

The “Universalism” (?) of Domas Šidlauskas-Visuomis

The Reverend Rudra Vilius Dundzila, PhD, DMin

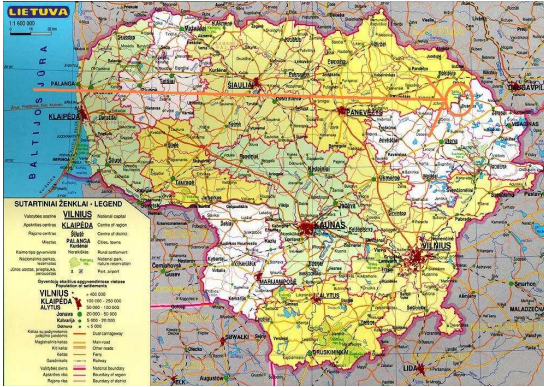
Domas Šidlauskas-Visuomis (1878-1944) was a Lithuanian cultural activist in the first half of the twentieth century. He is credited with helping to revive Lithuanian Paganism, although he unsuccessfully sought to create a new religion called Visuomybė or ‘Universalism.’ It was supposed to be a perfect world religion for the new era of humanity. He gained a group of followers in Lithuania and a much smaller one in the United States. This paper presents the history, and beliefs of Visuomybė, followed by a discussion of its Universalist claims.



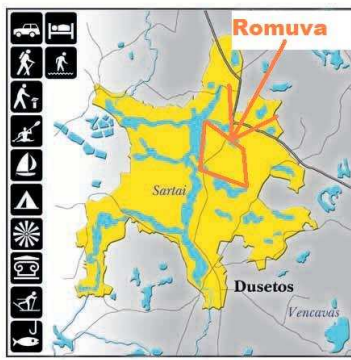
Domas Šidlauskas-Visuomis, ca. 1926

This paper relies on the writings of Šidlauskas as well as the research of Jonas Trinkūnas and Vytenis Almonaitis. They shared their research with me. Both conducted separate ethnographic expeditions to Dustetos to collect information about Šidlauskas. Trinkūnas also read Šidlauskas’ journal, archived at the Academy of Science, and published a few short articles with his findings.

Like many intelligencia of his era, Šidlauskas participated in the Lithuanian national awakening movement before World War I and in the cultural reconstruction of an independent Lithuanian state after the war. As a student, he began to study Asian religions, but graduated in business administration instead. He taught business principles to the burgeoning cooperative movement in Lithuania. In his spare time, he wrote articles on Lithuanian cultural themes in the press. His first book Visuomybė: naujos, tyros tikybos mokslas, dorovė, apeigos ir organizacija [Universalism: A New, Pure Religious Teaching, Morality, Rites, and Organization] was published in 1926. As the leader of Visuomybė, he took the name Visuomis, 'The Universal One.' He travelled to the United States during 1927-29. In 1929, he moved to Dusetos, a remote Lithuanian region. He established a sanctuary for Visuomybė in this region of forests, hills, and lakes along Lake Sartai (see map below). He called it Romuva, named after the well-known pagan temple of the Baltic peoples (Lithuanians, Latvians, Old Prussians, etc.). Under a pseudonym, he published two short books in 1931: Visuomiečių religija: trumpas, populiariškas visuomybės išdėstymas [The Religion of the Universalists: A Short, Popular Presentation of Universalism] and Apie Visuomį ir jo religiją [About Visuomis and His Religion]. Several times, he tried to register his group as religious organization, but was denied each time. He received a state pension for his cultural work in 1936. The following year, he closed the sanctuary and left for a trip to the United States. Here, he fostered three congregations, and published his final book, Kokie lietuvių bei lietuvių uždaviniai [The Duties of Lithuanians and the Balts]. After that, his contributions to newspapers cease, and nothing more is known about him.



Map of Lithuania with Dusetos and Lake Sartai highlighted.



Close-up map of Dusetos and Lake Sartai, with the Romuva area highlighted



Šidlauskas and some of his followers on a hill (the Romuva hill?) with Lake Sartai in the background.

Reference sources about Šidlauskas unanimously claim that Visuomybė sought to combine Lithuanian pre-Christian religion with Hinduism and Buddhism. That is incorrect. In his writings, he rejects the teachings of most Asian and Western religions, in particular Hindu Vedanta, Theosophy, Sufism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is especially critical of Judaism and, to an extreme extent, Christianity. He often calls Christianity a “superstition” as well as “2000 years outdated.” He holds only two religions with regard: the pre-Christian Lithuanian Pagan religion and Zoroastrianism.

Visuomybė has two fundamental principles. First, the world suffers from dark, superstitious, discordant, complicated, and perverse religions. Second, Šidlauskas as Visuomis reveals a new, perfect religion for humanity in the name of the true God. These ideas are presented *a priori*, requiring no justification. They may have come from visions of Šidlauskas. He experienced a super-conscious meditative state with visions in 1915, and again in 1919, then due to Typhoid fever.

Visuomybė originally had four stated beliefs, with one more being added later. First, the world is engaged in an eternal struggle between good and evil. The good and holy God engages in an eternal battle with the evil, destructive Pikulas. This duel repeats the Zoroastrian paradigm of Ahura Mazda vs. Angra Mainyu (the evil spirit). Furthermore, it is not God, but Pikulas who punishes people for their wrong doing. The choice of the name Pikulas is unusual, as it comes from Prussian folklore and is rare. It is one of the multiple names for the chthonic trickster deity that Christianity dubbed the devil. In Lithuanian, the name sounds like it means “the angry one,” but that is not etymologically correct.

The second belief of Visuomybė explains human ontology. The human being is composed of the body, the soul (he used the Christian term for soul, “siela”), the good spirit (he

used the Pagan term for an individual human spirit, “vėlė”¹, and the evil or angry spirit (he created the word “piktė” based on the aforementioned Pikulas).

Šidlauskas considers the body and physical matter unimportant. This reflects Western body-spirit dualism (and probably Gnostic influence). The essence of humanity is the spirit, not the body. To prove his claim scientifically, he compared the body-spirit relationship to a biological cell that divides into two new, separate cells. Likewise, death will free humans from their bodies. The image is not only inaccurate, but it also does not make sense. Parent cells divide into offspring cells that are copies of the parents; one part is not separated from another part. He originally suggested corpses be used for fertilizer, but later allowed remote mass graves or cremation.

The soul comes from an infinite spirit that is not the same as God. The good spirit comes from God, and the evil spirit comes from Pikulas. The soul experiences the battle between good and evil in the body. By analogy, the Šidlauskas’ good spirit might be compared to the “guardian angel” concept of Christianity and Zoroastrianism. After death, the soul becomes either a good spirit or a bad spirit. Šidlauskas explains this scientifically with an analogy to physics. The battle between good and evil is like the positive and negative poles of an atom. This is flawed science, as atoms do not have poles. He also compares good and evil to masculine and feminine traits, just one of his many misogynistic references.

¹ In his last book, he renamed the good spirit to Perkūnė, based on the name of the Pagan sky and storm God Perkūnas (Slavic Perun, Germanic Thor). He also replaced the generic term for God with the creator Perkūnas.

God is not an individual entity, but the collective of all good spirits. Likewise, the anti-God Pikulas is not an individual, but the collective of all evil spirits. This paradigm partially and inaccurately reflects the Hindu Vedantic concepts of Brahman and Atman. The Lithuanian philosopher and theosophist Vilius Storosta-Vydūnas had published a Lithuanian version of Brahman and Atman. Šidlauskas studied Vydūnas and mentions him in his writing (but does not list him among the leading Lithuanian philosophers, although he is generally considered the primary Lithuanian philosopher of the pre-World War I and inter-World War periods). Brahman is the universal, impersonal being, from whom the individual soul-like Atman flows, incarnates, and to whom it returns after death. In Šidlauskas' system, the soul does not come from God, but can become a good or bad spirit, i.e. part of either God or Pikulas.

Furthermore, Šidlauskas taught that good and bad spirits are organized according to national, racial (Baltic, Germanic, Slavic, as well as color/shade of skin), and class groups. There are also gradient groupings of good and bad spirits according to their level of goodness.

God (collective of good spirits)	Infinite soul	Pikulas (collective of evil spirits)
↑		↑
various national, racial, class, and gradient collectives of good spirits	↓	various national, racial, class, and gradient collectives of evil spirits
↑	↓	↑
good spirit	soul	evil spirit
↙	↓	↘
	body	

Šidlauskas' ontology of the human is unduly complicated. It contradicts his claim for a simple religion in contrast to the complicated religions of the past. Moreover, the various

structures and interactions of God, Pikulas, soul, good spirit and bad spirit cancel out Šidlauskas' claim to reject supernaturalism in religion.

The third belief of Visuomybė is human free will. The influences of one's actions affect the family and the progeny. People need to choose to live a perfect, organized, controlled, productive, and moral way of life. The basic principle of Visuomybė ethics is improvement and progress. People have to improve themselves to become the best people they can be. Personal self-improvement and ethical action will lead the world to progress. Moreover, the outward characteristics of personal perfection are physical beauty and grace. Šidlauskas encouraged marriage only between people of similar physical beauty, nationality or race, and social class. He opposed marriage between people of dissimilar characteristics of backgrounds, and especially of the handicapped and disabled. In this respect, Šidlauskas echoed a rather pervasive ideology of eugenics, intertwined with nationalist extremism, in pre-World War II Europe.

Fourth, Visuomybė believes that good and evil are manifest in human history. The good always leads people to progress, and evil—to regress. Evolution promotes the eugenic perfection of humanity. Men, Indo-Europeans (including Balts, Germanics, Slavs, Indians, etc.), whites, and Europeans are the perfected peoples. Certain nations were more progressive, and therefore more perfect, than others (he used this to show how the Germanic nations were immoral and inferior, counter to the Nazi claims of being the master race). Physically beautiful people are exemplars of progress. Šidlauskas divided humanity into the following categories, of which the last three represent progressive peoples: the childlike, the blind, the possible, believers, and scientists. He believed Visuomybė was the religious epitome of scientific progress.

Šidlauskas added one more belief to Visuomybė in 1937, during his second trip to the United States. The fifth belief is a Lithuanian pan-Baltic nationalism. Nationality became a

religious belief with strong missionary overtones. Šidlauskas sought to protect Lithuanian immigrants to the United States against losing their national identity. He idealized the Lithuanian language, culture, and spirit as an exemplar for all of humanity. These new ideas were nothing more than a nationalistic xenophobia. He also encouraged the resurrection of the Old Prussian language (the Old Prussians were a Baltic people that came under Teutonic rule in German Prussia and eventually lost their language and culture). He drew up a plan to create a United Lithuania, analogous to the United States. It would unite Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians (not a Baltic people), Old Prussians (a non-existent people), and Byelorussians (the Yotvingians were a Baltic people that came under Slavic rule in Byelorussia and eventually lost their language and culture). The citizens would all speak Lithuanian and practice the religion of Visuomybė.

From 1926 onwards, Šidlauskas spent much of his time propagating Visuomybė. In 1937, his advocacy took on a new dimension: he also sought the establishment of an independent Lithuanian Catholic Church, along the lines of the Polish National Catholics of the United States. They ceded from Rome over ethnic cultural disputes with American bishops (mostly Irish and Italian) to form their own Polish-language church based on a combination of congregational and Episcopal polity. Šidlauskas found seven Lithuanian congregations among the Polish National Catholics in the United States. They held mass in Lithuanian, had married priests, and elected their own bishops. Šidlauskas regretted that there were no Lithuanians among the Polish bishops. He called on the Lithuanian Parliament to follow the example of the Church of England: secede from Rome to form a Lithuanian National Catholic Church. It would encompass all Catholics and Protestants in Lithuania (he did not include the Byelorussian and Russian speaking Orthodox of Lithuania). Such advocacy contradicts his efforts for his own religion of Visuomybė.

However, he believed that a free Christianity in Lithuania would naturally lead people to accept Visuomybė.

Šidlauskas did recruit a group of followers. He claimed 6000 people professed his religion, although only 200 would attend the holidays he sponsored at the sanctuary (no edifices were built there, by the way). At first, he tried to convert only the intelligentsia of Lithuania. He later turned to the peasantry, but found them less interested in his ideas than the intelligentsia. He quickly abandoned his efforts towards the peasants. He also claimed that there were three groups in the United States.

Šidlauskas and his Visuomybė have been reexamined in contemporary Lithuania. The modern Lithuanian Pagan movement claims Šidlauskas' Visuomybė with its Romuva sanctuary is a precursor to the Pagan revival. Although he expressed respect for Lithuanian pre-Christian religion, he borrowed barely any elements from it, except for a few names and words. He also encouraged the use of Lithuanian national costumes and folk songs in Visuomybė services. He also did not claim his religion to be a revival of Paganism.

Visuomybė means Universalism, but it hardly represents any tenets of Universalism in the Unitarian Universalist sense. Universalism means that the God of love brings salvation to everyone and does not send anyone to eternal damnation. A lingering historical argument rejected the notion that hell exists as a temporary place of punishment before salvation. Salvation came to focus on the here-and-now, rather than the here-after. The soterological goal became the common good. In the twentieth century, Clarence Skinner advocated a Universalism that explores the "universal" basis of all religions. All religions share common ethical beliefs, such as the dignity of people, freedom, acceptance of human diversity, the common good, and the need for people to aid each other. Visuomybė expresses none of these Universalist beliefs.

There are other forms of Universalism besides Unitarian Universalism. First, Mahayana Buddhism believes all sentient beings (not just all people; this includes gods and demons) will eventually attain nirvana through lifetimes of reincarnation. It compares the suffering of the world to a burning house that requires escape. Advanced in their practice, Bodisattvas work selflessly for the complete enlightenment of all. Second, Hinduism believes that all incarnated souls will attain moksha through lifetimes of reincarnation. For some Hindus, this is an explicit belief, while for others it theoretically is a logical conclusion to the Hindu belief in karma and responsibility. Burning away karma of past deeds, the grace of the gods, or self-realization are prerequisites for moksha. Another aspect of Hindu universalism is the belief that all religions are true, but simply different paths to the same divine goal. For example, Swami Vivekananda, credited with bringing Hinduism to the West via his interpretation of Vedanta, believed that all religions are true and are evolving to a superior form. Another example comes from Unitarian Universalist partners the Brahma Samaj. They believe in the universal essential truth of Hinduism and all the world's religions. Visuomybė explicitly rejects both Buddhism and Hinduism, although it recommends meditation as a personal spiritual practice.

Šidlauskas' notion of Visuomybė as Universalism regresses to a selfish understanding of Universalism. Visuomybė is a universal religion because everyone should accept it. It is destined to a universal religion for all humanity, to the exclusion of other religions. Some missionary religions have made similar goals. This is a grandiose claim. In reality, Šidlauskas' Visuomybė is an individualistic religion born of a personal visionary experience. It combines and reinterprets a few mythic notions from Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Paganism in an overly complicated personal mythology. Its claims reflect pseudo-science. The ethical premise that personal self-improvement will lead to world progress is weak. Such a stance relies on osmosis, the trickle

down effect, of right-wing politics. Moreover, Visuomybè proclaims reprehensibly biased attitudes that support misogyny, nationalism, racism, classism, and discrimination. Its approach denies deny the fundamental unity and relatedness of the human family. There is no Universalism in Visuomybè.

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