where she generalizes and contrasts these two religious worldviews. She states that monotheistic religions "are established artificially by [their] founders ('prophets')" while polytheistic religions "appear in a natural way as ethnic, national religions, developed by a people itself." In the second chart, entitled "Comparative chart of neo-religion [this is how Lozko defines Sylenko's faith] and Ukrainian ethno-religion [this is how she views the stream of contemporary Paganism she adheres to]," Lozko criticizes Sylenko for "cancelling all the Ancestral Gods, proclaiming absolute monotheism, and using the native name of Dazhboh, attaching his own characteristics to this God." Thus, Lozko views Sylenko's RUNVira as "new, modern and reformatted" while the Native Faith, in her opinion, is "traditional" (authentic, customary, ancient, Ancestral) and "natural" (created by the Ukrainian ethnos over a span of many millennia of its history).⁴⁴ As we see, the followers of the polytheistic paradigm attempt to undermine the beliefs and practices of their monotheistic counterparts by characterizing them as creative and, thus, "regressive."

The Past: (Re)created and Consecrated

Interestingly, my research suggests that most contemporary Pagan revivals often have very little to do with actual historical reality, since there is, indeed, a very limited amount of primary information available. Let me provide an example from the primary chronicle *Tale of Bygone Years* (*Povist' mynulykh lit*) which was compiled in the early twelfth century and covers the period of time in Kyivan Rus' between 850 and 1110. This text includes a section devoted to the reign of Prince Volodymyr the Great who in 980, eight years before he Christianized Kyivan Rus', undertook a Pagan religious reform, establishing a shrine near his palace:⁴⁵

He [Volodymyr] placed wooden gods on the mountain behind his palace. Perun, god of lightning and thunder, had a silver head and golden

21 (2007): 3.

44. Halyna Lozko, *Etnolohiia Ukrainy* (Kyiv: ArtEK 2001), 282.

45. Some scholars view Volodymyr's undertaking as a symbolic means of consolidating his power in Kyiv. For this view, see I. Ia. Froianov, A. Iu. Dvornichenko, and Iu. V. Krivosheev, "The Introduction of Christianity in Russia and the Pagan Traditions," in *Russian Traditional Culture, Religion, Gender and Customary Law*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 5.

mustache. Then [came] Khors... After him – Volos – protector of cattle and trades, and also Dazhboh and Stryboh, who kept the sky and wind in their hands. Next to them, he placed Symarhl and Mokosha. It was Mokosha, whom sorceresses and priestesses came to worship.⁴⁶

This is just an example of the limited amount of data about old Slavic religion in historic chronicles. This particular passage presents some information about old Slavic beliefs, specifically the names of certain gods and goddess and their functions. However, like any other similar mentions in primary sources, it does not provide any references to particular cultural practices connected with such beliefs.

The only exception in this respect is *The Book of Veles* (*Velesova knyha*) which presents some more explicit data about the religious worldview and practices of old Slavs in the early stages of their history. This book is believed to have been originally written in the form of runes on wooden planks. However, the location of these planks is unknown. Instead, only their transcriptions are available. While the book is devoted to a very early time, possibly as early as the seventh century BCE, it was first discovered in the early twentieth century on the territory of contemporary Ukraine, near Kharkiv. The majority of East European and Western academics treat *The Book of Veles* as a forgery.⁴⁷ Despite this fact, it is regarded as a major sacred text by many contemporary Slavic Pagans.

In this study, *The Book of Veles* is treated predominantly as the sacred text of Ukrainian Pagans rather than a historical source. However, it is interesting that what Pagans consider their most complete source of historical information cannot be fully understood today. This is largely due to the fact that the language of the original text resembles old East Slavic mixed with some elements from contemporary Russian, Ukrainian and Polish. While many translations of *The Book of Veles* have been made (predominantly by Pagans) into both contemporary Ukrainian and Russian, one can find much dissimilarity while comparing different translations. For example, Halyna Lozko's literary translation of

46. Viktor Blyznets', trans., *Povist' mynulykh lit* (Kyiv: Veselka, 1982), 64-6.

47. For a summary of the history of the discovery of *The Book of Veles* and its subsequent publications in Russia, see Victor Shnirelman, "Russian Neo-pagan Myths and Antisemitism," <http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/13shnr.html#13>. For a discussion of its popular acceptance in Ukraine and specifically by Ukrainian Pagans, see Adrian Ivakhiv, "In Search of Deeper Identities," 11-14. For a detailed contextual and linguistic analyses of *The Book of Veles* as a forgery, see O. V. Tvorogov, "Chto takoe 'Vlesova kniga'," *Russkaia literatura* 2 (1988):100, and O. V. Tvorogov, "Vlesova kniga," *Trudy Otdela Drevnerusskoi Literatury*, Vol. 43 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1990). See also L. P. Zhukovskaia, "Poddel'naia dokirillicheskaia rukopis'," *Voprosy iazykozna-nia* 2 (1960): 143, and Maya Kaganskaya, "The Book of Vles: The Saga of a Forgery," *Jews and Jewish Topics in Soviet and East European Publications* 4 (1986): 3-27.

The Book of Veles into contemporary Ukrainian, accompanied by her detailed commentaries on particular elements and episodes, differ from other works of this kind. For instance, Lozko translates the original word *iezentse* used in The Book of Veles as *iazychnyky* (pagans):

...And viche [community council] ruled everything [social and political life of old Slavs] and people, calling themselves *iazychnyky*, were protected by Gods from many [enemies].⁴⁸

According to this translation and especially according to Lozko's footnote comment accompanying this line, The Book of Veles presents the idea that old Slavs were protected by their gods for as long as they adhered to their indigenous faith. Let us now contrast these lines with those translated by Serhii Piddubnyi:

...And Viche ruled this [social and political life of old Slavs], and in this way Gods protected [old Slavs] from many enemies that were called *iazentse* [not translated, just transliterated from old Slavic]...⁴⁹

As we can see, in Lozko's translation the term *iezentse* is related to the religious worldview – *iazychnytstvo* (paganism) – of the old Slavs. Piddubnyi points out that he does not agree with Lozko's translation of the term, since *tsi*, *tse* and *tsy* are old Ukrainian endings that indicate belonging to something, as in, for example, *anhliitsi* (English people), *nimtsi* [Germans], etc. Instead, Piddubnyi agrees with B. Iatsenko's translation of this term. Iatsenko translates it as *iazeny*. Following up on Iatsenko's version, Piddubnyi hypothesizes that *iazeny-iazy-iasy-iahny* are variants for Khazars – Turkic-speaking tribes that were one of the major enemies of old Slavs. Thus, according to Piddubnyi's translation and hypothesis the term *iezentse* as used in *The Book of Veles* does not have anything to do with the worldview of old Slavs but is a name of their enemy. Interestingly, the term *iasy* that Piddubnyi identifies as a variant name for Khazars, is well known among scholars as a historical name for an Iranian (Alan) nomadic tribe.⁵⁰

However, it is beyond the scope of this study to prove or disprove any Pagan interpretations of the past, including the translations of The Book of Veles (which is widely regarded by academics as a forgery).

48. Halyna Lozko, ed. and trans., *Velesova Knyka: Volkhoovnyk*, (Vinnytsia: Kontyent-Prym, 2007), 125.

49. Serii Piddubnyi, trans., *Vlesknyha* (Uman': UVPP, 2007), 17.

50. For references to this tribe see, for example, A.V. Gadlo, *Etricheskaia istoriia Severnogo Kavkaza IV-X vv.* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1979).

What is more important to me is how contemporary Ukrainian Pagans embrace the past and speculate about it in the process of the construction of their present-day identities.

The Slavic past is largely obscure. Only its separate fragments are available to us today. While many contemporary scholars try to create an objective picture of the past on the basis of this fragmentary information, Pagans take a selective approach to academic findings. They accept those interpretations that fit their ideology and reject any ideas that undermine their beliefs, sometimes even engaging in heated debates with academics.⁵¹ As pointed out above, Pagan discourse about the past develops in its own way, whether or not coinciding with academic arguments. Even more interestingly, Pagans do not always reach consensus in their views of the past. For example, as illustrated above, while largely rejecting the academics' idea that The Book of Veles is a forgery, Pagans often debate their own interpretations of this source.

For them, the past opens horizons for personal imagination. Because of the obscurity of the past, various leaders provide differing depictions of it, projecting their own personal views and desires. Victor Shnirelman identifies this process as the "invention of the past" (*izobreteniie proshlogo*).⁵² Consequently, differing views of the past, related to conflicting visions of the future, result in spiritual diversity in the present and, therefore, in new dynamic cultural forms even within one contemporary ethnic Pagan community. Today one can find a great number of Ukrainian Pagan publications, many specifically produced by polytheists, with detailed explanations on how to observe certain rites of passage, calendar cycle holidays, and other rituals. Pagans present these as being consistent with how they were observed by their ancestors,⁵³ in this way striving to legitimize their present views and practices. Thus, it is not only the monotheistic Ukrainian Pagans who are creative (as they are "accused" by polytheists) but also, to a great extent, their polytheistic counterparts.

51. See, for example, S.V. Zobnina et al., "Analiz sovremennogo mifotvorchestva v noveishykh issledovaniiah po iazychestvu," <http://slavya.ru/docs/shnir06.htm>. This work represents a Pagan response to Shnirelman's article "Ot 'Sovetskogo naroda' k 'organicheskoi obshchosti': obraz mira russkikh i ukrainskikh neoiazychnikov."

52. Shnirelman, "Neoiazychestvo i natsyonalizm."

53. For examples, Halyna Lozko, *Kolo Svarozhe* (Kyiv: Ukrain's'kyi pys'mennyk, 2005); Lada Kurovs'ka, *Narodzhennia Bohyni: Sviashchenni znannia slavo'ianskoho narodu* (Kam'ianets'-Podil's'kyi: PP Buinyts'kyi, 2006); Volkhv (Pagan priest) Mezhymyr, *Malyi Trebnyk Ridnoi Pravoslavnoi Viry* (Kyiv: 7513 roku vid sotvorennia myru (year 7513 from the time of the creation of the world[2005]), and many others.

*Concluding Remarks: Indigenizing the terms “Monotheism” and
“Polytheism”*

Monotheism and polytheism were recognized in the field of religion in the past as two major contrasting frameworks for the spiritual development of humanity. These models owe their popularity in academic discourse especially to the adherents of the sociocultural evolutionist theory. The latter introduced the idea that the monotheistic model represented a higher stage of evolution of human thought than polytheism.⁵⁴ This idea, however, is challenged by many present-day (western) Pagans who purposely search for their distant polytheistic roots while constructing a contemporary spirituality.⁵⁵ As for present-day academics, the spiritual development of humanity, especially the evolutionist framework, is no longer a prominent theme within contemporary Western scholarly discourse in religious studies. It is, rather, regarded as a legacy of the past. Instead, contemporary scholars more often concentrate on individual societies and changes characteristic for their specific contexts, rejecting the evolutionist model of social progress. However, while being considered a legacy of the past, evolutionist ideas have proved to shape present-day spiritualities, as our case study demonstrates. In fact, in the case of the RUNVira phenomenon, an evolutionist framework has formed the foundation for this new ethnic religion.

The terms *polytheism* and *monotheism* as used today (not necessarily in line with evolutionist discourse in regards to religious beliefs and practices) are being also challenged by academics. Some contemporary scholars question their relevance to complex spiritual worldviews and practices (including the idea of the Trinity in [theoretically] monotheis-

54. One of the earliest proponents of this theory was the late-nineteenth century English anthropologist Edward Tylor. While speculating about the origins of religion, Tylor introduces the following evolutionary chain for the spiritual development of humanity: dreams, ghost-souls (as explanations of dream images), spirits (animism), polytheism, and monotheism. His model suggests that monotheism is the logical result of human thought that evolved from simple beliefs into more complex religious ideologies. At the same time, Tylor also believed that the development of science would eventually completely overcome religion. Tylor, James Frazer, and other evolutionists believed that all societies follow the same pattern of development towards social progress, although this progress is reached by different societies at different times.

55. For example, see the studies by Tanya Luhmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Michael F. Strmiska, ed., *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC Clío, 2005); Sián Reid, ed. *Between the Worlds: Readings in Contemporary Neo-Paganism* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2006), and many others.

tic Christianity). In particular, theologian Laurel Schneider in her book *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* goes back to the origins of these terms to argue against their validity. She points out that both categories are modern constructs and not ancient terms. They both were introduced in the seventeenth century and carried a strong political rather than spiritual connotation. In particular, the concept of monotheism was presented as a means of establishing the religious and cultural superiority of Europe and Euro-America in the early modern context by “charting monotheism as an advance over polytheism.”⁵⁶ Agreeing with Mark Smith, Schneider points out that these two terms are interdependent and the term “polytheism” acquires meaning only when juxtaposed to “monotheism.”⁵⁷ Like Smith, Schneider finds these terms anachronistic when applied to ancient contexts. She sees the “problem of monotheism-polytheism binary” to lie “in the reductive quality of all binary distinctions and the limitations they place upon otherwise much more complex and shifting realities.”⁵⁸ In her opinion, one has to be very careful in applying modern concepts to non-modern contexts since a significant amount of indigenous meaning can be lost in such a case.⁵⁹ This problem is also often addressed by anthropologists.

The specific case of Ukrainian Neo-Paganism discussed in this work contributes to the discourse on polytheism vs. monotheism in a profound way since it demonstrates even greater complexities in people’s spiritual experiences in the modern world. It turns out that both models can coexist and influence each other in the complex process of identity negotiation even within the same religious movement, at least on the ideological level.

I find Schneider’s emphasis on the political nature of the terms “polytheism” and “monotheism” and on the limitations that they can place on people’s spiritual worldviews and practices very important. Indeed, these terms often do not come from the people themselves. However, this is not the case for Ukrainian Pagans discussed in this work. Contemporary Ukrainian Paganism is a modern religious movement with strong political connotations. The terms “polytheism” and “monotheism” may be anachronistic when applied to old Slavic paganism since it is doubtful that the old Slavs consciously thought about themselves in these terms. However, the categories of polytheism and monotheism

56. Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London-New York: Routledge, 2008), 22.

57. *Ibid.*, 21. See also Mark Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2001), 11.

58. *Ibid.*, 20.

59. *Ibid.*, 21.

both seem completely appropriate for contemporary Ukrainian Pagans who consciously embrace them. In fact, for Ukrainian Pagans these concepts become an important part of the formation of a modern national identity. On the one hand, both Pagan monotheists and polytheists construct this alternative identity through the formation of an alternative spirituality, juxtaposing their ideas to those of the larger (predominantly Christian) Ukrainian society. On the other hand, as was illustrated above, with the help of the categories of monotheism vs. polytheism they negotiate this identity between themselves, debating who can offer the best version of “Ukrainianness.”

While doing this, contemporary Ukrainian Pagans charge the terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” with their own new meaning (as they do other terms such as *iazychnytstvo* (paganism) and thus indigenize them. As pointed out above, Lev Sylenko was under a great influence of the European superiority discourse (mentioned by Schneider) as communicated through the concept of monotheism. However, he imparts the term with his own connotation. As also pointed out earlier, Sylenko presents Ukrainians as not only part of a superior European community but as a superior nation who now shows the path of spiritual progress to the rest of Europe:

Humanity languishes in the darkness: it is absolutely necessary
To feed its brain with new food.
Ukraine is called by Heavens
To show Europe the new way [of spiritual development].⁶⁰

Sylenko and his followers understand spiritual progress to lie in the “European understanding of God” which implies the reformulation of particular ethnic religions into monotheism. Thus, RUNVira followers associate Sylenko’s reform of old Slavic beliefs with the advanced thinking of a progressive people. In contrast to this, Native Faith adherents view monotheistic religions as foreign forces attempting to destroy indigenous Ukrainian culture by forcing it to conform to a global cultural pattern. For these people, only polytheism represents a progressive model for building their contemporary indigenous spirituality. In the context of present-day Ukrainian Pagan discourse, the terms “monotheism” and “polytheism” become helpful linguistic means for communicating contemporary ideologies. They come from the people.

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