

"WE ARE THE INDIANS OF GREECE"¹

Indigeneity and Religious Revitalization in Modern Greece

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The revitalization or rediscovery of indigenous religious traditions is a global phenomenon. It takes on multiple manifestations, but its roots lie in what is perceived as a global ecological, political, and spiritual crisis. These revitalization movements, along with trends such as shamanic or spiritual tourism, make claims about what is wrong with the world and offer suggestions for how the world should be. In Europe, this manifests as the revitalization of pre-Christian traditions which both challenge the long history of western culture and Christianity and propose solutions rooted in ancestral worldviews.

In this article, I will discuss the example of the revitalization of Greek religion in modern Greece, and will look at the ways that indigeneity is expressed and perceived among contemporary Greek pagans. I am challenging the way we have traditionally used the term *indigenous*, which has been mostly used to refer to the original inhabitants of former colonies. For Greek pagans, whose ancestral religion has no official recognition or protections from the state, indigeneity has gained new meaning as it is used to articulate an argument for religious freedom and social justice. Indigeneity is a very fluid and contested concept with very particular local expressions, and Greek pagans draw from and construct indigeneity as a discourse that allows them to make claims of authenticity as the true Greek religion. Some of this discourse is harsh and might be alienating to the average Greek who has been raised to associate Greek identity with Orthodox Christianity. For many Greek pagans, however, the long history

of Orthodoxy in the region does not invalidate their claims of being the carriers of the true *indigenous religion* of Greece. In fact, they find the two worldviews incompatible, thus the need to reconstitute what they perceive as the authentic, indigenous, ethnic religion.

The revival of pre-Christian spiritual traditions is not unique to Greece but is rather a common trend in Europe over the past twenty years. This is emphasized by the 1998 founding in Lithuania of the World Congress of Ethnic Religions (WCER), which serves as a transnational network of solidarity for the national group members. These movements have a fundamental difference from neo-pagan movements in North America that complicates the concept of indigeneity. While these neo-pagans draw on a variety of traditions to create an eclectic and individualistic spirituality, European movements, among them the Greek one, have a clearly political dimension and are more concerned with issues of identity and social justice. Furthermore, Western and Eastern European movements have some basic differences. These movements in Eastern Europe emphasize identity issues while “magical practices are de-emphasized” (Szilárdi 2009, 46). Greek pagans aim to reconstitute what they perceive as their authentic, indigenous religious tradition and try to revive the fundamental principles of polytheism that are relevant to contemporary life, all the while arguing that Christianity is essentially an imposed *foreign* religion.

Their discourse speaks of cultural colonialism and occupation and they view the recent government debt crisis as a natural product of this. They argue that “we are in a cultural occupation which began with the Roman Empire 22 centuries ago, was consolidated with the violent and bloody imposition of Roman Christianity 16 centuries ago and continues today” (YSEE n.d.a). An ethnographic example that exemplifies this is that after the ritual for the summer solstice that I observed in 2013, participants wished to each other to be free next year (“Και του χρόνου λεύτερω ροι”). This indicates a sense of marginalization and oppression since they are not allowed to freely practice their religion.

Like any religious or social movement, the Greek one is diverse and there are multiple and discordant voices in it. This is not surprising since the ancient tradition they draw from is far from monolithic, so there are multiple interpretations of it. What is presented in this article is one group’s perspective and approach, that is, YSEE, a group that was

founded in the 1990s. An interesting origin story for the group is that one of its founders who was an ally to Native American struggles for social justice, was encouraged by a Native American to look into his own culture. This was an awakening that led to much research and later organized action on his part. This story, along with many of the publications and YSEE's online presence, emphasize the continued sense of solidarity to indigenous movements globally. This is important because even though the group uses indigeneity as its main argument, its discourse is more internationalist rather than nationalist.

Religion in Greece

The freedom to practice religion in Greece is guaranteed by Law 2462/97, Article 18. The official religion is Orthodox Christianity, while the only other officially recognized religions are Islam and Judaism. The vast majority of Greece's population are baptized Orthodox Christians. Greece is the only country in the world where an Eastern Orthodox Church is recognized as a state religion. The Greek Constitution prohibits proselytism by other religions but no such restrictions are imposed on the Orthodox Church. The church is also the only authority that can advise the state on decisions regarding which religions are legitimate and which ones are merely "cults" or "heresies." The Church of Greece is largely exempt from taxes and the Orthodox clergy's salaries and pensions are paid by the state. Primary and secondary school education includes Christian Orthodox instruction as part of the curriculum, and the church has in the past critiqued the content of textbooks of other school subjects such as history. More recently, the church again asked to be consulted on the choice and content of textbooks in schools (tanea.gr 2013b).

Even though Greeks do not consider themselves very devout Christians (most Greeks will go to Church once a year on Easter Saturday but otherwise rarely engage with religion the rest of the year) they do feel that Greek identity is intrinsically linked with Orthodox Christianity. This is the reason that many Greeks will baptize their children or get married in a church even if they never go to church otherwise. This has created a degree of "normativity" that establishes being Orthodox as normal and everything else as subject to an array of reactions, from ridicule to intolerance. This intolerance to other religions might take a variety of forms, as the long debates about building a Mosque in Athens reveal (Tagaris

2013). The Orthodox Church's position on the mosque issue has been clear as they feel that it would be offensive to Greeks after several centuries of Islamic occupation (Lowen 2012). While many of the recent debates on this issue focus more on the financing of the mosque by the state in a time of crisis, the truth is that the reason this mosque hasn't been built is due to public hostility, regardless of the source of financing.

It is within this context of "theocracy" according to Greek pagans and an increasing number of Greek citizens that they raise their challenge to mainstream religious discourse. In addition, while some European countries are moving toward the official recognition of their respective pre-Christian religious traditions (Beckford 2010, The Nordic Page 2012), past experience along with recent events, discussed later in this article, do not show much promise for Greece. A more material result of this discrimination is that at the moment non-recognized religions in Greece who are forced to register as non-profit organizations are obliged to pay a "business tax," which several pagan groups have protested (YSEE, n.d.a). Thus, while some pagans in other European countries might be more inclined toward syncretism due to a less conflicted history with Christianity (Butler 2005), so far most Greek pagans see their worldview as incompatible with that of Christianity.

Within the religious context I have just described, Greek pagans face marginalization and ridicule to the point that they conceal their religious affiliations from their coworkers and sometimes family and friends. I have observed rituals during which photos and videos were taken where certain participants did not want their faces shown for fear of being exposed as pagans. To this are added misconceptions (an example being a rumor of pagans engaging in orgies), which further reduce the chance of being taken seriously. I would argue that contemporary Greek pagans' status is one of invisibility, whether imposed or voluntary, and erasure from mainstream culture, which informs much of their discourse and organized action, which is mainly geared toward creating visibility.

Religious revitalization

Is the revival of a religious tradition a few thousand years old a "New Religious Movement?" I suggest that it may be, in the sense that it gives new meaning to old practices and teachings. If we accept that "NRMs can best be understood if seen as world transforming movements that

express the human desire for betterment” (Clarke 2005), then the revitalization of Greek religion, which emerged from a strong dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs while proposing alternatives to it, fits this label. European pagans themselves however have rejected this label, giving preference to the term “indigenous religions” an argument that has been articulated by Andras Corban Arthen (2010) while it was implicitly acknowledged at the 2009 Parliament of the World’s Religions meeting in Melbourne when European ethnic traditions were included in the same category as other indigenous religions (Corban Arthen 2010, Rassias n.d.).

From an anthropological standpoint, Anthony F. C. Wallace’s, work on revitalization movements provides a useful theoretical framework. A revitalization movement is a “deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a group to create a new and more satisfying culture” (1956, 279; 1966, 30), in other words to construct a more satisfying cultural system. Revitalization movements, according to Wallace, occur during times of stress for individual members of the culture and when there is widespread disillusionment or disappointment with existing cultural beliefs. Moreover, they are common in areas that were colonized. However, recent work (Harkin 2004) has proposed a reassessment of the colonialism hypothesis to include potential oppression by internal forces or potential unresolved internal conflicts. In one form or another, Greek pagans use post-colonial discourse and argue that Greeks still suffer from the disorientation that resulted from Christianization and the loss of indigenous identity and worldview. I would add that this revitalization also points to long-standing internal conflicts in the Greek culture that have never been adequately addressed or resolved (such as the relationship between Christianity and the preexisting religion or the relationship of the Orthodox Church to the Greek state that is receiving increasing criticism).

Revitalization movements typically arise as a response to a severe stress in the culture, usually colonialism or the “relatively recent loss of some important aspect of the cultural system” (Levinson 1996, 193). But if Christianity is identified as the colonizer, why did this movement appear only recently, even though Christianity has been in the area for centuries? The question obviously warrants a longer discussion that is possible here, but it is important to remember several salient facts about Greece’s turbulent history since the nineteenth century. Specifically, the

Greek nation state is quite young (since 1830) and even after its creation, it was a constitutional monarchy led by foreign kings until the 1970s, a fact that leads many modern Greeks to doubt its sovereignty. In addition, for the majority of its young life, the Greek nation state has known multiple wars and a couple of dictatorships, making it clear even to the casual observer that trauma and oppression, as opposed to democracy and freedom, are more descriptive its recent history. Thus it is clear that Greece has been under severe stress with only short periods of stability. The revitalization of Greek religion became prominent and overtly vocal during the first period of relative stability in Greece, but one could argue that it is still consistent with the stress-leads-to-revitalization-movements theory.

Another response to the “why now” question, given by Greek pagans themselves, is that the Greek religion never went away but was practiced by small clusters of people in secret over the centuries because of persecution. They cite as evidence to this the work of the fifteenth century neoplatonic philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon (Γεώργιος Γεμιστός Πλήθων) as well as the late thirteenth century movement of Leon Sgouros. Plethon in particular is considered influential for the survival of Greek religion to this day because he predicted and advocated for the revival of paganism (Woodhouse and Gemistus Plethon 1986).

Finally, revitalization movements have been identified with millenarian movements in the literature (Levinson 1996). Millenarian movements believe in dramatic change that will happen through divine intervention. However, there are basic differences with millenarian movements insofar as Greek pagans do not believe that social change will happen through divine intervention. Rather, they pursue social change through struggle and efforts to educate modern Greeks and change the culture by reviving their ancestral worldview.

Greek “Pagans?”²

The group that I have worked with for over a decade and from which I draw the data for this article is the Supreme Council of Ethnikoi Hellenes (Υπατο Συμβούλιο των Ελλήνων Εθνικών (Υ.Σ.Ε.Ε.), from now on will be referred to as YSEE). It was founded in 1997 as an umbrella organization and was one of the founders of the World Congress of Ethnic

Religions (WCER). The organization has chapters in Australia (since 1999) and USA (since 2007). The group's roots can be traced at least to the early nineties when some of its founders published the journal *Diipetes* (Διιπετές, which translates as “sent by Zeus”), which was first published in 1991 and ceased publication recently after seventy-five issues. In an attempt to differentiate themselves from more recent pagan groups, YSEE claims to be the only “official” authority on Greek religion. The “movement” is far from homogenous, however, as it has multiple approaches to Greek religious tradition included under its umbrella. What follows, therefore, might not be representative of other groups. YSEE is based in Athens, even though they have chapters in other Greek cities.

They do not use the word ‘pagan’ because it was derived from the Latin *Paganus* (peasant), which was meant as “an insult used by the victorious Christians since the 4th Century, to belittle what remained of the Native Religions” (YSEE n.d.c). Instead, they use the word ‘*Ethnikos*’ to self-identify, a word that

“refers to those who live and conduct themselves in accordance with their native identity and values. A more specific definition refers to those who do not reject their identity, due to conversion to one of the introduced monotheistic creeds (viz. Christianity and Islam). [...] The word ‘*Hellene*’ should suffice to describe what we refer to as ‘*Ethnikoi Hellenes*’. Unfortunately, this term has been denigrated and improperly used in identifying the majority Christian Orthodox subjects of a State that uses the adjective ‘*Hellenic*’ in violation of its initial meaning” (YSEE n.d.c).

They refer to Greek religion as Hellenic Ethnic Religion (Ἑλληνικὴ Ἐθνικὴ Θρησκεία). For similar reasons, at the first WCER meeting in 1998, the decision was made to use *ethnic* as opposed to *pagan* in the name of the organization, because it was felt that the word *ethnic* better expressed the roots of many pre-Christian religions (Dundzila and Strmiska 2005). I am using the term *pagans* and Greek religion to facilitate communication, with no intent to be disrespectful to the terms they prefer to use.

The main characteristic of Hellenic Ethnic Religion is the absence of dogma or canon, the celebration of diversity in all forms, and the celebra-

tion of nature. In fact they refer to Greek religion as ‘natural’ and therefore impossible to destroy. In their website’s section on worldview (Κοσμοθέαση), they state:

“Our ‘dogma’ includes: the obligation we all have to speak and act logically as a mark of respect for Universal Reason, our honest relationship with all living beings, tolerance toward all views that are expressed logically, education through life-experience, respect for measure, the continuous study of the Cosmos and Humanity” (YSEE n.d.c)

When asked what they believe in, they make clear that the word “believe” does not represent the way they approach spirituality, which is quite different from the way they were taught as Christians. Rationality is very important to them and discussion often revolves around worldview, the particular way ancient Greeks saw the world, which can be discovered through studying ancient Greek philosophy and other ancient texts. Many of the people I have talked to read these texts in the original, often without having formal instruction in ancient Greek. They are essentially self-taught and several have commented that even though it was hard at first, they did slowly start “remembering” their ancestral language.

YSEE runs a space called Ekatevolos (Εκατηβόλος) in downtown Athens, where events are held almost weekly. Events are usually talks and seminars that promote an inquisitive approach, which privileges dialogue, diversity, and self-study. Based on my observations, this is more of a hands-on, *re-discovering* of their culture as opposed to a *re-imagining* of it with little concrete basis to rely on. The Greek case is obviously unique compared to other revitalization movements that might have emerged out of oral traditions, in that there are numerous ancient texts that have been saved that they can refer to. Their rituals are held monthly according to the ancient Attic calendar. However, even though they have access to all this information, they do not aim for an uncritical regurgitation of tradition. They have adapted rituals to modern circumstances (for example, three day rituals would be impossible to hold today), and they recognize that culture is dynamic and ever changing. As an example, a few years ago during a debate about proper attire during rituals, several YSEE members told me that even if Greece hadn’t been Christianized, ritual

attire would have changed over the centuries. What they protest however, is the violent way cultural change was brought about in their culture and the official denial of that violence today, which is completely erased from formal education.

Their discourse, both in their publications and conversations, emphasizes certain ancient Greek values and virtues (Αρετές) that were defined by ancient Greeks and that can be beneficial for contemporary Greeks. These virtues are the focus of a popular series offered at Ekatevolos in recent years. Even though ethnic identity is important to the group, YSEE does not make an argument for racial or other purity in their discourse regarding this identity. In their own words, they seek the “defense and restoration of Hellenism, which is meant not as modern citizenship or simple racial chain, but as one coherent worldview and the value system that stems from it and that can be realized in every sphere of everyday life.[. . .]” (ekatevolos.ysee.gr n.d.). In addition, they clearly do not condone racist discourse as they “defend the right of all views to be heard, except those who do not recognize the same right to others, meaning ideas that propagate racism, organized systems of oppression and all intolerance” (ekatevolos.ysee.gr n.d.).

Even though their discourse is at times harsh toward the Orthodox Church and the Greek state, it can be argued that this discourse reflects and at times reacts to the injustice, ridicule, and irrationality that they have been subjected to by the Greek state and Greek society at large. For example, YSEE members or allies have been the victims of violent acts by presumably nameless opponents in the past, including the arson committed against a pagan-friendly bookstore in the 1990s. Nevertheless, they do not advocate violence but rather make an argument for religious pluralism.

Non-violent struggle

Given the erasure and discrimination they face, the main goal of Greek pagans is the right to live and exist as Ethnikoi Hellenes. They explicitly state in their publications and website that they are not asking for official recognition, thus challenging the authority of a hostile nation state:

“We don’t think there is an issue of recognition, or otherwise, of our Ethnic Hellenic religion by some petty state authority, requiring an application, as if we were some small monotheistic sect. The

existence of our ancestral polytheistic religion is by rights just, as it is indigenous, native, historically well known and much older than any other religion, including today's ruling creed" (YSEE n.d.c).

Other issues they lobby for are the separation of religion and state, legal recognition of their rituals (naming, marriage etc.), dignity in death (euthanasia, cremation) and protection and respect of sacred sites. At the moment, the only religious rituals recognized by the law are Christian ones, non-pagans have to have a civil wedding in order to be legally married. In addition, even though cremation was legalized in Greece in 2006, because of fierce protest from the Church, this option has yet to materialize, forcing non-Christians and Christians alike who prefer this option to travel to neighboring countries like Bulgaria (Dabilis 2013).

YSEE conducts monthly rituals that follow the ancient Attic calendar of festivals. When the weather permits, they prefer to perform them outdoors. Over the years they have refined the rituals and have developed certain protocols reconstructed from the study of ancient sources. A typical ritual begins by summoning of the deities and creating the sacred space. Certain objects and statues are transported especially for the occasion and kept covered when not used in ritual. Members of the ritual team recite hymns in ancient Greek from existing sources. Finally, bloodless sacrifice is offered (milk, wine etc.), while incense (styrax) is burned throughout the rituals. At the end of the monthly ritual, other rituals might be performed, for example, naming rituals or weddings. Naming rituals are important as they signify an individual's transition from being a Christian to being an *Ethnikos Hellen*, by shedding their given Christian name (that was given to them by Christian baptism) and taking on a Greek name that the individual has carefully chosen for its significance to them.

These rituals are not without controversy, however. Even though the group would like to be able to worship at ancient temples, those belong to the state and are run by the Greek Ministry of Culture. None of these sites are viewed as places of worship, and the most important and high profile ones, such as Delphi or the Acropolis, are restricted with high entrance fees for tourism. Several years ago, in 2009, the group had to request written permission to worship at Delphi. Their petition was not directly denied by the Ministry of Culture, but they were given permission to perform a ritual away from the temples (near a parking lot) and

were asked not to take photographs. The group perceived this as an insult and chose to perform the ritual in nature away from the archaeological site instead. Usually a remote, smaller archaeological site is chosen that does not require an entry fee. During the daytrip for these rituals, participants learn about less known sites and their history by more knowledgeable members of the group (Fig. 1).

The group's most common form of action is the publication of press releases and letters (230 in fourteen years) addressed to the media as well to Greek government authorities. They are both reactive and proactive; that is, they both respond to current events and make their perspective on an issue known, or they are directed to certain authorities as in the case of the press release regarding the "business tax," which was addressed to the Ministry of Finance (YSEE, n.d.a). These press releases always end with the phrase "*Honour and Glory to our Ancestral Gods.*"

They also create and circulate petitions when there is a pressing matter. A recent one meant to be delivered to the Greek government is petitioning for the following things:

1. "The granting of the quality of legal entity to the hellenic ethnic religion
2. The protection of the hellenic ethnic religion as part of the "national heritage" of Greece
3. The institutional establishment of equality of rights ("isonomia") - equality before the law—equality of speech ("isegoria") of the hellenic ethnic religion."³



Figure 1. ritual for the summer solstice (photo by the author, June 2013).

Their most consistent form of action is information dissemination and education about their ancestral Greek religion. They have delivered hundreds of seminars, which are still organized on a weekly basis. They have also organized and participated in non-violent protests when an event requires it. Examples from recent years include the demonstration in 2009 at the Acropolis Museum for the removal of certain scenes from a short film, directed by Kostas Gavras, which was shown in the new Museum, after protests from the Orthodox Church (Maltezou 2009). The incendiary scenes were showing the destruction of the Acropolis by what looked like Christian priests. More recently, they participated in demonstrations against the austerity measures bearing banners with the insignia of YSEE. They also participated in protests about the intended burying of an important ancient altar near the Agora in Athens during the Athens Metro excavations (Balezdrova 2011).

Finally, they maintain transnational relationships with other pagan groups, through their participation in the annual meetings of WCER, including and especially the 2004 meeting that was held in Athens.

Political dimensions

Recent austerity measures have created a great amount of fear among Greeks, and right wing groups have gained popularity. One of these, the Golden Dawn Party (which many consider a neo-nazi group), entered the parliament in 2012, gaining twenty-one seats or seven percent of the vote. They have a very questionable record, however. They have been involved in killings and harassment of immigrants for years with the tolerance of Greek police. In September of 2013, members of Golden Dawn were involved in and arrested for the assassination of Pavlos Fyssas (hip-hop artist Killah P), who was outspoken against racism and fascism (Tharoor 2013). Since his murder, and since the apprehension of several Golden Dawn members, the Orthodox Church and Greek media rhetoric has tied his murder to the putative “pagan” ideology of the group (tanea.gr 2013a). This claim seems to be a strategic move on the part of the church to distance itself from a political party that is increasingly unpopular. After the comments regarding “pagan ideology” by one of the Orthodox bishops, one of the members of Golden Dawn publicly reprimanded him reminding that the church had publicly supported Golden Dawn in 2010 (tvxsteam 2013).

In reality, Golden Dawn has aligned with the church on multiple occasions in the past, most notably during two blasphemy cases in 2012. The first case was one of a play depicting Jesus as gay (Tagaris 2012) against which neo-nazis protested side by side with church officials until the theatre closed. The second one was the case of a young man who created a satirical page on facebook mocking a monk who is believed to be a saint. What is interesting in this case is that the arrest was the result of the efforts of Golden Dawn who brought the case to the parliament (Tsimitakis 2012).

Even though there are self-identified pagans who might be engaging in nationalist discourse, and there is at least one such publication,⁴ these hardly represent the majority of contemporary Greek pagans. Moreover, a casual browsing through their publication is remarkably similar to what Steigmann-Gall (2003) describes when he discusses Nazism in Germany. That is, their ideology is not an attempt to turn to paganism but to reinvent Christianity as “Positive Christianity,” that simultaneously has a superficial relationship to paganism. Greek neo-nazis seem to share this ambivalent position and oscillate between Christianity and paganism.

Governments and mainstream religions are often hostile to New Religious Movements (Clarke 2005) and Greece is no exception. The Orthodox Church has and continues to be a conservative force in Greek society; not only have they repeatedly tried to strengthen the connection between Greek identity and Orthodoxy—as the example of the 2000 protests against new national identity cards that would not list a person’s religion indicate (Smith 2000)—but they have also treated all other religious groups as threats as I have shown earlier. Finally, the reluctance of the church to relinquish some of their wealth or at least be taxed at the same rate as everyone else in a time of severe economic crisis has attracted much criticism from people who would like to see the country go into a more secular direction.

Conclusion

This article challenged the way we usually use the term *indigenous* (which has traditionally been used to describe the original inhabitants of former colonies) using the example of religious revitalization in Greece. I discussed the ways Greek religion is being reconstructed in order to provide

meaning to contemporary subjects' experience and challenging mainstream religious discourse in Greece.

I have argued that this movement should be approached as a revitalization movement according to Wallace's definition. However, even though it fits the definition of a revitalization movement in some respects and bears some resemblance to other revitalization movements, the Greek case is in other ways unique because of unique historical and cultural circumstances. In this way, it offers us wonderful insight on the ways that modern Greek culture is changing and at the same time the ways it is resisting change. What is clear is that for many modern Greeks, the old Orthodox ways of looking at the world are no longer adequate and a return to the indigenous, ethnic Hellenic traditions is warranted. Most especially, this study has demonstrated that it is not until previously marginalized voices come into the center that real change can occur.

While the novelty or authenticity of such a movement might be disputed by some, what is indisputable is that religious discrimination and multiple violations of human rights are happening as long as Greek religion and other minority religious groups do not have official recognition by the Greek government. Based on historical evidence, this will not be feasible until true separation of church and state occurs in Greece.

Notes

1. This quote is the title of a publication by YSEE, the group I am discussing in this article. My deepest gratitude goes to Pamela Winfield for extending an invitation to submit a paper for this special issue on New Religious Movements and providing a forum for this important conversation and to Vlassis Rassias for his input.
2. Even though I use the words *pagan* and *paganism* throughout the article to facilitate communication and to place the Greek movement within a wider context, it has to be emphasized that these terms have historically been offensive and the people I am discussing do not self-identify with them.
3. https://secure.avaaz.org/en/petition/Please_help_the_native_hellenic_tradition_and_religion_to_become_recognized_as_a_statutory_corporation_in_Greece/
4. <http://www.apolloneiofos.gr/>

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