

Modern Germanic Heathenry and the Radical Traditionalists

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The word 'Traditionalism' is used to denote a number of different ideas and schools of thought in contemporary society. A Google search on the term will generally link you to a number of sites on Catholicism, mostly related to the schism Marcel Lefebvre created after the Second Vatican Council because of its ruling to remove the Latin Mass. Other links will have small descriptions on what Traditionalism is, such as 'Someone who accepts tradition as authoritative.'¹ Mark Sedgwick informs that,

There are many sorts of 'traditionalists' and many 'traditionalist' movements. In the widest sense of the word, a 'traditionalist' may be no more than a conservative, possibly a nostalgic person who hankers after the customs of his or her youth. A 'traditionalist' may also be someone who prefers a specific established practice over something that has replaced it.²

However these definitions do not make mention of Rene Guénon a Frenchman who essentially founded a school of thought that is now commonly referred to as Traditionalism. This type of Traditionalism could be described as seeing the importance of tradition in its means of transmitting beliefs and philosophies from previous generations. Tradition is thus a way for perennial philosophy to be handed down through the generations.³ This is also the Traditionalism that will be examined in relation to revivalist religions here today.

¹ Jim Kalb, 'Turnabout: Culture, politics, tradition and Catholicism,' *What is traditionalism|Turnabout*, on <http://turnabout.ath.cx:8000/node/140>, accessed 10/09/04.

² Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, New York, 2004, 21.

³ See M Milani, 'Mystical Experience and its Critique of Pure Reason in the Spiritual Epistemology of Sūhrawardī and Rūmī,' in this book, 243-246.

Due to the importance of tradition for this school of thought, the modern world is seen to be in crisis for its disregard of older generations and the stories they have to tell, as well as the customs that were practiced by them and the beliefs they held. Instead the modern world is about progress and moving away from things deemed 'outdated' or 'obsolete,' and unfortunately traditions are often placed under these titles. This manifests to a greater extent in Asia, as the younger generations are leaving their own culture behind in their attempt to become Western and modern. They dress, speak and act in the manner in which they believe is Western and of the modern world; rather discarding the outdated world of their parents and grandparents. As Harry Oldmeadow states

For traditionalists modernism is nothing less than a spiritual disease which continues to spread like a plague across the globe, decimating traditional cultures wherever they are still to be found.⁴

However it is not just in Asia and the New World that tradition is being destroyed, but also in the West. Though Traditional cultures have not existed in Europe for a number of centuries, the traditions of past generations are dying out as the world progresses forward and anything that does not fit in with the new regime of technology and science is left behind. Regional dialects are losing ground, as are traditional means of craft and cooking. However the traditions of Europe do not seem to concern Guénon and his followers. They are far more interested in preserving the Traditional cultures that still exist. There are no thoughts of reviving past Traditional societies, rather those who did seek this line of thought after reading Guénon's works were seen to be not of the 'true traditional spirit.'⁵ One reason for this could be that even if one is sincere in the revival of these

⁴ Harry Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of Perennial Philosophy*, Sri Lanka, 2000, 117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, viii.

traditional cultures, they will still be corrupted by the modern world. Yet this does not give reason enough for why people should just abandon the traditions that still exist in the modern and Western world. There is another group of Traditionalists, stemming from Guénon's work that does see the importance of the traditions and Traditional cultures that once existed in Europe.

This group is essentially centred on the works of Julius Evola, an Italian who was inspired by Guénon and who also wrote on the issues of the decline of Western civilisation and the problems of modernity. However Evola was not adverse to the concept of reviving the pre-Christian religions of Europe. Rather he believed that the best course for Italy was to return to Roman paganism rather than continue its embrace of Catholicism, as described in his book *Pagan Imperialism*. Due to this difference between the Traditionalism Guénon wrote about and the version Evola taught, the followers of Evola have termed their school 'Radical Traditionalism.' The editors of *TYR* journal defined being a Radical Traditionalist as follows:

It means to reject the modern, materialist reign of 'quantity over quality,' the absence of any meaningful spiritual values, environmental devastation, the mechanization and over-specialization of urban life, and the imperialism of corporate monoculture, with its vulgar 'values' of progress and efficiency. It means to yearn for the small, homogeneous tribal societies that flourished before Christianity - societies in which every aspect of life was integrated into a holistic system.⁶

It is here with *TYR* journal that we encounter the influence of Evola and Traditionalism on contemporary revivals of pre-Christian religions.

⁶ Joshua Buckley, Collin Cleary and Michael Moynihan, 'What does it mean to be a Radical Traditionalist?' *TYR: Myth, Culture, Tradition*, 1, Atlanta, 2002, cover notes.

Leading author of the French New Right, Alain de Benoist, also believes in looking to Europe's pre-Christian past as a means of righting the wrongs that are occurring due to modernism.⁷ The French New Right is a movement that has been influenced by Traditionalism and other philosophies. The embrace of the European pre-Christian traditional cultures and religions is in regards to the tendency found in the modern world, and even held by Guénonian Traditionalists, that it is in the 'East' that tradition and an alternative religion to Christianity can be found. Throughout the West there are books on Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism, Native American beliefs, and any other religion of the non-Western world. Often these books are written by Westerners and are essentially exploiting these religions for their own profit. The books are designed to cater to the modern Western world which wishes to be spoon-fed information, but also given an alternative to Judeo-Christian religion that does not require them to change very much at all about themselves. While Guénonian Traditionalists do not endorse these kinds of books and information about the Eastern religions being spread, they do state that one should look to the still existing traditional cultures for guidance and transmission of perennial philosophy. Yet we must return to those who are looking to the ancient Europeans for guidance in this time of crisis.

The contemporary people who are reviving pre-Christian European religion have not necessarily been exposed to the writings of Traditionalists or Radical Traditionalists. Yet often in these revivalist religions two groups emerge – those who are true to the old religion and the traditional culture from which it came; and those who are quite modern in their approach and seek to change the religion to suit their needs and turn the religion from being a holistic, integral cultural religion into a simple faith system. I am now going to examine the former group in a revivalist religion, Modern Germanic Heathenry to be exact, and

⁷ Michael O'Meara, *New Culture, New Right: Anti-Liberalism in Postmodern Europe*, Bloomington, 2004, 96-106.

look at the ways in which Radical Traditionalism is currently aiding this religion in its growth.

As mentioned previously the editors of *TYR* journal identify themselves as Radical Traditionalists, however they are also Germanic Heathens, hence the naming of the journal after one of the Germanic gods. While their journal is only small at the moment (having produced only two editions at this point in time), it has attracted contributions from some of the leading members of the Germanic Heathen community. These include Stephen A McNallen (who began the revival of the pre-Christian Germanic religion in the United States of America) and Dr Stephen Edred Flowers also known as Edred Thorsson (who has been a prominent figure in the American Heathen community for a couple of decades and also co-founded one of the biggest American Heathen organizations). This shows they are aware of Radical Traditionalism and at least to some extent agree with the views of this school of thought. Indeed McNallen has shown praise for Alain de Benoist's book *On Being A Pagan*, in which it is expressed the concept of pre-Christian religion being the way to help the modern world. McNallen states that the book 'is a 'must-have' work, and I am so convinced of its importance that I have ordered copies for distribution via the AFA website,⁸ and that is 'a magnificent tool'⁹ in regards to aiding the philosophical growth of Germanic Heathenry and its adherents. I will now look at McNallen's article for *TYR* journal and its relation to Radical Traditionalism.

In his article, McNallen reflects on his involvement with the Germanic Heathen revival and its community, and makes some criticism of where he feels the religion has gone wrong over the years and what it must do to continue to grow:

⁸ Stephen A McNallen, 'Yahoo Groups: AFA Bearclaw,' *AFA_Bearclaw: Message: AFA Update 02/02/05*, http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AFA_Bearclaw/message/83, viewed 11/09/05.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The narrow focus on the Vikings ... Instead of being 'Norse centered,' we would have done better to use the Germanic tribes as models (which, indeed, the AFA began doing in the late 1990s). The tribes demonstrate a better balance between the needs of the individual and the group, as well as a greater connection to kin and soil.¹⁰

This shows how McNallen desires Heathenry to become more tribal and as such focus on the community as outside of tribal groups it is very much individualistic rather than about the group. The concept of returning to tribal structure is becoming quite prominent in Heathenry and the traditionalist views in regards to this shall be dealt with in relation to McNallen's next criticism.

Lack of hierarchy and a disregard for leaders ... Asatru today has too many mediocre men and women who, believing 'we are all equal,' have no notion of the bond between leaders and followers so central to Germanic society.

This anarchic tendency must be replaced by the spirit of our ancestral tribes, where the chieftain, the aristocracy, and the freeman existed in an interplay of powers.¹¹

This is similar to the concepts Evola writes of in *Revolt Against the Modern World* with regards to traditional society and hierarchy. One sector of Germanic Heathenry, Theodish Belief, already embraces these ideas of hierarchy that McNallen wrote about above. They have implemented the system of Sacral Kingship, that is the idea that the King of the tribe has a sacred link to the gods. Indeed the chapter written by Garman Lord, founder of the Theodish Belief sect, on their Sacral Kingship¹² is

¹⁰ Stephen A McNallen, 'Three Decades of the Asatru Revival in America,' *TYR: Myth, Culture, Tradition*, 2, Atlanta, 2003-4, 216.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Garman Lord, *Way of the Heathen: A Handbook of Greater Theodism*, Watertown, 2000, 13-20

much like Evola's chapter on Regality¹³, which details the concept of divine kings and the links rulers had to the gods in traditional society. While Theodish Belief has often been quite separate from the main Heathen community, in the recent years it has become more prominent and a more popular form of Germanic Heathenry, which may be a result of Heathens wanting a more Traditional form of the religion, that is one that incorporates tribal hierarchy and the Traditional idea of Kingship. However there are other issues with this, as Theodish Belief is quite archaic and essentially embodies what Oswald Spengler terms 'Second Religiosity':

That of the Second Religiousness consists of a deep piety that fills the waking-consciousness – the piety that impressed Herodotus in the (Late) Egyptians and impresses West Europeans in India and Islam – and that of Caesarism consists in its unchained might of colossal facts. But neither in the creations of this piety nor in the form of the Roman Imperium is there anything primary and spontaneous. Nothing is built up, no idea unfolds itself – it is only as if a mist cleared off the land and revealed old forms, uncertainly at first, but presently with increased distinctiveness.¹⁴

This can apply to Theodish belief as well as some other sects of Heathenry as it is often very much about doing things exactly as can be found in the sagas, the *Eddas* and other texts.

Groups focus on the old, now dead languages, rather than learning their currently existing forms, for example, learning Old German instead of Modern German or a German dialect that currently exists. While the Traditions are important, these groups are far too focused on the exactness of the religion of the pre-Christian Germans, rather than living their religions as a born

¹³ Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, translated by Guido Stucco, Rochester, 1995, 7-15.

¹⁴ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, translated by Charles Francis Atkinson, abridged edition, edited by Helmut Werner, Oxford, 1991, 347.

and bred Hindu or Shintoist would.

These ideas tie in again with McNallen's next critique of Modern Germanic Heathenry,

Historical anachronisms . . . Many followers of Asatru wear Norse tunics or Viking dresses when they gather among themselves. Swords and axes, too, are common accessories at some events. It's not hard to figure that many worthwhile people have turned away from us in disgust because they expected to find a religion, and found a historical reenactment group instead.¹⁵

This is also reflective of the Second Religiosity that Spengler warns us of, as while those robes may still been worn at ceremonies had Germanic Heathenry not died out due to the Christian conversion of Europe, that type of garb today is seen as very much associated with groups such as the Society for Creative Anachronism. Many Heathens also hold this view about dressing up in medieval clothes, and prefer to wear good clean normal everyday clothes to a ritual. One Heathen has spoken of utilising the clerical stoles of the Christian church as a way of separating themselves as being at a normal gathering and being at a ritual.¹⁶

One of the last points McNallen makes about Heathenry is:

Lack of philosophical depth ... We have studied the *Eddas* and sagas. Beyond that we know of Georges Dumezil, Edgar Polome, and the excellent popularisations of H. R. Ellis Davidson. But until we can hold our own in debate with the Jesuits or in the pages of the *New York Times Review of Books*, we will not be taken seriously. What does Nietzsche

¹⁵ McNallen, 'Three Decades,' op cit, 216.

¹⁶ Boars_Heart, 'Texatru Junction,' *Texatru Junction | Weltanschauung | HofsGodi, Gudja, Harugari, Wihbeddthegen...*, <http://www.asatru.us/thread.php?threadid=1052&sid=&hlight=stole> viewed 7/09/05.

have to say to our topic? How does our idea of the holy compare to that of Rudolf Otto? Are the gods only Jungian archetypes? Does the work of British biologist Rupert Sheldrake confirm our own ideas on kinship affinity? How do the writings of Alain de Benoist and Tomislav Sunic impact us? In short, versus from the *Havamal* will not suffice to express our beliefs to a sophisticated world.¹⁷

This concept is quite intriguing, not just for his ideas about Heathens grounding themselves in more than just the writings of H. R. Ellis-Davidson and others, but the fact he mentions the works of Alain de Benoist. McNallen's article features in the second volume of *TYR*, and there is no contribution from Benoist in the first volume that explains the ideas of Benoist and the French New Right. There is an interview by Benoist with Georges Dumézil¹⁸ and brief mention of the periodical *Elements* that Benoist edits. This shows that McNallen has gone out of his way to learn about and read Benoist, as well as Sunic. It also displays that he believes them to be of importance and significance to Germanic Heathenry. He feels 'They broaden our horizons, give us scholarly and philosophical depth.' While it may be only people like McNallen and Flowers at this point in time who are looking at these authors (Flowers providing a preface to the English translation of Benoist's *On Being A Pagan*, as well as researching areas such as 'The Pagan Right' and French New Right), the fact they are endorsing them is promising. Barely two weeks after McNallen's review of *On Being A Pagan* he wrote, 'our first batch of *On Being a Pagan* by Alain de Benoist has dwindled down to a couple of copies, and more are on the way to fill orders that continue to arrive in our inbox with delightful regularity.'¹⁹ This shows that McNallen's avocation of Radical Traditionalism and the writings of people like Benoist is making an impact on the Heathen community.

¹⁷ McNallen, 'Three Decades,' op cit, 217-8.

¹⁸ Alain de Benoist, 'Priest, Warriors, and Cultivators: An Interview with Georges Dumézil,' *TYR: Myth – Culture – Tradition*, 1, Atlanta, 2002, 41-50.

¹⁹ McNallen, *AFA Bearclaw*, op cit.

Essentially there are different schools within Traditionalism as seen here, and while they may not both agree on the issue of reviving pre-Christian religions, they do provide aide to them. As we have seen, Radical Traditionalism is already influencing Modern Germanic Heathenry, and is likely that it will help this religion grow into a faith with more philosophical grounding than it presently has. Or as McNallen states, 'The AFA is proud to feature these titles on our website, and to thus participate in the metamorphosis of the Germanic movement to a new and higher level.'²⁰

²⁰ *ibid.*