

## [Potent Pagan Powwow](#)

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RELIGION

### Potent Pagan Powwow

Representatives of Europe's pre-Christian faiths meet in Lithuania, last of the Pagan nations

For six days over the Summer solstice, 200 representatives to the World Pagan Congress met in Vilnius, capital city of the Baltic country of Lithuania. The modest event augured well for what is being called "post-Christian" Europe. As church membership drops across the continent, some are harkening back to the pre-Christian days when the Pagan religion flourished. That wasn't so long ago in Lithuania, where Paganism was suppressed only in the 18th century. In nearby parts of Ukraine and Russia, Pagan ritual never ceased. The congress is one attempt among several to re-gather the threads of tradition and re-establish ancient indigenous religions.

Timed to begin on the June 20 solstice, the 50 international participants joined their local hosts and about half of Lithuania's 3.7 million people for the national celebration of Rasa, a Pagan festival. In the cities, people just party late into the night, but in the countryside they assemble, as they have for centuries, outside the villages on forest hills near rivers, decorate themselves and kupolines, sacred poles, with wreaths of herbs and ferns, and build large bonfires. The congress

gathered for the night's celebrations outside Vilnius, at the nearby Kernave ruins, medieval capital of Pagan Lithuania. Dancing around bonfires to ethnic music was followed by setting floats with candles adrift on the nearby Neris river.

This Rasa celebration is remarkably close in practice and name to rasayatra, the festival celebrated in North India in the lunar month of Karttika (October/November), by nocturnal dances in circles and representations of the sports of Krishna. It is only one indication of how closely allied these Pagan faiths are with Hinduism. Lithuanian is additionally the oldest living language of Europe, closely related to Sanskrit and ancient Greek and hence widely studied by linguists. These three languages were used as a basis for the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European.

Returning from the Rasa celebration at 3 am, dawn, organizers wisely set the congress opening ceremonies for late afternoon, at the statue of Grand Duke Gediminas. He was the 14th-century Pagan ruler who defended Lithuania against Christian crusaders seeking to convert his nation by force. In his time, he declared that Pagans, Catholics and Orthodox Christians worship the same divinity in different forms, and guaranteed religious freedom. His openness did little good, for it is a fact of European history that nation after nation was converted to Christianity by conquest, and the existing Pagan faith in each forcibly suppressed. Lithuania fell to the crusaders in 1410, just fifty years after Gediminas' rule. Pagan temples were demolished and churches built upon their ruins. Even then, the church missionaries complained that the peasant population--who regarded the Christians as foreign invaders--were tenacious in holding to their old beliefs. The last Pagan temple was closed in 1790. Paganism and

Lithuanian nationalism have since been linked, and provided a double reason for the people's resistance to conversion. Even the Soviet occupation following World War II failed to eliminate Romuva, the national Pagan church. Believers, including Jonas Trinkunas, one of the congress organizers and a leading religious scholar, kept it alive through to the nation's independence in the '80s.

On the 22nd evening, Lithuanians, Latvians and Belorussians conducted a Baltic fire ritual for congress members at the Romuva temple, followed by Russian, Ukranian and Polish rites. After the fire was lit, Dainas [related to Sanskrit dhyanam, "meditation"], ancient Pagan songs known as the "Lithuanian Vedic hymns," were sung as participants slowly circled the fire altar. Beer was offered first to the Fire Goddess Gabija (also known as Ugnis, the same as the Hindu Fire-God Agni), then to the Earth Goddess Zemyna, the ancestors and finally to the deities of the skies. Everyone was offered a sip of the sanctified beer. The Russian Pagan priest, Vadim Kazakov, smudged everyone's third eye with ashes from the fire, in accordance with traditions--this use of sacred ash being another parallel to Hindu practice.

On the third and fourth day, congress delegates discussed their concerns, such as the on-going demolition of ancient temples in Greece and the discrimination against Pagans in the Czech republic, where people have lost their jobs because of their beliefs. They drafted a declaration [sidebar] and have continued discussions on the Internet ([www.wva.com/~audrius/](http://www.wva.com/~audrius/)) since the event, working to set up a meeting next year in Greece.

At Vilnius Pagans Define Their Faith

We have gathered to express our solidarity for the ethnic, indigenous, native and/or traditional religions of Europe and the world. All cultures, native religions and faiths should be equally valued and respected. Each religion and each people have their distinctive local traditions (faith, mythology, etc.) which articulate their love of their land and history, and cultivate a regard for the sacredness of all life and the divinity of Nature. Just as Nature survives through a wide variety of species, so can humanity be allowed to develop freely and without interference along a wide variety of cultural expressions. According to our ancient traditional ethics, the Earth and all creation must be valued and protected. We as human beings must find our place within the web of all life, not outside or separate from the whole of creation.

We share a common understanding of our position in the world, based upon our common historical experience of oppression and intolerance. Ethnic and/or "Pagan" religions have suffered great injury and destruction in the past from religions claiming they possess the only truth. It is our sincere wish to live in peace and harmony, and to strive for cooperation with the followers of all other religions, faiths and beliefs. We believe that the dawn of a new era of individual and intellectual freedom and global exchange of views and information gives us an opportunity to start again to return to our own native spiritual roots in order to reclaim our religious heritage.

We are worshipers of Nature, as most of humanity has been for the greater part of human history. True indigenous religions should give us love and respect for all that we see and feel around, to accept all forms of worship which emphasize

sincere hearts, pure thoughts and noble conduct at every moment of our life, towards all that exists. Let us be proud of our reborn ethnic religions. Our new Universalism induces people not to remain closed within walls of hatred and jealousy against those who are not inside our walls. We established the World Congress of Ethnic Religions to help all ethnic religion groups survive and cooperate with each other. Our motto is "Unity in Diversity."

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