

## **Nature and Ethnicity in East European Paganism: An Environmental Ethic of the Religious Right?**

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### **Abstract**

Paganism is frequently cast by Anglo-American scholars as a form of "nature religion." Some have also identified its political leanings as left rather than right. This article tests these preconceptions against the evidence provided by East European, especially Ukrainian, Paganism or "Native Faith." The author examines Native Faith notions of nature as land, as "blood," and as "tradition," and argues that these are underpinned by a concept of "territorialized ethnicity" – the belief that ethnic communities are natural and biological entities rooted in specific geographical territories. The article traces this idea to its precursors in European and Soviet thought, and suggests that it may be more commonly found around the world than Western theorists presume. In light of such a different understanding of nature, the concept of "nature religion" may need to be rethought.

Scholars of British and North American Paganism have increasingly been identifying contemporary Pagan religion with the broader category of "nature religion."<sup>1</sup> Paganism, in this view, is an expression, and perhaps

1. On contemporary Paganism as nature religion, see Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts, and Geoffrey Samuel, eds., *Nature Religion Today: Paganism in the Modern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Chas S. Clifton, "Nature Religion for Real," *Gnosis* 48 (1998): 16-20; Bron R. Taylor, "Nature and Supernature – Harmony and Mastery: Irony and Evolution in Contemporary Nature Religion," *The Pomegranate* 8 (1999): 21-27; Michael York, "Nature Religion as a Contemporary Sectarian Development," *Diskus* 6 (2000), [http://www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/york\\_2.html](http://www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/york_2.html); Regina Smith Oboler, "Nature Religion as a Cultural System? Sources of Environmentalist Action and Rhetoric in a Contemporary Pagan Community," *The Pomegranate* 6.1 (2004): 86-106. For more qualified or dissenting views, see Marion Bowman, "Nature, the Natural, and Pagan Identity," *Diskus* 6 (2000), [http://www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/bowman\\_2.html](http://www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/bowman_2.html), last accessed 17 June 2005;

the most clearly distinguishable one, of a religiosity in which the natural world plays a central role, either as a primary source of metaphors or models, such as seasonal cycles and natural elements, or as the primary locus of value, or both. Such religiosity has grown alongside the rise of environmental awareness, and the two are seen as loosely but importantly linked. Related to this, and due to its perceived historical connections with the sixties' counterculture, Paganism has also been linked by some to the political left.<sup>2</sup>

This article tests these preconceptions about Paganism, nature, and politics against the evidence provided by Slavic Paganism and "Native Faith" as these are found in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, especially in contemporary Ukraine. (The term "Native Faith" is the preferred term used by East European practitioners of what Western scholars would commonly categorize as "Paganism." The latter is seen by these believers as a derogatory Christian usage.) It argues that Ukrainian and other East European Pagans tend to structure the nature–society dichotomy according to a different economy of meanings than many Anglo-Americans. Drawing from a tradition strongly shaped by the ideas of Romantic-era thinkers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, East European Pagans perceive humans not as distinct from nature, but as culturally or ethnically "rooted" within the natural world. Humans are seen less as a single, unified species, and more as inherently differentiated into blood-related collectivities that emerge out of specific histories of interaction with the natural environment. Concomitantly, nature appears not in its own right, as "nature" *per se*, but as part of a continuum within which humans and nature form a single or commingled collectivity.

Such thinking about the human relationship to nature is rooted in specific theoretical traditions of late eighteenth- through twentieth-century European and Soviet anthropological thought. The second part of this article will examine some of these sources, in order to shed light

and Shawn Arthur, "Technophilia and Nature Religion: The Growth of Paradox," *Religion* 32 (2002): 303-14.

2. In his ambitious *Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion* (2003), sociologist of religion Michael York observes that "the contemporary pagan scene is generally center-left rather than right-wing conservative" (163). A related argument is made by Brendan Cathbad Myers, "The Politics of Environmental Counterculture and Heterodoxy" (unpublished article shared on the NatRel listserv, 12 February 2001). On Paganism and politics, see also B. C. Myers, *Dangerous Religion: Environmental Spirituality and its Activist Dimension* (Miami: Dubsar House, 2004), and Ann-Marie Gallagher, "Weaving a Tangled Web? Pagan Ethics and Issues of History, 'Race' and Ethnicity in Pagan Identity," *Diskus* 6 (2000), <http://www.uni-marburg.de/religionswissenschaft/journal/diskus/gallagher.html>, last accessed 17 June 2005.

on issues otherwise overlooked by Western scholarly researchers no less than by Western Pagans. Following that, we will look at the most significant understandings of “the natural” – specifically, nature as land, as “blood,” and as tradition – underpinning the views of East European Pagans and Native Faith practitioners. The kind of human–nature continuum suggested by contemporary East European Pagans may, at first blush, appear a laudable attempt at an ecological reincorporation of humans into the natural world, one consonant with popular North American environmentalism. But it raises thorny issues of ethnic exclusiveness – who belongs, and who does not? – which have troubled inter-ethnic relations in almost every corner of the world, and which are commonly the province of the political right rather than the left. In conclusion, the article suggests the possibility that nature as defined by many East European Pagans – a nature in which territorialized ethnicity is a pivotal component – may in fact be a more widespread notion of nature than that favored by North Americans and Western Europeans. In this light, the concept of “nature religion” should either be reconsidered or expanded to include non-Western ideas of what is “natural.” In other words, the “nature” in “nature religion” should not be taken for granted. Rather, it should be seen as a contested site, a definition in progress, a site not of essence (the very definition of nature, for some), but of construction, bricolage, and discursive struggle.

### *Cultural Constructions of “Nature”*

“Nature” means different things to different people, and recent examinations of contemporary concepts of nature highlight the cultural specificity and variability – the cultural constructedness – of the concept. As Raymond Williams put it, nature is “perhaps the most complex word in the [English] language.”<sup>3</sup> Ecophilosopher Neil Evernden points out that, once we have articulated a concept of “nature” as distinct from “all things” or “the world as a whole,” it becomes possible to speak of some things as belonging to nature or being natural, and of other things as being unnatural (or supernatural).<sup>4</sup> “Nature” has therefore come to function as a boundary term demarcating a primary realm (which can consequently be elevated or downgraded) from a secondary realm of the “human,” “cultural,” or “unnatural.” It is a term that denotes value and

3. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 219.

4. Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 20-21.

that, as Mary Douglas puts it, has often been used as a kind of discursive “trump card.”<sup>5</sup>

Aside from this more generic usage of the term, two main traditions of thinking about nature have arguably dominated popular Anglo-American discourse since the middle of the twentieth century. According to one, a discourse rooted in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic notions of the pastoral and the sublime (associated with pristine wilderness), nature constitutes a realm that is more or less autonomous from human society, a primary, material realm, the workings of which offer us a set of values or standards against which humans can measure our own achievements. The latter come out looking better, that is, transcendent, or worse, as “fallen,” depending on one’s stance on the question of whether or not modernity and “progress” have been good things. The pastoral mythos looks back to more “traditional” times when people lived in closer harmony with nature, while the wilderness sublime, largely an American derivation, privileges an imagined past in which nature was undefiled by human presence.<sup>6</sup> In reality, the notion of a pristine nature was based on a colonial misperception, whereby European colonists assumed that the “wilderness” they saw around them was untouched when in fact it had been modified and managed by indigenous populations for centuries before European biological colonization dramatically reduced those populations.<sup>7</sup>

5. Mary Douglas, “Environments at Risk,” in *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, 232-48 (London: Routledge, 1975). On the history of changing conceptions of nature, see Clarence Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Stephen Horgan, *Nature and Culture in Western Discourses* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Kate Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-human* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995); Donald Worster, *Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (New York: Norton, 1995); John Urry and Phil Macnaghten, *Contested Natures* (London: Sage, 1996); Adrian Franklin, *Nature and Social Theory* (London: SAGE, 2001).

6. It is the latter wilderness preservationist tradition, especially its more recent variant of “deep ecology,” that has developed the distinction between anthropocentrism and biocentrism that has become common currency in eco-activist circles.

7. Of course, this is not to claim that there are no gradations or degrees of modification distinguishing indigenous from colonial and modern practices. See Alfred W. Crosby, Jr, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); William Denevan, “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82.3 (1992). Charles C. Mann, *New Revelations of the Americas before Columbus* (New York: Knopf, 2005).

According to a second set of ideas, rooted in natural history and evolutionary theory, nature or ecology constitutes a realm of untamed biological interrelationships from which humans have attempted to separate ourselves, yet which also provide a proving ground for tests of strength and/or for continued survival of the species. In the postwar period ecology has articulated a view of nature as a set of nested and interdependent physical and biological “systems,” which *include* human social systems. These social systems are in turn seen as consisting of a set of subsystems, such as the economic, the political, and the social (on national, local, and other scales), all of which are seen as historically shaped and as relatively changeable.

East European conceptions of nature, as these are found among Pagan and Native Faith practitioners, are different from both of these, though they overlap to an important degree with the pastoral tradition (but not the pristine wilderness tradition) and to a lesser degree with the ecosystemic tradition.<sup>8</sup> In what follows I will elucidate the unique sources of East European Pagan conceptions of nature. But before detailing these differences it is necessary to say a few things about the Pagan groups and movements that serve as the primary source material for the analysis that follows.<sup>9</sup>

### *Paganism and Native Faith in Slavic Eastern Europe*

East European Paganisms are a much less-charted area than are their North American or Western European counterparts, for two main reasons. The first is that many of these movements have only emerged, or in some cases re-emerged, since Gorbachev's *perestroika* (“rebuilding”) in the 1980s and especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–91. The second is that scholarship in many of these countries, especially in the former Soviet Union, was ill-equipped to deal with new religious movements and groups, and the situation has improved at a slow to moderate pace at best – hardly enough to keep up with the rapid growth of new religious movements and organizations. Only a very few book-length scholarly studies of Slavic Neopagan or

8. On the pastoral tradition in Russian landscape painting, see, for instance, Christopher Ely, *This Meagre Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002).

9. For a parallel analysis of ideas of nature in two New Age and Pagan pilgrim communities, with reference to a larger body of theoretical work in environmental communication and philosophy, see my *Claiming Sacred Ground: Pilgrims and Politics at Glastonbury and Sedona* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), especially Chapter 2.

related movements have been published,<sup>10</sup> and synthetic and comparative studies covering the whole of Eastern (and Central) Europe remain practically non-existent.

My own research has been largely confined to Ukraine, and much of what follows is based on a close reading of some of the main sources as well as current writings and scattered fieldwork with Ukrainian Pagans (in Ukrainian, *Yazychnyks*) and *Ridnovirs*. The latter term literally means “Native Faithers” or “Native Believers”; it is a broader term than *Yazychnyks*, and includes RUNVira, or Native Ukrainian National Faith, a prominent monotheistic reformist new religion based on its founder’s ideas about pre-Christian Ukrainian religion.<sup>11</sup> The analysis below has also been informed by primary and secondary materials on Russian and, to some extent, Polish, Slovak, Belarusian, and Serbian sources. There is fortunately a growing archive of on-line material from dozens of Pagan groups in these and other countries, as well as efforts by a smattering of Western Pagans to make available source materials on Slavic Paganism, though the quality of the latter is uneven, to say the least. Two international associations, the World Congress of Ethnic Religions (originally called the World Pagan Congress) and the recently formed All-Slavic Council of Native Believers (*Vseslovians’ke Viche Ridnoviriv*, in Ukrainian) have also been of value in the analysis that follows. My conclusions should thus be considered most relevant to the Ukrainian scene, to a lesser extent to the Russian, Belarusian, and Polish ones, and only partially relevant to the others in the region. Even within the Ukrainian setting, my focus is primarily on *Ukrainian* Native Faith groups, not on the non-ethnically Ukrainian (Russian, Pan-Slavic, “Vedic,” and other) groups, which are less numerous in Ukraine but nevertheless can be found, especially in the eastern regions of the country.<sup>12</sup> While the latter are less

10. Scott Simpson, *Native Faith: Polish Neo-paganism at the Brink of the Twenty First Century* (Krakow: Nomos, 2000); Viktor Shnirel’man, ed., *Neoyazychestvo na prostorakh Yevrazii* [Neo-Paganism in the Territories of Eurasia] (Moscow: Bibleisko-bogoslovskii institut sv. Apostola Andreia, 2001); Yevgenii Moroz, *Istoriia “mertvoi vody” – ot strashnoi skazki k bolshoi politike: Politicheskoe neoyazichestvo v Postsovietskoi Rossii* [The Story of “Dead Water” – From Terrible Tale to Great Politics: Political Neopaganism in Post-Soviet Russia] (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2005).

11. Adrian Ivakhiv, “In Search of Deeper Identities: Neo-Paganism and Native Faith in Contemporary Ukraine,” *Nova Religio* 8.3 (2005): 7-38; Adrian Ivakhiv, “The Revival of Ukrainian Native Faith,” in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. M. Strmiska (Religion and Contemporary Society series; Oxford: ABC-CLIO Press, forthcoming).

12. The most prominent ones include the Union of Slavic Societies (Soyuz Slavianskikh Obschin), the Ancient Russian Ingliistic Church of Orthodox Old Believers-Ingliists (Drevnerusskaya Ingliisticheskaya Tserkov Pravoslavnikh Staroverov-

nationalistic, many demonstrate the traits of right-wing politics and white racialism described below. Some, like the Slavic Pagan Movement (*Slavianskoye Yazicheskoye Dvizhenie*) and the Black Brotherhood (*Chornoye Bratstvo*), have significant overlap with national-socialist politics, the Black metal underground, and related right-wing movements. My focus, however, is on what could be called the “mainstream” within Ukrainian Paganism and Native Faith, not on the more extreme or underground variants.

While each national context carries its own specificities, the choice of Ukraine as a stand-in for Eastern Europe can to some extent be defended as follows. If Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and other eastern members of the European Union, are taken to be *Central* European nations (as they themselves prefer to be cast), then Ukraine’s geographical position between non-EU members Romania, Bulgaria, and (EU member) Slovakia to its south-west and Russia and Belarus to its north-east, and its political position as the largest nation between Russia and “the West,” makes it both geographically central and, in many respects, geopolitically central within Eastern Europe. One could argue that its status as a newly independent “postcolonial” state makes Ukraine more susceptible to nationalist strains of Paganism;<sup>13</sup> however, Russian Paganism is also dominated by strong nationalist currents (with some exceptions), and similar strains are prominent in all these countries.<sup>14</sup> In any case, the trends identified below are widespread, if not quite equally shared, in the three East Slavic post-Soviet states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.<sup>15</sup>

Inglingov), and the followers of Slavic Pagan martial arts teacher Selidor (A. Belov).

13. Ukraine’s “postcoloniality” has been much discussed among literary critics and historians, including Mykola Riabchuk and other contributors to the Kyiv-based intellectual monthly *Krytyka*; see, e.g., Mykola Riabchuk, “Culture and Cultural Politics in Ukraine: A Post-Colonial Perspective,” in *Dilemmas of State-Led Nation Building in Ukraine*, ed. T. Kuzio and P. D’Anieri (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 47-70; Stephen Velychenko, “Post-colonialism and Ukrainian History,” *Ab Imperio* 1 (2004): 391-404. On post-Soviet Ukraine more generally, see Andrew Wilson, *The Ukrainians: Unexpected Nation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); and Catherine Wanner, *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

14. For instance, in his thorough examination of Polish Neopaganism, Scott Simpson writes: “The Nation (in a variety of ideological forms) is almost always of highest moral concern to CEE [Central and Eastern European] Neo-Pagans” (Simpson, *Native Faith*, 40).

15. This article does not delve into the Baltic (northern European) traditions of Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia, nor on the Pagan and native religions of the non-ethnically Russian autonomous republics within the Russian federation. On Baltic Paganism, see Michael Strmiska, “The Music of the Past in Modern Baltic Paganism,” *Nova Religio* 8.3

The primary sources drawn on for the argument that follows are sacred texts, statements of faith, exegetical documents, and periodical literature produced by the main groups and associations of Pagans and Native Believers in Ukraine and, to some extent, in Russia. The most important document in the first category is the *Book of Veles*, an ostensibly early medieval text treated as holy writ by many Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian Pagans and Native Faith practitioners and as a keystone historical document by most others, though most scholars consider it to be a modern forgery.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, among Ukrainians, Lev Sylenko's *Maha Vira* is considered a bible by his followers, members of RUNVira, or the Native Ukrainian National Faith, and is read and discussed by many other Native Believers. The main Ukrainian organizations surveyed here are the Native Faith Association of Ukraine (*Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrayiny*, or ORU), the Council of the Native Ukrainian Faith (*Sobor Ridnoyi Ukrayinskoyi Viry*, or SRUV), the Native Orthodox Faith (*Ridna Pravoslavna Vira*, or RPV), the two largest denominations of the Native Ukrainian National Faith (OSID RUNVira and OSIDU RUNVira), and the influential Triitsia Community in Kyiv. Together, these groups contain a membership of some four or five thousand followers in Ukraine (and a small number abroad), but when one adds the number of independent and unaffiliated groups, individual practitioners, and seriously interested readers, the total number becomes substantially larger.<sup>17</sup> In the Russian (and pan-Slavic) context the main associations are the Union of Slavic Communities "Slavic Native Faith" (*Soyuz slavians'kikh obshchin Slavianskaya Rodnaia Vera*) and the Circle of Pagan Traditions (*Krug Yazycheskoi Traditsiyi*); the membership of each includes several dozen local communities and associations. Among the most important Ukrainian writers surveyed in this analysis are contemporary activists and community leaders, including Halyna "Zoreslava" Lozko (leader of the ORU), Volodymyr Kurov's'kyi (RPV), Oleh Bezverkhyi (SRUV), and archaeologist Iurii Shylov (a member of the Triitsia community), as well as

(2005): 39-58. Useful English-language overviews of the various forms of Paganism in Russia are Victor A. Shnirel'man, "'Christians! Go Home!' A Revival of Neo-Paganism between the Baltic Sea and Transcaucasia (An Overview)," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17.2 (2002): 197-211; and V. A. Shnirel'man, "Perun, Svarog, and Others: Russian Neo-Paganism in Search of Itself," *Cambridge Anthropology* 21.3 (1999/2000): 18-36.

16. On the *Book of Veles*, see Maya Kaganskaya, "The Book of Veles: Saga of a Forgery," *Jews and Jewish Topics in Soviet and East-European Publications* 4 (1986-87): 3-27; O. V. Tvorogov, "Vlesova kniga," *Trudy otdela drevnerusskoi literatury* 43 (1990): 170-254, available at <http://www.russiancity.ru/books/b48.htm>; Ivakhiv, "In Search of Deeper Identities," 12-14.

17. See Ivakhiv, "In Search of Deeper Identities."

historical figures, especially Volodymyr Shaian (1908–1974), who is widely credited as the founder or initiator of the rebirth of the Ukrainian Native Faith. Among Russian Pagans, the most influential writers include Aleksei Dobrovolskii (Dobroslav), Viktor Bezverkhii, Nikolai Speransky, and Aleksandr Barkashov (who writes under the pseudonym Aleksandr Asov). Finally, the key periodical literature consulted includes the Ukrainian journals *Svaroh*, *Rodove Vohnyshche*, *Slovo Oriyiv*, *Visnyk Vicha*, and *Tryhlav*.<sup>18</sup>

It should be stated that the following analysis does not exhaust the philosophical underpinnings of Ukrainian, Russian, or Slavic Paganism and Native Faith. On the contrary, much could be written about Pagan codes of honor or about cosmological formulations, such as the widely shared tripartite division of the universe into *Nav*, *Yav*, and *Prav* (respectively, the Spiritual, Invisible, or Other World; the Manifest World; and the World of Higher Law or “Right”), a conception that is commonly traced to the aforementioned *Book of Veles*. What follows, rather, is a preliminary attempt to articulate the general understanding of “nature” within East European Native Faith, and to shed light on the intellectual context that has created a conducive environment for such an understanding to develop.

*Nature and Environmental Ethics in Slavic Paganism:  
Sources and Influences*

*Nineteenth-Century Romanticism and Folkloristics*

As Ronald Hutton observed in his history of Neopagan Witchcraft, much of modern Paganism can be traced to the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic revolt against classicism, rationalism, faith in science, and Enlightenment universalism.<sup>19</sup> As a cultural and intellectual movement, Romanticism flowered alongside the development of modern nationalism, a set of ideas manifesting in two main variations, the inclu-

18. Additionally, I have consulted writings from a more broadly defined “cultic milieu,” including related groups such as the neo-traditionalist esotericist organization Mesogaia, the Aryosophical journal *Perekhid-IV*, and popular authors Yurii Kanyhin (*Vikhy sviashchennoi istorii: Rus'-Ukraina* [Landmarks of Sacred History: Rus'-Ukraine] [Kyiv: Ukrayina, 2001]; *Shliakh Ariiv: Ukrayina v dukhovnii istoriyi l'udstva. Roman-ese* [Path of the Aryans: Ukraine in the Spiritual History of Humanity, A Novel-essay] [Kyiv: Ukrayina, 2000]); Ihor Kahanets', *Ariis'kyi standart* [Aryan Standard] (Kyiv: A.S.K., 2004).

19. Hutton, Ronald H., *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

sive *civic* nationalism developed in France and later applied to the United States of America, and the *ethnic* nationalism identified most closely with German thinkers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and others. Herder conceived of nations or peoples as organic totalities: each ethnically defined *Volk* had its collective personality, unified through a common language and body of customs, folklore, song, myth, and ritual, and formed through a distinct history of interaction with its climate, geography, and natural environment.<sup>20</sup> Under the influence of Herder's ideas, intellectual elites began to assert histories and heritages for their emerging nations. Out of the Romantic ferment grew the fields of folkloristics and comparative philology, which, in the hands of Jakob Grimm, Franz Bopp, and others, came to embody a desire for noble origins – the shaping of national identities equal, if not superior, to others and distinct from the universalist claims of the Enlightenment and of Christianity. Movements of national awakening occurred across Europe, and just as other burgeoning nations compiled or invented their folk epics and books of genesis – such as the Scottish *Ossian* and the Finnish *Kalevala* – Poles, Czechs, Ukrainians, and other East Europeans did the same. Folk customs and worldviews were portrayed by leading writers, and folklorists and ethnographers gathered material from those “heartland” regions which otherwise were seen as the most “backward” provinces of rapidly modernizing nation-states. In each case, a *Volk*, “people,” or ethnos was identified as the carrier of traditions that emerged out of a close interaction with an environment, and which, in the Romantic mindset, represented health, vigor, and what today might be called “sustainability.” An ethnos, by this definition, was seen as an inherently territorial phenomenon; and European ethnoi were, according to the new comparative linguistics, seen as united by a collective descent from a mythical people or “race” called the “Aryans,” since renamed the Indo-Europeans.<sup>21</sup>

20. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Materials for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784).

21. This idea of ancient Aryan ancestors offered a means by which some Europeans felt they could distinguish themselves from the biblically based history of the Semitic peoples, which had provided the dominant lens on the distant past (in Europe) until the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Aryan–Semite dichotomy was used as a convenient template onto which some European intellectuals began projecting their own favored and unfavored traits. Ariosophy, as it became known, was to influence some of the ideologists of Hitler's Third Reich and has since been discredited in part due to that association; however, in the early decades of the twentieth century, non-Germanocentric forms of Ariosophy were in circulation in other parts of Eastern and Central Europe. These ideas were instrumental in the first

*Holism, Cosmism, and Early Twentieth-Century Ecological Philosophy*

The term "ecology" was coined by German biologist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). Ecological thinking, at its roots, is closely related to Darwinian evolutionism, but where Anglo-American social philosophers tended to develop the latter into a political perspective focused on the individual (i.e., Social Darwinism), in Germany and Russia it was developed into a non-dualist social philosophy, which saw the "laws of nature" as governing humans primarily at the collective level of nations or societies. While ecological thinking in the West has a strong tradition of holism, including such influential doctrines as Aldo Leopold's "Land Ethic," it rarely identifies the human part of the human-nature picture with a specific form of human collectivity, such as, for example, the tribe, ethnos, or nation.<sup>22</sup> In Eastern Europe, at least until recently, it has tended to do just this. In pre-Soviet imperial Russia the concept of *sobornost'*, or social communality, provided an important basis for a holistic conception of an organic connection between people (specifically, the rural peasantry), society (as represented by the church and the tsar), and the land ("mother Russia").<sup>23</sup> However, to explain why such holism persisted in the Soviet era, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of several developments in Soviet popular and scientific thought.

In the immediately pre-revolutionary and early Soviet periods, and to some extent even in the hostile political climate of the Stalinist era, with its no-holds-barred industrial development programs, holistic and con-

stirrings of a Ukrainian Neopagan revival in the 1930s, when Volodymyr Shaian simultaneously articulated the idea of the rebirth of Ukrainian "Native Faith" and of a "Pan-Aryan renaissance"; see Halyna Lozko, "Volodymyr Shaian: Osnovopolozhnyk vidrozhennia Ridnoi Viry [Volodymyr Shaian: Founder of the Rebirth of the Native Faith]," *Svaroh* 9 (1999): 6; Volodymyr Shaian, *Vira Predkiv Nashykh* [Faith of our Ancestors] (Hamilton, Ont.: Society of the Ukrainian Native Faith, 1987). On the Aryan myth, see Alan T. Davies, "The Aryan myth: Its Religious Significance," *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion* 10.3 (1981): 287-98; Dorothy M. Figueira, *Aryans, Jews, Brahmins: Theorizing Authority through Myths of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), Chapter 4; Léon Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racism and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, trans. Edmund Howard (London: Sussex University Press, 1974), 183ff.; Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Stefan Arvidsson, "Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67 (1999): 327-54.

22. Aldo Leopold, "The Land Ethic," in *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966): 237-64.

23. See J. D. Oldfield and D. J. B. Shaw, "Revisiting Sustainable Development: Russian Cultural and Scientific Traditions and the Concept of Sustainable Development," *Area* 34.4 (2002): 395.

ervationist sensibilities persisted among Soviet environmental scientists. Among others, soil scientist V. V. Dokuchayev (1846–1903), his student V. I. Vernadsky, and geographer V. A. Anuchin characterized the relationship between people and nature as a physical and “spiritual” one that can and ought to be characterized by a social-economic-ecological equilibrium.<sup>24</sup> One of the most important Soviet scientists, Vladimir Vernadsky (1863–1945), plays a central role in the history of ecological thought in Eastern Europe. Vernadsky is best known for developing the field of biogeochemistry, a precursor of today’s global systems perspectives in the ecological and environmental sciences, and for his ideas about the “noosphere,” the collective body of human thought incorporated into the biosphere as an active factor in its transformation. (Vernadsky developed this latter idea together with French thinkers Eduard Le Roy and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.) Influenced by other thinkers in the tradition of Russian philosophy that has come to be known as *Cosmism*, Vernadsky theorized the geologic role of living matter and the increasing influence of plant, animal, and human life on the evolution of planetary structures. Human thought, in his view, is a form of energy and an active factor of geological evolution, which allows humanity to cooperate with nature as a complementary part of a living and thinking organism.<sup>25</sup>

In broader intellectual circles, Russian Cosmistic writers such as Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Fedorov, Pavel Florensky, and space scientist Konstantin Tsiolkovsky infused these ideas with mystical utopianism, cosmic speculation, and Russian messianism. The “Eurasianist” school of thought, developed largely by Russian émigrés in the 1920s and 1930s, connected some of these ideas to the notion of a Russian-centered civilization which has ostensibly evolved in the cradle of the Eurasian

24. Oldfield and Shaw, “Revisiting Sustainable Development,” 396ff. On the persistence of this tradition into the later Soviet era, see D. R. Weiner, *Models of Nature: Ecology, Conservation and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

25. On Vernadsky and the concept of the noosphere, see V. I. Vernadsky, “The Biosphere and the Noosphere,” *American Scientist* 33 (1945): 1-12; V. I. Vernadsky, *Zhivoye veshchestvo i biosfera* [The Living Substance and the Biosphere] (Moscow: Nauka, 1994); V. I. Vernadsky, *Biosfera* (Moscow: Mysl’, 1967, published in English as *The Biosphere* [New York: Copernicus, 1998]); Iu. P. Trusov, “The Concept of the Noosphere,” *Soviet Geography* 10 (1969): 220-37. On Soviet geography, see Mark Bassin, “History and Philosophy of Geography,” *Progress in Human Geography* 21. 4 (1997): 563-72; Robert J. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). On Cosmism, see Michael Hagemester, “Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today,” in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. B. G. Rosenthal (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 185-202.

continent, a civilization that combined the virtues of Asia and Europe and that stood opposed, or at least as a preferable alternative, to the Atlanticist West. These ideas have been revived with great vigor by Russian thinkers in the last 15 years, in large part due to the work of Lev Gumilev, whom we will examine in a moment.

### *Soviet Anthropology*

As is widely recognized, Soviet science was for several decades dominated by forms of Marxist-Leninist historical materialism, which emphasized systematic historical changes in modes of production, including the development of capitalism and its presumed successor, socialism, and the class relations that structured the antagonistic dynamic between the two. What is less well understood in the West is the extent to which both Soviet science and the political organization of Soviet federalism (such as it was) were rooted in an understanding of identity based on a primordialist and territorialized notion of ethnicity. According to this understanding, "ethnos" is a pre-given category in the historical development of human society: ethnicity emerges from an ongoing relationship between a social community and a particular geographic environment, and the resulting ethnos naturally develops from the tribal level to that of a nationality (ethnic group) and ultimately to that of a nation-state. The Soviet Union was a centrally directed union of such states, with each state conceived as a national entity, to be developed according to Stalin's principle of "national in form, socialist in content." Ethnicity, in this picture, was inherently territorial, and ethnies were seen to have "homelands," in which they are "hosts" while other, non-titular ethnic or national groups are "guests." For decades such a territorialized conception of ethnicity was institutionalized in state practices, including passport registration and census procedures, and in nationality policies associated with the Soviet model of ethno-territorial federalism.<sup>26</sup> Such a notion of the ethnos, rooted in Herderian and Romantic conceptions of the nation, was developed in the 1920s by Soviet ethnologist S. M. Shirokogorov and, in the 1930s, Soviet anthropologist L. V. Oshanin utilized the term "ethnogenesis" (*etnogenez*) to describe the historical process by which ethnoses form and develop.<sup>27</sup> By way of comparison, such strict ethnic

26. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism*; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

27. As defined by Soviet ethnologist Iulian Bromley, an ethnos is "a stable intergenerational community of people, historically formed on a certain territory, possessing common relatively stable features of culture (including language) and psyche, as well as a consciousness of their unity and of their difference from other

primordialism, while it is recognized as a longstanding tradition in the Western scholarly study of nationalism, has long been outside the mainstream of Western scholarly discourse, which has been dominated by instrumentalist and constructivist views of ethnicity and nationalism.<sup>28</sup>

### *Lev Gumilev*

It was not until the late Soviet era, however, that the idea of ethnogenesis was combined with the project of defining an ecological and geopolitical orientation for the Russian nation. Lev Nikolayevych Gumilev (1912–1992) plays a central role in this project. The son of venerated dissident writer-poets Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova and himself a survivor of labor camps, Gumilev has been an enormously influential and charismatic figure in Russian ecological and cultural thought since the last decades of the Soviet Union. An Asian historian and ethnologist, Gumilev attempted to create a new science of the relations between humans and nature centered on his biocosmic theory of ethnogenesis. Influenced most by Vernadsky and by the Eurasianists of the 1920s–30s and by Vernadsky, Gumilev developed the latter's "theory of living matter" to explain ethnogenesis as a development of biochemical energy in the biosphere.

In his most significant work, *Ethnogenesis and the Earth's Biosphere*,<sup>29</sup> Gumilev applied his theoretical model to the development of ethnic groups, proposing that each ethnos, as a kind of "biosocial organism" made up of a complex combination of behavioral patterns, undergoes an organic evolution through which it develops a sense of deep connection with its geographic environment. The key factor for development of an ethnos is "passionality" (*passional'nost'*), or the "passionary drive." Whereas most people, for Gumilev, are motivated by a desire for self-

similar entities (self-awareness), reflected in a self-name (ethnonym)" (Iulian V. Bromley, *Ocherki teorii etnosa* [Essays on the Theory of Ethnos] [Moscow: Nauka, 1983], 57-58). On Shirokogorov, Ovshanin, and Soviet ethnology more generally, see Sergei Sokolovski, "Structures of Russian Political Discourse on Nationality Problems" (Kennan Institute Occasional Papers Series 272; Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1999, <http://wwics.si.edu/topics/pubs/ACF28A.pdf>), 5; Bella Bychkova Jordan and Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, "Ethnogenesis and Cultural Geography," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 21. 1 (2003): 5.

28. E.g., Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

29. Lev N. Gumilev, *Etnogenez i biosfera zemli* [Ethnogenesis and the Earth's Biosphere] (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta, 1989), published in abridged English translation as *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere* (Moscow: Progress, 1990).

preservation, a select proportion are “passionaries” who devote their lives to particular goals and charge the larger society with the energy of action. In contrast to this life-affirming energy, necessary for any creative development and associated with the growth of an ethnic group living in harmony with its environment, Gumilev argued that ethnic mixing leads to a dangerous loss of that organic connection with the natural environment, a turn to abstract thinking, negative attitudes to nature and life, and ultimately an entropic degeneration into an inert or “vacuum” state. Another danger, for Gumilev, is represented by the “parasitic ethnos” or “chimera,” which develops outside of any environmentally symbiotic context and, when it becomes lodged within the territory of a “benign” ethnos, threatens it with destruction from within.

Gumilev developed a kind of ecological morality in his Manichean conception of life as divided into passionality/energy and vacuum/entropy (“anti-systems”), with some benign and dynamic ethnoi on the side of the former, while others, seen as stagnant, malicious, parasitic, or chimeric, are on the side of the latter. And while he stopped short of blaming the Jewish diaspora for the misfortunes of Russian and other ethnoi, this allusion was implicit in his writings, especially in his characterization of the Judaic state of Khazaria as “chimeric” and parasitic on the early medieval state of Rus’, predecessor to today’s Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusan nations. Gumilev’s assumption of ethnic essences bears only a tenuous relationship to contemporary anthropology; it also bears an obvious resemblance to fascist notions opposing communities of organic solidarity against dangerously rootless “cosmopolitans.” Yet he remains an extremely popular cult figure, whose legacy continues not only in popular nationalist circles, but among many Russian and Ukrainian intellectuals and scholars as well.<sup>30</sup>

30. See Lev Gumilev, *Noosfera i khudozhestvennoe tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Nauka, 1991); Lev Gumilev, *Etnosfera: Istoriya liudei i istoriya pryrody* (Moscow: Ecopros, 1993). For scholarly critiques of his ideas, see Viktor Shnirel’man and Sergei Panarin, “Lev Gumilev: His Pretensions as Founder of Ethnology and his Eurasian Theories,” *Inner Asia* 3 (2001): 1-18; Mikhail N. Epstein, *The Russian Philosophy of National Spirit: Conservatism and Traditionalism* (Washington, DC: National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1994). On the questionable legacy of Gumilev’s writings on ethnicity, race, and related topics, see Svetlana Boym, “From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia,” *Representations* 49 (1995): 154ff.; Vera Tolz, “Forging the Nation”: National Identity and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 50.6 (1998): 1002-1004. A positive scholarly assessment of Gumilev is Bychkova Jordan and Jordan-Bychkov, “Ethnogenesis and Cultural Geography”; these two scholars (one a respected and widely published American cultural geographer) call Gumilev the USSR’s most prominent cultural geographer, and analyze his work as a sophisticated version of cultural ecology (pp. 6ff.).

*Recent Developments in Post-Soviet Neo-traditionalism and Nature Philosophy*

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, ethnic nationalism, neo-traditionalism, anti-Westernism, and a revived Eurasianism (in Russia) have surfaced in various interconnected strands in the popular and intellectual culture of Eastern Europe. Paralleling Western civilizationalist thinkers such as Samuel Huntington, with his argument that global conflicts of the future will be based on a “clash of civilizations,” Russian neo-Eurasianists, led by Aleksandr Dugin, as well as other radical traditionalists and defenders of “Orthodox civilization” oppose the commercial empire of the “Atlanticist” West, claiming that a Russian-led Eurasian civilizational bloc would harbor a more proper balance between the spiritual and material worlds.<sup>31</sup> Neo-traditionalists and ethnic nationalists draw on the writings of Western European radical traditionalists, including René Guénon and Julius Evola, and on writers associated with the French Nouvelle Droite (New Right). Beliefs in the sacred destiny of Russia, or of Ukraine for Ukrainians, and in the power of specific landscapes such as the Melitopil’ area in southern Ukraine or Arkaim in the Ural Mountains have spread through the work of the followers of the Agni Yoga or “Living Ethics” (*Zhivaya Etika*) of artist-theosophists Nikolai Rerikh (1874–1947) and his wife Elena Rerikh (1879–1955) and in the writings of Oles’ Berdnyk, Iurii Shylov, Aleksandr Asov, and others.<sup>32</sup> “Aryosophy,” which takes its premise from the archaeologically contentious notion that ancient Aryans once roamed somewhere in the expanses of central Asia, southern Russia, and/or Ukraine, has grown into a mini-industry in itself, with the works of Aleksandr Asov achieving a high popularity in Russia. In Ukraine such ideas have been developed in the writings of archaeologist Iurii Shylov, popular author Iurii Kanyhin, and others, for whom the southern Ukrainian steppes between the Dnipro (Dniepr) and the Don rivers represent a civilizational cradle

31. Aleksandr Dugin’s influential writings include *Konservativnaya Revolutsiya* [The Conservative Revolution] (Moscow: AKIRN, 1994) and *Osnovy Geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoie budushcheie Rossii* [Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia] (Moscow: Arktogeia, 1997). His influence on Russian political circles is examined in John B. Dunlop, “Aleksandr Dugin’s ‘Neo-Eurasian’ Textbook and Dmitrii Trenin’s Ambivalent Response,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 25:1/2 (2001):91-128. A good source on Eurasianism is I. A. Isaev, ed., *Puti Evrazii* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1992). The influence of René Guénon’s Traditionalism on Dugin and other Russian thinkers is examined in Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

32. E.g., on Arkaim, see V. A. Shnirel’man, “Passions about Arkaim: Russian Nationalism, the Aryans, and the Politics of Archaeology,” *Inner Asia* 1 (1999):267-82.

filled with sacred cultural and “energetic” landscapes.<sup>33</sup>

The teachings of Ukrainian-born nature mystic and ascetic Porphirii Ivanov (1898–1983) have also found a large audience of followers scattered across the former Soviet Union, and have even been incorporated into the official educational curriculum of the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan. Rejecting materialism, Ivanov advocated a “System” of living in close harmony with nature, including twice-daily cold bathing in natural waters, regular barefoot walking in the outdoors, weekly waterless fasting (from Friday evening to noon Sunday), abstinence from smoking and drinking, and an altruistic demeanor in all activities. With its focus on natural health and rejuvenation and its mixture of personal virtue ethics, rural communitarianism, millenarian optimism, and rejection of worldly power, Ivanov’s teaching represents the latest in a long tradition of East Slavic nature religions. Similar ideas and practices have mixed with cosmicist thinking, Asian spiritual trends, occultism, and strands of Orthodox belief, to produce much of the diversity of alternative religion in Eastern Europe today. These many trends feed into a cultural or “cultic” milieu from which Ukrainian and other East European Pagans and Native Believers draw on in their own reconceptualizations of ethnicity, culture, and politics in the post-Soviet era.

In the case of post-Soviet Ukraine, such ideas are discussed and developed in a context in which Ukrainians are striving to develop a national identity appropriate to a modern state within a larger world that appears to harbor multiple threats. As many Ukrainians see it, these threats come both from the East, in the form of a potential revival of Russian hegemony, a Slavic or Eurasian bloc of nations ruled from the old “center” in Moscow, and from the West, with its cosmopolitan, relativizing, and competitive capitalist economy in which some Ukrainians fear inundation and a future of economic servitude. The solution, for some, is to turn to an ethno-nationalist assertiveness unseen since the nineteenth century (and the inter-war and World War II era in western Ukraine). In the case of Russia, on the other hand, it is exclusively the Western threat that is seen as requiring a strong Russian response. While other national ethnicities have been “liberated” from the constraints of the Russian-dominated Soviet Union, Russians have not often perceived themselves as an “ethnic

33. By “Aryosophy” I do not mean the valuable scholarship on Indo-European origins of such archaeologists as James Mallory, Marija Gimbutas, David Anthony, and others. Rather, I use the term to refer to the popular literature which assumes not only that the Indo-European origins question has been settled, but also that the Proto-Indo-Europeans are equivalent to ancient “Aryans” – the same people who later were to write the Vedas – and that derives a mystical cosmology from the mix of Vedic literature and Slavic folklore and archaica.

group like any other." Since 1991, however, Russian nationalism has emerged in numerous forms, alongside pan-Slavic and "Eurasian" civilizational identities. In all these contexts ideas of "nature" are appropriated as a source of values, but these are generally a "nature" that is seen not as separate or autonomous from humans, but one that is thoroughly intermingled within particular historical communities, whether Russian, Ukrainian, Slavic, or "Eurasian." In what follows I will resort to specific examples from Ukrainian Pagan and Native Faith writings, but it should be understood that similar sentiments can be found in Russian and other East European Pagan writings.<sup>34</sup>

### *Native Faith as Nature Religion or as Identity Movement?*

#### *Nature as Land*

Examination of Ukrainian Native Faith writings shows that some idea of "nature as land" and of environmental crisis plays an important role for Native Believers, at least as a trope around which to orient their ideas about human society. Land is specifically invoked as a source of sustenance, which should be cared for and shared by all. On occasion this concern for the land has resulted in political statements such as the "Proclamation to All Ukrainians," delivered at the First Forum of Ukrainian Native Believers in February 2003, which urged resistance to the government's plans to privatize agricultural lands. As the Native Orthodox Faith (Ridna Pravoslavna Vira, or RPV) faith document, *With the Gods in Tryhlav*, puts it, "The Land of the Ruses [inhabitants of medieval Rus'] is Holy... It is the cradle of our nation [*Rod*, which can also be translated as Kin, Ancestry, or Family]." In his exegesis to this principle of faith, RPV High Priest Volodymyr Kurovs'kyi writes, "All the land should be protected, defended against mockery, and kept pure. *It should especially be protected against foreigners*, because our land means nothing to them..."<sup>35</sup> In August 2005, the RPV led a march in Kyiv of Native

34. The availability of information on Belarus is limited, in part, due to the country's smaller size and to President Aleksandr Lukashenka's rigid authoritarian rule; but the country can be seen as containing elements broadly analogous to both the Ukrainian and Russian contexts described here. Belarusian nationalists, on the whole, tend to see themselves as more positively related to their Russian "brethren" than do Ukrainian nationalists; thus, pan-Slavism is more widespread in both Russia and in Belarus than in Ukraine.

35. Volodymyr Kurov'skyi, ed., *Z bohamy u Tryhlavi: Karby virovchennia Ridnoyi Pravoslavnoyi Viry* [With the Gods in Tryhlav: Treasury of the Teachings of the Native Orthodox Faith] (Kyiv: Rodove Vohnyshche Ridnoyi Pravoslavnoyi Viry, 2004),

Believers protesting laws allowing the sale of land (as well as the introduction of Christian Ethics classes in public schools).

This notion of land overlaps to some degree with the first and third notions of nature referred to above, that of pastoral nature and of ecological systems, but it can more accurately be seen as rooted in a traditionalist “stewardship ethic,” where the land is “ours to care for,” with both the “ours” and the “care” being significant components of a relationship that unfolds over time. Land should therefore not be turned into a commodity, which would allow it to be sold to outsiders who have no historical relationship with it. Nature, in this view, is not autonomous from the human world, but the two are inherently interrelated. Compared to modern ecological systems views, this perspective does not understand humans in the abstract as a subsystem of nature; instead, it sees humans as inherently organized in tightly knit, biologically related communities which are intertwined with nature. This is neither an anthropocentric, instrumentalist, nor biocentric view. Rather, it expresses what could be called an “ethnocentric natural law” ethic. Exceptions to such ethnocentrism can be found among Pagan related groups; these include followers of Porphyrii Ivanovych Ivanov, who may not be Pagans but who do qualify as practitioners of a sort of “nature religion,” and certain Pan-Slavic and Vedic groups for whom a Slavic or “Aryan” identity is important but not definitive. However, the majority of Pagans and Native Believers in Ukraine and Russia do seem to proclaim something akin to such an ethnocentric natural law ethic. The following two sections expand on two significant components of such an ethic.

#### *Nature as Ethnos, Nation, or “Blood”*

In her book *Ethnology of Ukraine* Halyna Lozko, a scholar, leading ideologist of Ukrainian Paganism, and spiritual head of the Union of Native Believers of Ukraine (Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrayiny, or ORU), defines ethnos as a “natural phenomenon,” “a blood-related collectivity which has its native land, its native language, and its native faith.”<sup>36</sup> For Lev Sylenko, founder of RUNVira, the human species has similarly, as part of its evolution, divided itself into distinct *ethnoi*, each of which undergoes its own life cycle, flourishing or perishing according to a natural developmental process. Ukrainians, for Sylenko and for most Native Believers, constitute an ancient ethnos; Sylenko dates the “Trypillian-Oriian-Scythian-Ukrainian” ethnos back nearly 8,000 years. The *Book of Veles*,

online version, available at <http://tryglav.iatp.org.ua/lev/bookzbut1.htm>, no pagination. Emphasis added.

36. Halyna Lozko, *Etnolohia Ukrayiny* (Kyiv: ArtEk, 2001), 16, 18.

which most scholars take to be a modern forgery, is accepted by Native Believers as dating back over 2,000 years and as providing information going back to before the Indian Vedas were written. (Many Ukrainian Native Believers believe the Vedas were in fact written by Aryans who migrated across Central Asia from the Ukrainian steppes.)

Ethnic identity is frequently connected to racial and “blood” identity; all are issues that concern many, if not most, Native Believers. Conceptions here range from more moderate forms of Ukrainian ethnic nationalism (with ostensible respect for all nations) to more extreme forms of racial identification, including Aryanism and White racialism. The idea of Ukrainians as “Aryans” is widespread among all the major Native Faith confessions; this is the case among Russian Pagans as well. Both of the two major founders of Ukrainian Native Faith, Volodymyr Shaian and Lev Sylenko, emphasized the “Aryan” nature of Ukrainians. Shaian hoped that the rebirth of Ukrainian Paganism would be part of a broader Pan-Aryan Renaissance, while Sylenko has been careful to acknowledge the value of all nations or ethnoses in their own homelands.<sup>37</sup> Native Faith writer Budymyr, in his *Rebirth of the Worldview: The Great Ukrainian Resistance*, includes a detailed classification of kinship categories, arranged as a series of concentric circles founded on blood kinship and spanning outwards from the family unit (*simya*), extended family (*rodyna*), and ancestral lineage (*rid*) to the tribe (*plemia*), nation (*narod*), state (*derzhava*), family of nations (*simya narodiv*, e.g. Slavs), and race (*rasa*), but, tellingly, with no all-human category beyond that.<sup>38</sup>

Both Lozko and RPV leader Kurovs’kyi devote significant space to “raceology,” which they treat as if it were an established science. In *Ethnology of Ukraine*, Lozko draws on Herder, Gumilev, and an array of modern “raceologists” to present the theory of polygenism (that human races emerged separately from different progenitor species) as decisively more convincing than its counterpart, considered standard by Western biologists, of monogenism (the “out of Africa” theory). Lozko writes that

37. Some prefer the term “Oriitsi,” or “Oryans,” to “Aryans,” as the former term softens the harsher political associations of the latter, and at the same time connects the mythic Aryans to the agricultural plow or “or,” which ancient Ukrainians apparently used to tame the land. Those familiar with Marija Gimbutas’s theory of Indo-European horsemen invading peaceful goddess-worshipping agriculturalists might be surprised to see the two brought together into a peaceable synthesis in the quasi-archaeological work of Lev Sylenko, trained archaeologist Yurii Shylov, and numerous other writers.

38. Budymyr, *Vidrodzhennia Svitohliadu: Velyke Ukrayins’ke Vidvovuvannia* [Rebirth of the Worldview: The Great Ukrainian Resistance] (Kyiv: self-published, 2001), 25-28.

The latest contemporary findings in the research methodologies of raceology, particularly the works of Russian scholars H. Khit and N. Dolynovoi (*Racial Differentiation of Humanity/Rasovaia differentsiatsia chelovechesva*, Moscow, 1990) prove that all talk about the species unity of humanity consists of nonscientific fantasies.<sup>39</sup>

She goes on to describe the races according to categories long discarded by Western science: White/Aryan as creative, Yellow as conservative, Black and mixed race peoples as degradative, and so on.

Racial mixing, and to a lesser degree ethnic mixing, are therefore frowned upon. The RPV's *Testaments and Teachings of the Ancestors* exhorts followers to maintain purity of blood ("To marry and have children with people not of one's 'Rod' is a grave harm [*kryvda*], because purity of the blood of the Rod is thereby defiled...") and to maintain awareness of one's "varna" (or caste, of which there are three: farmers, warriors, and priests).<sup>40</sup> Exogamy, or the "mixing of blood," is outlawed by the "Commandments of the Native Faith Believer."<sup>41</sup> By analogy with animal species, Halyna Lozko argues that intermarriage between human ethnic groups, and all the more between races, is a "disintegrative (destructive) factor" for ethnic survival.<sup>42</sup> The ORU's "Declaration of the First All-Ukrainian Conference of the Ukrainian Native Faith to the Ukrainian Government and to all Ukrainians, in Ukraine and out of its borders," in its opening paragraph, blames the decline of humanity on the "[m]ixing of ethnic (national) cultures" which "finally inevitably leads to demolition of the ethnosphere which is a part of biosphere of the Earth."<sup>43</sup>

#### *Nature as Sacred Tradition*

If the notion of nature as land is one that Western environmentalists can easily comprehend and agree with, while nature as ethnos (or as "blood") seems a throwback to less enlightened times, an idea that synthesizes the two and that is commonly found in Native Faith literature is that of Sacred Tradition or Custom. I capitalize these words to denote their difference from mere "traditions" or "customs," and because in some state-

39. Lozko, *Ethnolohiia Ukrayiny*, 18-22, quote on p. 21.

40. Kurovs'kyi, *Z bohamy u Tryhlavi*, no pagination.

41. "Zapovidi Ridnovira," *Visnyk Vicha Ukrayins'kykh Ridnoviriv* [Herald of the Assembly of Ukrainian Native Believers] (28 April 2004): 5.

42. Lozko, *Ethnolohiia Ukrayiny*, 23.

43. Obiednannia Ridnoviriv Ukrayiny, "Vidovza Pershoho Vseukrayins'koho Soboru Ridnoyi Viry do Uriadu Ukrayiny ta do vsikh ukrayintsiv v Ukrayini y poza yiyi mezhamy" [Response of the First All-Ukrainian Council of the Native Faith to the Government of Ukraine and to All Ukrainians in Ukraine and Beyond its Borders], *Svaroh* 9 (1998): 4.

ments of faith these words are actually capitalized. While some idea of Sacred Tradition is implicit or explicit among most Native Faith groups, it has been particularly well emphasized by the Kyiv-based Triitsia community, for whom it has taken on the character of a unifying catchphrase or mantra. For Triitsia, “Custom” (*Zvychayevist’*, Customariness, or Sacred Tradition) denotes a form of natural law: it is the “Constitution of a People’s [*Narod’s*] Worldview,” made up of the “life-affirming, life-loving expressions of the LAWS of the PERFECT ETERNAL WORLD, given to HUMANITY for a HAPPY LIFE.”<sup>44</sup> As described in their faith handbook, *Zvychayevist’* consists of:

the LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE, (UNIVERSAL MIND, NATURE), given to humans at their creation by GOD, which encompass all defining aspects of the life of the human (physical and spiritual), and ensure coexistence between humans and all life on Earth. It is the DIVINE WORLDVIEW OF THE UNIVERSAL ORDER, encoded in humans on the genetic level. It is the general, unified LAWS OF NATURE...CUSTOM [*Zvychayevist’*] is the sum total of CUSTOMS, each of which regulates a certain aspect of human life and, at the same time, is connected to all others in one whole. CUSTOM [*Zvychayevist’*] is the CONSTITUTIONAL WORLDVIEW of the individual person and of the people [*narod*] as a whole, the Highest Law, which guarantees, if it is followed, the organic coexistence with all in NATURE.<sup>45</sup>

Native Believers understand today’s world as one caught in the grips of a devastating loss of tradition. This notion of Tradition, or Custom, encompasses a narrative of history, proceeding from a Golden Age in which human collectives operated in instinctive harmony with the natural world (and of psychic attunement with the Earth’s “Informational Field”<sup>46</sup>) to today’s near total deterioration of the “ethnosphere” and biosphere. As the Triitsia handbook describes it, the gradual loss of the pristine condition occurred through stages, with language first severing us from nature, making possible such things as lying, and with writing and later technological development making possible a growing enslavement by those who control these technologies, specifically the main adversary of Native Faith, which Triitsia identifies as Money, the “Financial International,” the “Golden Devil.”<sup>47</sup> Most Ukrainian and Russian Native Believers identify an adversarial force of some kind; for others, it may be Christianity, modernity, globalism, Zionism, the ideologies of “rootless cosmopolitans,” or some combination of all of these factors (and they are

44. Triitsia, *Rechnyk Ridnovira* (Kyiv: Triitsia, 2003), 32, 48; all emphasis and capitals in original.

45. *Ibid.*, 16.

46. *Ibid.*, 38.

47. *Ibid.*, 41-42.

often seen as interconnected). The solution to the current situation, as many Native Believers see it, is a recovery of the original condition through a rebirth of the remnant forms of tradition and custom encoding those original relationships, or “Original Instructions” (a term used by some Native American Traditionalists) by which human groups once lived in harmony with Nature.

### *The Politics of Native Faith*

Given these beliefs about nature, identity, and tradition, it should not be surprising that to the extent that they identify themselves politically, Ukrainian and Russian Native Believers are almost always found on the political right.<sup>48</sup> The biographical blurb in Lozko’s edition of the *Book of Veles*, for instance, explicitly hails her as “ideologue of the Ukrainian radical right movement.”<sup>49</sup> Some Russian Pagans are members of national-socialist (neo-fascist) and “national-bolshevik” groups, both of which are generally considered to be on the conservative far right; indeed, the influence of Pagan-inspired political thinkers within the Russian right is surprisingly extensive and, to many observers, troubling.<sup>50</sup> Some Native Faith writings explicitly refer to European radical right movements and thinkers, such as mid-century Italian fascist mystic Julius Evola, the French Nouvelle Droite and its leading representative Alain de Benoist, and other “pagan conservatives.”<sup>51</sup> The writings of Dugin, Lozko, and others echo the themes of the Nouvelle Droite, including its anti-liberalism and anti-egalitarianism, its hostility to Christianity, implicit anti-Semitism (and explicit anti-Zionism), and advocacy of a return to an ethno- and ecocentric Paganism equated with an ancient Indo-European past. Ukrainian Native Believers blame Christianity for having taken

48. One should keep in mind, however, that the terms “left” and “right” carry a somewhat different inflection in the former Soviet Union than in the West. Some Neo-Pagan writings indicate sympathy or identification with the Soviet era (e.g., Budymyr, *Vidrodzhennia Svitohliadu*) or with Russia’s current post-Soviet situation (e.g., Yaromysl, *Slovo Oriyiv* [October 2001]: 8-9). Most, however, are strongly critical of Soviet communism, but also critical of Western liberalism, capitalism, and cosmopolitan internationalism or multiculturalism.

49. Halyna Lozko, ed., *Velesova Knyha: Volkhovnyk* [The Book of Veles: A Mage’s Guide] (Kyiv: Taki Spravy, 2002), 366.

50. E.g., Victor A. Shnirel’man, “Russian Neo-Pagan Myths and Anti-Semitism,” *Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism* 13 (1998), <http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/13shnr.html>, last accessed 1 November 2003; Dunlop, “Aleksandr Dugin’s ‘Neo-Eurasian’ Textbook”.

51. On Pagan conservatism, see Tomislav Sunic, *Against Democracy and Equality: The European New Right* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990); Tomislav Sunic, “Marx, Moses, and the Pagans in the Secular City,” *CLIO* 24 (1990): 2.

away Ukrainians' original traditions and values, "enslaved" Ukrainians and clouded their minds, turning them into "sheep" and making them easy fodder for foreign overlords, whether imperial Russian/Muscovite, Polish, Soviet Communist, or most recently "Jewish-American." As argued by Dymerskaya-Tsigelman and Finberg and by Shnirelman, the "Jewish question" hovers over much of the Ukrainian and Russian Pagan milieus.<sup>52</sup> Pagan publications make at least occasional derogatory references to Christianity as a foreign and "Jewish" religion, and frequently castigate it as a tool of "internationalism and cosmopolitanism," which are recognized by Jewish scholars as codewords for an imagined conspiracy of "international Jewry."<sup>53</sup> Revealingly, though there is hardly a word about Jews in Halyna Lozko's Pagan prayer manual *Pravoslov*, the final page features ten Pagan Commandments, of which the final one reads "Don't get involved with Jews!"<sup>54</sup>

This perspective ties in directly to the movement's anti-globalism. The RUNVira periodical *Slovo Oriyiv*, in its editorial on the tenth anniversary of Ukrainian independence, declared, "Today we've simply divided up our [former] total dependence on Moscow among Moscow, Washington, Israel, Europe, and god knows who else."<sup>55</sup> From one oppressor, Ukraine is seen as having been handed over to another, "'Jehovah's chosen' nation and the 'global police force' ruled by them — the USA."<sup>56</sup> In these positions Ukrainian Native Believers may be seen to be reacting against economic processes that have engulfed Ukraine since the fall of the Soviet Union in a way that is consistent with the broader anti-globalization movement. This movement is commonly thought of as a movement of the political left, but the examples of the Nouvelle Droite, far right Republicans such as Patrick Buchanan in the United States, and Islamist Jihadists, and others, tell us that there is an anti-globalization right that is as vehement and vigorous as anything on the left.

Despite these parallels and overlaps with other radical right movements, however, some strains of Ukrainian and Russian Native Faith differ from the more overtly political orientation of those movements in the

52. Liudmila Dymerskaya-Tsigelman and Leonid Finberg, "Antisemitism of the Ukrainian Radical Nationalists: Ideology and Policy," *Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism* 14 (1999), <http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/14liud.html>, last accessed 1 November 2003; Shnirelman, "Russian Neo-Pagan Myths and Anti-Semitism".

53. E.g., Mstyslav, *Slovo Oriyiv* (August 10001 Y.D. [2001]): 6.

54. "Ne mai spravy z zhydom!" H. Lozko, ed., *Volkhovnyk. Pravoslov* (Kyiv: Svaroh, 2001), 138.

55. *Slovo Oriyiv* (August 2001): 1.

56. Yaromysl, "Pro Moskoviyyu i moskovyktiv" [On Muscovy and Muscovites], *Slovo Oriyiv* (October 11001 [2001]): 8.

emphasis placed on lifestyle, family, community, and ritual practice. Many Native Believers are attracted especially by the ethical principles underlying their faith, with its emphasis on honor, continuity with and responsibility before one's ancestors, and a land-based work ethic, all of which are seen to contrast to the principles that guided the Soviet era and those that are perceived to be flowing in from the West today. This duality of right-wing politics and cultural/community-based religiosity can be seen in Native Believers' frequent overlap with other civil organizations, which range from folk revival groups and Cossack or martial arts groups to nationalist and ultra-nationalist political groups. Members of RUNVira and of the RVP, among others, have been especially prominent within the revival and development of Ukrainian Cossack orders, with their martial arts, swordsmanship, and warriorship codes of ethics.

### *Conclusion*

"Nature" means different things to different people, and modern Western concepts of nature, including those shared by Neopagans, should not be assumed to be objectively true or universal among Pagan or indigenous religious practitioners across the world. For Ukrainian and other Slavic Native Faith believers, nature is not viewed as separate from culture; or at least, Native Believers do not seem very interested in nature *per se*, as it is commonly understood in Western science. Rather, their interest is in the ethnic or cultural collectivity that has a seemingly "natural" relationship with its particular nonhuman environment. Questions about how this relationship develops, the historical contingencies whereby social groups move from one place to another, languages evolve and spread (by assimilation, hybridization, and other processes), and collective identities emerge, fragment, and transform, are shunted aside in favor of a view in which an ethnos remains essentially the same for millennia, growing and evolving like an organism, but with boundaries that are recognizable and that are passed on through the "blood."

This kind of "nature" may be different from that commonly understood by Anglo-American environmentalists; however, it is one with long-standing historical provenance. It is a nature that *includes* humans, not as a single unified species that is creative, dynamic, and capable of rapid social change – a species consisting of humans whose rights are recognized and enshrined in the historically attained contracts brought by a modernity that may remain problematic – but rather as a species that is culturally and racially differential, with different roots in different places extending outwards to rigid territories of belonging and exclusion. This may in fact be "nature religion" of a sort, and some of it is certainly

Paganism; but it is more definitively *ethnic* religion. The virtue of the latter term is that its definition is more clear – it is about a culturally defined “in group” – while “nature religion” lacks a very clear definition.

To what extent, then, can these forms of religion be called “nature religion”? If by this term we are referring to the European Romantics’ idea of nature as a source of healing, wholeness, and purity – the nature that (more or less) spawned the original nature preservation movement of John Muir and others – then some, but not all, the elements of an environmental ethic based on such a view of nature may be shared by East European Pagans. They, too, wish to return to a place and time that was more pure and whole, though it is not necessarily one that featured large areas of “virgin wilderness”; it may have, rather, consisted of a thoroughly tamed agricultural landscape. If, on the other hand, we mean nature as defined by ecological science, then we need to ask, first, what exactly that definition is and whether it is a stable and reliable one,<sup>57</sup> and, secondly, we need to apply that definition to those whom we would consider to be practitioners of “nature religion”. If our definition of nature is a normative one – and it would seem that, by definition, a nature religion must incorporate *some* normative understanding of nature – then the question should be: what are the norms perceived to exist in the natural world, and what are the social and cultural forms that follow from or are encompassed within those norms? I have attempted here to identify the main characteristics of the normative conception of nature that underpins the dominant forms of East European Pagan and Pagan-related Native Faith.

East European Native Faith is perhaps best seen as a form of radical conservatism or traditionalism, rooted in nineteenth-century European notions of the nation as a tightly bounded, blood-related unit of the evolutionary process. This form of ethnic religion *is* a response to the ecological crisis, but the ecological crisis is seen as part and parcel of a broader, global ethnocultural crisis of unprecedented scope. The response offered is a return to the cultural traditions of people who ostensibly lived in harmony with the Earth. In effect, what is foreseen is a purification whereby those who can return to their “Original Instructions” will do that; as for those who cannot, perhaps because their people do not *have*

57. See, e.g., Daniel S. Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Karl S. Zimmerer, “Human Geography and the ‘New Ecology’: The Prospect and Promise of Integration,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 84.1 (1994): 108-25; Ian Scoones, “New Ecology and the Social Sciences: What Prospects for a Fruitful Engagement?” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 479-507.

such instructions, their fate is left unmentioned. The role of ecology and ecological thought here is at best secondary within these movements; it is one of the sources of appeal for Native Believers, a trope that appears alongside others such as nation, heritage, honor, and tradition. As such, the ethic encompassed within such a “nature religion” – or, more appropriately, such an “ethnic religion” – is a form of ethnocentric natural law ethic. Such an ethic encompasses within itself an environmental ethic, one that we might call an environmental ethic of the “religious right,” or at least of one, non-mainstream or non-Christian portion of the religious conservative milieu.

Though the research summarized here does not extend beyond Eastern Europe, it does raise the question of how widespread such an idea of nature – that is, an ethnically, nationally or culturally imbued notion of nature – may be. I would, in fact, suggest that such a view may be more widespread around the world than the modern Anglo-American view of a nature purified of culture, or of an “ecology” in which humans are seen as a single species rather than as ethnically (or racially) already intertwined with natural systems. Presumptions about Paganism bringing its practitioners into closer harmony with nature need to be examined with this in mind: What kind of harmony would Pagans like to seek? *Whose* harmony with *what* nature? In contexts where nature plays a guiding role for religious and cultural organization, practice, and ethics, how is this ethnic card played out? What of those (immigrants, refugees, and perennial “others”) who do not appear to fit the criteria of such ethnically, culturally, or racially defined “harmony”? And what are the implications of this common link between Paganism and territorialized, primordialist ethnicity for scholars of Paganism and for Pagan practitioners in the West? If scholars of religion are to maintain some concept of “nature religion,” we must reflect on our own assumptions about “nature” and on how these compare with others. Ultimately, a greater dialogue between different views of nature and different views of politics will better allow us to negotiate the minefield of cultural claims to nature within which contemporary Paganisms around the world are enmeshed.

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