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# Contemporary “Dievturi” Movement in Latvia: Between Folklore and Nationalism

## Abstract

The movement of “Dievturība” was formed in the late 1920s as an alternative combination of Christianity and “new nationalism” and it is proclaimed as an invention of tradition in contemporary society. The participants of the “Dievturi” movement consider “Dievturība” as a specific Latvian religion based on Latvian folklore and national ideology. They emphasise that each nation has its ancestral/ethnic religion, and the duty of a nation is to take care of it. “Dievturi” acknowledge and treat Latvian folklore as the source of their ethnic religion. The methods used and the data acquired during the research (e.g., field research) give a clear idea of “Dievturība” in contemporary society. They are trying to practise “Dievturība” as an ethnic religion, but there are no considerable changes or new ideas aimed at the doctrine of the group. The members of the group characterise their involvement in the movement as the development of personality and a good possibility for spending their leisure time in an attractive and exciting way. The “Dievturi” movement has not managed to attract the contemporary intelligentsia to reinvent itself for the modern age and it is not attracting any considerable attention from the mass media.

**Keywords:** Dievturība, ethnic religion, fieldwork, nationalism, neo-Paganism, Latvian folklore, social values

## Introduction

In recent years, nearly every European society, including Latvia, has been faced with the emergence and growth of different New religious movements (NRMs). Some of these NRMs are centred around the “re-invention” of pre-Christian belief systems. These NRMs strictly deny Christianity and reclaim a primordial European or national spirituality for themselves. The forms of such neo-Pagan belief systems and religious practices are mostly very inhomogeneous across different groups and countries.

The term “neo-Paganism” is well known in Latvia, but “Dievturība”<sup>1</sup> in

1 The term, “Dievturība”, is derived from the Latvian *Dievs* ‘God’, and *turēt* ‘hold’ and it is generally translated as ‘people who hold or live according to God’s laws’. Formation of the Latvian “Dievturība” took place in 1926, when it was registered as a religious community. Its rise associated with widespread nationalism in Europe at that time, and the aim of the participants was to provide an ideological basis

Latvia differs from the contemporary neo-Pagan tradition by several aspects. For instance, “Dievturība” is not characterised as a pantheistic, polytheistic, shamanistic or magical religion oriented towards the spirituality of nature. These aspects, characteristic of neo-Paganism, are on the periphery of the contemporary “Dievturi” movement. Our consideration is that “Dievturība” continues the tradition started in 1920s and it can be proclaimed as the invention of the tradition. Although the history of its origin is well known, the ones forming the new tradition try to construct it as the reconstruction of authentic, ancient Latvian concepts (e.g., Misāne, 2000, pp. 43-44). “Dievturi” regard that Latvian folk songs entail all of Latvian religion and its faith, morality, aesthetics, social views and values. “Dievturība” is close to those New religious movements which emphasise ethnic aspects. Its ethnic religious construction is based on unsophisticated doctrine, sacral texts and practice of rituals (e.g., Beitnere, 1995; Misāne, 2000; Misāne, 2005; Рыжакова, 1995; Saivars, 1997).

Our aim of the research is focused on obtaining the elements of nationalism and social values and the interpretation of folklore in Latvian “Dievturi” groups (e.g., “Dievturība” in the context of NRMs movements, major values and ideas in the policy of national ideology and group member goals, activities and interests). Moreover, the aim is both to describe and formulate the position and functions of modern “Dievturi” groups and their impact and significance in strengthening the existence of the Latvian nation along with its values and ethnic religion and the ability to influence the formation and development of social values in the society.

## Methods

The aim of our research is gained by summarising the results of the fieldworks in 2006-2008 among contemporary “Dievturi” groups using the methods of participant observation, ethnographic descriptions, semi-structured interviews and methods of visual anthropology (the techniques of photography and filming) and the analysis of the data in mass media.

The research obtains the information on which it is based from thirty extensive interviews (from 1.5 to 4.5 hours) with group leaders and active members, photos (200) and video-materials (16 hours) from exaltations and other “Dievturi” events and questionnaires (32).

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for the Latvian nation state. The “Dievturi” Church popularised a Latvian way of life in areas such as religion, politics, economics, art, philosophy and the like. At that time, “Dievturība” only partially joined the European neo-Pagan tradition; it was more like a national ideology. During the Soviet period, “Dievturība” did not exist officially in Latvia, but some groups continued their activities in exile in the 1950s and later. In Latvia, “Dievturība” was officially reconstructed in 1990, after a rather long time of non-existence. “Dievturi” in present day Latvia has split into 15 groups.

The structured compilation of the data (based on interviews and questionnaires with “Dievturi”) in SAL/neo-Pagan spreadsheets of Google docs (e.g., impact on society and wider society, family, friends and institutions, environment in the past, lifestyle and image, values and ideas, true/false member) is used as an additional method for comparing the results of similar groups.

## Results

The major activities of “Dievturi” groups involve exaltation,<sup>2</sup> family festivals (name-giving ceremonies, weddings, funerals), folk music group concerts, cultural-historical tours (visiting ancient cult places, sacred places and hill forts), preparing publications and articles for the mass media, organising summer camps, meditative rituals, celebrating the great annual festivals (the autumn, winter, spring and summer solstices) and significant events in Latvian history and so forth. As the main element of national ideology in these groups, folklore has been studied in the context of the rite of exaltation. It is evident that “Dievturi” groups treat Latvian folklore as the source of their ethnic religion.

Among the most significant social values are kindness, truthfulness and accord, world cognition and joy, honesty, respect towards the values of other people as long as they do not interfere with the individual freedom of the human being to openly express his or her worldview. Other positive values also include family, veneration of ancestral virtues, generally humane values, healthy lifestyle, respect towards nature, ability to become part of the world processes and the cosmic rhythm and the wish to pass down Latvian virtues and the legacy of traditional culture to future generations. Many of the “Dievturi” emphasise the significance and worth of tolerance inviting to pay closer attention to the philosophy of Latvian folk-songs instead of engaging in social and political activities.

Globalisation tendencies of Latvian society (including internationalism and cosmopolitanism) along with the acceptance and promotion of negative virtues (one-sex marriages, homosexuality) receive a very negative evaluation; they are characterised as an essential threat to the existence of the Latvian nation in the nearest future. Any kind of religious or political fanaticism that turns people into impersonal marionettes poses a threat to the personal freedom and human rights and national rights for independence is negatively evaluated. In the context of gender stereotypes, “Dievturi” groups unanimously accept gender equality grounding it on the notions of folk-songs and correspondence to the Latvian mentality according to which each gender has particular functions, rights and duties in the family and community.

2 Exaltation (*daudzīnājums*) is a term used only by “Dievturi”, who introduced it to emphasize the difference between their way of praising God and Christian religious services.

The number of members in the most active Latvian groups is approximately 30. The age of the participants is mostly middle-aged and older. “Dievturi” events are also attended by young people, yet their influence in the group is insignificant. The groups in Latvia are characterised by the high proportion of females (about 70%). Nevertheless group leaders are usually males.

The contemporary Latvian “Dievturi” group members acknowledge that their involvement in the group relates to a good possibility for spending their leisure time and professing and developing the Latvian worldview and identity. For many of them, it is a calling and duty to their past (sustaining the legacy of their ancestors) and the future (passing down the ancestral legacy to younger generations); hence, on the ideal level, this involvement is a sense of mission to sacrifice themselves to “Dievturi” and to people and to cultivate traditional values in the name of the society-to-come.

## Discussion and conclusions

Present day Latvian “Dievturi” groups are practicing “Dievturība” as a national religion. Though almost all “Dievturi” followers admit that religious tolerance is the most significant value in relation to other religions, it is just a theoretical assumption. This covers-up the concept of national self-awareness which nowadays does not impact the social structure of Latvia, since “Dievturi” groups are peripheral in the contemporary culture, education and politics of Latvia. As a result, the “Dievturi” movement in contemporary Latvia is not attracting any considerable attention from the mass media and public financing sources.

“Dievturi” groups are weak, because members are growing older. They are not able to attract youth or solve their internal problems, since several active “Dievturi” group participants have either abandoned “Dievturība” and do not practice it in any way or they act individually and their actions do not reach beyond the boundaries of their own family or friends. Furthermore the “Dievturi” movement has not managed to attract the contemporary intelligentsia to reinvent itself for the modern age. Unless it addresses these problems, the “Dievturība” will have no strong future but it may exist for some time yet.

The national elements used presently by “Dievturi” groups as symbols of national values are semantically insignificant and, in the social environment, they are treated as attributes of archaic Latvianness that, in the best case scenario, can only be used in annual festivals and pseudo-national decorum. People in Latvia more or less recognise the national culture symbols used by “Dievturi”, yet their world perception is not influenced in any significant way. Besides, the national elements used by “Dievturi” in their rites are not their “private property”. National costumes, cuisine,

annual festivals, the related symbolism, sacred places and hill forts and folklore belong to everyone and may be used in diverse and very different contexts. This means that they do affect the society (e.g., national cuisine and costume for annual festivals), education (e.g., celebrating annual festivals at school) and culture (e.g., in the form of culture signs in the text). However, society is not strongly influenced by the elements of national culture employed by Latvian “Dievturi” groups.

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## Šiuolaikinis dievturių judėjimas Latvijoje: tarp folkloro ir nacionalizmo

### Santrauka

Dievturyba judėjimas Latvijoje buvo įkurtas 1920 m. pabaigoje kaip alternatyvus krikščionybės ir „naujojo nacionalizmo“ idėjų derinys, propaguojantis naują požiūrį į tradicijas. Tyrinėjant atlikta 30 giluminių interviu su judėjimui priklausančių įvairių grupių lyderiais ir aktyviais nariais, užpildyti klausimynai, sukaupta daug filmuotos medžiagos, analizuota, kaip judėjimą pristato žiniasklaida. Tyrėjai nustatė, jog dievturių judėjimo nariai laiko dievturybą išskirtine latvių religija, kuri remiasi Latvijos folkloru ir nacionaline ideologija; pabrėžia, kad kiekviena tauta turi savo protėvių / etninę religiją, o tautos pareiga yra rūpintis ja. Dievturiai pripažįsta ir laiko latvių folklorą savo etninės religijos šaltiniu, grupių nariai praktikuoja dievturybą

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kaip etninę religiją, apibūdina savo dalyvavimą judėjime kaip asmenybės ugdymą ir puikią galimybę patraukliai ir įdomiai praleisti laisvalaikį. Tyrimas atskleidė judėjimo narių vertybes, jų papročius, pagrindinius tapatybės bruožus. Dievturių judėjimui nepavyko pritraukti gausensio šiuolaikinės inteligentijos būrio ir aktyviau įsilieti į visuomenės gyvenimą, todėl jis nesuranda platesnio atgarsio.

**Raktažodžiai:** dievturyba, etninė religija, lauko tyrimas, nacionalizmas, neopagonybė, Latvijos folkloras, socialinės vertybės.