

[Pagan, by the Grace of Gods](#)

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TRENDS

Pagan, by the Grace of Gods

How a spiritual vision changed François Perin--war hero, politician, professor, playwright, thinker

The Gods and Goddesses of Europe were sent into exile beginning 1,700 years ago with the advent of Christianity. Their followers were deemed pagans and heathens, opprobrious terms which in truth only designated those who did not follow Christianity, Judaism or, later, Islam. But today both Christianity and that other modern faith, Rationalism--the belief that truth can be arrived at through reason alone--have ceased to be relevant in the minds of many. François Perin is one of a growing number of sophisticated intellectuals who conceive the contemporary revival of paganism not as a return to the past, but as Europe's reconnecting with its deeper spiritual self, which had never disappeared, but was cloaked over and repressed by centuries of an essentially alien philosophy. To reestablish the Gods to their rightful place in our lives, these thinkers reckon, is to reconnect with the essential divinity in nature and in ourselves, the inner strata where the Gods live and whence they shed their grace.

By Hughes Henry, Brussels

The spiritual evolution of François Perin, now 78, began with his progressive dechristianization between the ages of 17 and 22, during the dark days of World War II. "Prospects for my country and myself were most gloomy," he recalls. Yet it was at that very time that a vision startled him one evening and initiated his movement toward the Gods, the ancient Pagan Gods of his distant ancestors. While attending a concert, a flamboyant symphony by Italian composer Ottorino Respighi, he recalls, "Suddenly, my imagination thus submerged showed me, bursting forth on a Roman road, a flaming chariot driven by a being without outlines, integrated in a whole radiant with light and a sense of triumph. I was transfixed. Who was this unknown God? Not for an instant did I think it was Christ. It was a God without name, rendered anonymous by centuries of religious asphyxiation. I would have to wait many years and expand my horizons significantly to learn again the names of the Gods--thanks in part to passionate historians such as Mircea Eliade who patiently brought the Gods back from anonymity and exile. I found the Sun God to be worshipped universally, in all climes and all times, under many names. Thus for me the Gods, persecuted by jealous and dreary priests during fifteen centuries of obscuration, were reinstalled upon their thrones. The effect on me was electric and totally transforming. There are no words to express such experiences."

Perin is a well-known and influential man in his native Belgium, one of Europe's smallest countries and 90 percent Roman Catholic. It is just 30,000 square kilometers squeezed between France, the Netherlands and Germany. Its citizens are linguistically affiliated with one or another of those countries--an awkward arrangement resulting from international treaties. During World War II, Perin was active in

the underground RÃ©sistance, distributing literature against the German occupation. For this he would have been executed if caught, but Perin is too humble to admit to heroism. He is best known in Belgium for his tumultuous political career as a standard-bearer for the country's French-speaking minority. He ended his career dramatically in 1985 when he quit his party and walked out of Parliament. Later in life he became professor of Constitutional Law at the University of LiÃ¨ge.

He's made no secret of his Pagan leanings, and finally in 1996 published *Franc-Parler* ("Straight Talk," Quorum, Belgium), subtitled "Testimonial on the Double Crisis of Christianity and of Rationalism." This book is, for FranÃ§ois Perin, the result of a dream nourished over a very long time. "Since I was a young man," he writes, "I have asked myself a myriad of questions about religion, morality, social mores, ideologies, scientific advances, etc. Straight Talk is doubtless a kind of testament in a bottle put out to sea, addressed to unknown beneficiaries!"

And what a rich testament Straight Talk is [see excerpts, page 34]. It is an analysis of the history of militant Christianity in Europe and the consequent destruction of Pagan traditions. It is an insightful analysis of Rationalism, which displaced religion for many, but has failed to fulfill the spiritual needs of man. Rationalism, the belief in the supremacy of reason in guiding men's affairs, is the philosophical basis of science. Finally, Straight Talk is a vision of the future, summarized when Perin quotes his older contemporary, French writer and politician AndrÃ© Malraux, "The challenge of the next century, while humanity faces the most terrible crisis ever, will be to reintegrate the Gods back into its life." The alternative, says Perin, is a "vacuum which will be filled by

materialism"--specifically by the cult of consumerism and the unending quest for personal enjoyment.

Does he believe that such a situation could develop in India toward Hinduism? "What will happen in India will be quite different, because they have no pope to work against. The Easterners don't know that we've had to fight against an authoritarian and dogmatic religion. They don't understand our Rationalism and its combativeness and aggressiveness, the elements which are the very heart of the difference in our respective evolutions. We had to throw off the lead cloak of an authoritarian religion that had might on its side. Claiming to hold the one and only truth, it persecuted, tortured, burned alive those that deviated from its teaching. It is important to explain this to the Hindus who wish to understand the mentality and evolution of spirituality in the West. They must be told what 2,000 years of Christianity was like!"

Perin envisions for India an evolution following its traditions and within the framework of an ongoing globalization. "It seems to me that the difference between the situation in India and ours is that a doctor, an astronomer or biologist in India doesn't feel the need to enter into a militant stance against the religious traditions of his family or country. He'll continue to participate in those traditions without problem or neurosis, because there is no conflict between his scientific knowledge and his religious tradition. He won't confuse religious epic poetry with a chemical or mathematical formula; these are two distinct languages. But in the West, they have become embroiled in conflict."

Perin is not attempting to reopen the Pagan temples or restore the rituals of ancient Greece. But, he says, "I understand that for some people the vehicle of their mythology is necessary to them, and they do not want to go beyond that stage. It is too bad that Christianity has assassinated our belief in the Gods that we had during Greek and Roman times. The Gods are instruments we need because they are visible and have human or animal form. They are vehicles which help the human mind to perceive further than the prosaic perception of daily reality. Without Christianity, we could have preserved the traditions and all their sensibilities that a magnificent art inspired by the Gods would have expressed. We could have kept that while eliminating the grosser superstitions as evolution went along. Alas, Christianity stole the temples to set up churches instead. It chased out the Goddesses and replaced them with statues of the Virgin Mary. It chased out the Gods and replaced them with the saints. Christianity therefore simply substituted, and it is precisely because of this very real though unadmitted neopaganism that the Church has survived so long."

Today a wide spectrum of belief and practices comes under the heading "Pagan." In some areas, such as along the Volga River in Russia, Pagan religion was never suppressed and continues in unbroken continuity from ancient times. Elsewhere, as in Britain, creative--sometimes superficial--attempts have been made to reconstruct earlier Pagan traditions. Perin belongs to a level of intellectuals who take pains to differentiate their Paganism from the more off-hand reconstructions.

The Eastern door: "My departure from Christianity was slow,

meticulous, and without crisis or fury or anguish. It took place over several years. Progressively I ceased being Christian, because when still very young I took religion very seriously. Otherwise I would have remained a Catholic." He was initially influenced by the groundbreaking book: the Life of Jesus, by Ernest Renan, published in 1865. "Renan was the first to dare to portray Jesus' life as totally stripped of the marvelous--a shocker at the time. Today, there are a myriad of writings which attempt to reconstruct the historic reality of Jewish society as it was in the time of Jesus of Nazareth. They reposition the person of Jesus in its human reality, and in effect draw further and further away from Christian mythology. Ultimately came the indifference which plagues Christianity today. Attending Mass has become a mere gesture for the sake of tradition, without any depth of thought involved." He was also impressed by two books: Travel to Lhasa of a Parisian Woman by Alexandra David-Neel and The Life of Ramakrishna by Romain Rolland.

Perin's first personal encounter with Eastern practices took place, ironically, during a visit to the 800-year-old Catholic Abby of Orval in 1970. "Theology was not fashionable with their monks at that time," he recalls humorously, "They were involved in meditative methodology with practical exercises, including extra-Christian disciplines such as yoga and Zen." Eventually Perin--and many of the monks too--adopted Zen Buddhism as their spiritual path.

Perin began the practice of Zen in earnest, which he continues to this day. Buddhism has been a popular and natural alternative both in Europe and America for seekers like Perin. In 1996, he and others created the Lay Association for the

Study and Practice of Buddhism. Their manifesto states that the time has come to attempt a joining together of the Western body of dechristianized, atheistic or materialistic souls with Buddhism. Perin is today constantly on the lecture circuit. He says, "I refuse to be a missionary or to conclude for anyone but myself, and I speak only because I am invited to."

"I thus left Christianity by the Eastern door," states Perin. "At this century's end, still poorly liberated from its Christian shackles, I became aware that I was a Pagan. I was touched by grace. The kingdom of heaven is within us, indeed. But we shall have to lift the hard stone off of our hearts and minds. It has blocked the way for much too long."

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Pagan Message

Selections from Perin's "Straight Talk"

Language of truth: From the first centuries to the 18th, an infernal logic set in which put Christians at each other's throats. Contrary to polytheism, Christian monotheism, which issued out of Judaism, could conceive only one religious truth. If there is but one God who reveals Himself through prophets and especially a one and only Son, it must mean that Absolute truth is expressible in human language. And when multiple interpretations arise, there must logically be only one correct one--the others are false, odious and criminal. How could Christians have accepted one another down the centuries, thus trapped in such logic? They did not understand that human

language has only relative and approximative meaning. Diversity should have been accepted as the inevitable product of the human condition, instead of leading to anathema, persecution and holy hatred. Alas, fanaticism agitated each and every variation of belief.

Theologians: Modern theologians are still attempting to reconcile what is not reconcilable, and their arguments grow ever more subtle and complex and therefore proportionately less intelligible or relevant to the greater number. And even yet, the Church will more often than not condemn the works of modern theologians. Ratzinger's instructions in May of 1990 [which followed his famous letter of December, 1989, warning Catholics of the "dangers and errors" in Eastern beliefs and practices such as yoga and meditation--see HT Feb, 1990] tells modern theologians to "renounce the intemperate expression of their speculations." Thus the Church remains inflexible.

Leaving Christianity: One way to leave Christianity is to simply lose faith, like you lose a set of keys. An adolescent will do a rational critique of his faith and feel totally detached from the beliefs that he is told he should hold. Then he stops believing in God the same way he stopped believing in Santa Claus. The second way to leave is through open revolt. This is when the family is very much identified with Christianity, and the youth breaks with great pain, especially when he has had oppressive teacher-priests in Catholic schools. This type of open rebellion produces all your militant anti-clerics, communists, etc. The third way is when one grows up in a milieu where religion is a matter of social conformity, without too much depth of meaning. Then the break is gentler, with consideration for

parents and grandparents. For me, I left by the Eastern door.

Materialism: "Individualism" is winning the day. But not in its noble form of courageous and independent thinking but rather as a degenerated and vague egocentrism born of inconstance or total cynicism. The simple acquisition of goods needed for a decent life is no longer sufficient. We need ever more useless things, and new sensations in an endless crescendo. Because no inner richness or character is developed, one falls under the dependence of trends and products, violent shows or the hell of drugs.

Science: Scientists are becoming increasingly holistic wherein the observer is one with his observation and the thing observed. Objectivity loses its meaning, thus the very philosophical principle of rationalism and science is gone. Science's certainties and even the hope to find certainties is gone. Therefore we now know that science will not fill the vacuum left by the disappearance of the European religion. Science has changed our lives, but not taught us anything to enhance life.

The future: The Gods and Goddesses of antiquity served to bring Divinity and the vision of cosmic harmony into all aspects of life. If antique civilization had survived, what a serene evolution would have ensued. No tearing up of ourselves, no violent break with our own past, ancestors, or Gods, and ultimately none of the vulgar platitudes of our modern day into which the dechristianized world has fallen simply because there is no living wisdom to fill the vacuum. Europe has lost a sense of the deeper dimensions of mankind because it exiled

its Gods under the destructive fury of Christianity. What will become of Europe now? Victimized by suicidal wars and ideological madness, can it become anything more than a common market? It needs to rebuild a civilization. The time has come to blend the best of the East and the West.