

The Evils of Christianization: A Pagan Perspective on European History

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Any thoughtful student of history soon comes to understand that major events affecting large numbers of people can be approached and assessed from a variety of angles and perspectives. It is a durable truism that “history is written by the victors,” with many historical accounts of previous times slanted to favor the interests of particular nations or social groups over others less privileged. In recent times, social and intellectual trends such as feminism, deconstructionism, postcolonialism and indigenous people’s movements have raised awareness of the importance of acknowledging the voices and viewpoints of persons, groups and nations who have been ignored or devalued in history as it has been construed, constructed and promulgated by the dominant social groups of past times.

In looking at the history of religions in Europe, I am struck by the extent to which one particular viewpoint has dominated understanding and blocked critical reflection about what is arguably one of the major historical transformations in ancient and medieval times: the change of religions which took place in Europe when Christianity spread beyond the confines of the Roman Empire to replace the traditional, nature-oriented religions of other parts of Europe. For lack of a better term, I will refer to these pre-Christian European religions as “Pagan” religions or as “Paganism.” By and large, the transition from Paganism to Christianity has been viewed through the lens of a

perspective which assumed that Christian domination over and suppression of the preexisting Pagan traditions was a natural and necessary thing.

This view of European history, grounded in the dogmatic conviction in the intrinsic superiority of Christianity to all other religions, has a long history and venerable history in its own right, beginning with the Christian scriptures themselves. To medieval participants in this Christian-centered discourse, European civilization was one and the same as “Christendom,” and even today, it is still commonplace to refer to Europe as the “Christian West.” In the last 150 or so years, however, the authority of this paradigm or metanarrative of Christian supremacy has been corroded by the general secularization of Western societies and also by Western people’s increasing contact with and knowledge of other religions from around the world.

The deflation of this metanarrative of Christian privilege has enormous implications for the position of Christianity in relation to other religions in the increasingly pluralistic societies of today and tomorrow, and it has equally important ramifications for how we view and interpret the past. With the paradigm of unquestioned Christian supremacy giving way to a new ideal of religious tolerance and coexistence in which religious pluralism is viewed as the norm, we have reason to look with new eyes at the topic mentioned earlier, the transition from Paganism to Christianity in Europe.

This change of religions is often characterized as the “rise” of Christianity, but it should also be understood as the “fall” of Pagan religions in Europe; a “fall” which was neither a simple nor a painless process, but rather a bloody and protracted struggle. Christianity did not simply “rise” like a spring plant or the dawn sun; it conquered. Nor did Paganism merely “fall” like a leaf from a branch or a fruit from a tree; it was crushed.

The temples of the old religions in Europe did not simply collapse because of old age and dilapidation; they were torn down by the Christians and in some cases, recycled as building materials for the construction of Christian churches.

In many areas, the adherents of the Pagan religions fought tenaciously to preserve their ancestral traditions, even if their struggles were ultimately in vain, and their traditions so thoroughly eradicated that only the most fragmentary traces were to remain. Clearly, there were, and are, two sides to this story, but we usually only hear one side, that which celebrates the victory of Christianity. What would we hear were we to listen to the other side, to the voices of the Pagans who suffered loss, defeat and erasure? What would we find were we to seek to discover these past peoples and their religions rather than to dismiss them?

I believe that the most basic and perhaps most important lesson that comes from such research and contemplation is the realization that there was religious pluralism in medieval Europe one thousand years ago; a lively clash of competing Pagan and Christian religious cultures. In the terms of the Russian theorist Bakhtin, there was religious *heteroglossia*, religious *dialogue*.¹ This religious dialogue ended with the victory of the culture of Christian monologue and monologic, but this monologue never succeeded entirely in eradicating all traces of the Paganism of the past, which lived on in folklore, in popular customs and celebrations, and even entered into Christianity itself, with Pagan gods made over into Christian saints or reviled as forms of the Christian devil, and holy days reinterpreted as feast days for Christian saints. Realizing that Pagan religion represented another distinct dimension of European life, both before, during and

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael

after Christianization opens the way to a more nuanced and multi-dimensional understanding of European history and culture. Realizing that the forces of Christianization were continually striving to impose religious uniformity and erase even the memory of religious dialogue and pluralism contains important food for thought in our contemporary world situation, as I will reflect upon in the conclusion.

In the following brief case-studies, examining first, the role of Emperor Charlemagne, and second that of the Vikings in the religious conflicts between Pagans and Christians in medieval Europe, I attempt to show how examining European history from the Pagan point of view can illuminate important issues and raise valuable questions for our contemporary understanding of European history.

Reconsidering Charlemagne

The reign of the Frankish king and later, Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne is often viewed as one of the milestones in the establishment of European Christian civilization. In recent times, with the increasing strength of pan-European institutions in the framework of the European Union, Charlemagne is seen as an early herald of European unity.² His rule is often praised as a “Carolingian renaissance” for fostering great accomplishments in arts and learning, in partnership with the institutions of the Christian church. There are, however, other dimensions of Charlemagne’s reign which are less often discussed, because they do not fit well with the pleasing image of a wise, benevolent monarch in whose name religion and culture flourished.

Consider Charlemagne’s war against the Saxons. This was a series of fierce

Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981).

² To give just one example, the British newsmagazine *The Economist* has a weekly feature on pan-European issues entitled *Charlemagne*.

conflicts from 772 to 804, for some 32 years, with numerous treaties and truces that inevitably gave way to further battle. In the biography of Charlemagne produced by the court official Einhard in about the year 830,³ it is stated that the war was undertaken by Charlemagne to put an end to the incessant raiding and other misdeeds of the Saxons on the borderlands of the Frankish kingdom. Einhard would therefore have us believe that this was a purely defensive war, but it is obvious that Charlemagne had territorial ambitions that were far more imperial than defensive.

Einhard also informs us that Charlemagne was dead set on the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity. He notes at one point that “the war could have been brought to a more rapid conclusion, had it not been for the faithlessness of the Saxons.” According to Einhard, the Saxons’ continuing refusal to fully accept the Christian religion and, in Einhard’s phrase, “abandon their devil worship,” was the main factor prolonging the state of war.⁴ From Einhard’s Christian-privileging perspective, the Saxons were stubborn, deceitful infidels, whose unchristian ways fully justified the use of massive force against them.

However, if we consider the situation from the point of view of the Pagan Saxons, it takes on a quite different aspect. From this perspective, the Franks, and especially their king Charles, were warrior-fanatics with a relentless desire to impose their religion on the Saxons. Whatever else might be said against the Saxons, there is no indication that they were trying to force their religion on the Franks. If we take seriously that the Saxons had their own religious traditions which they were trying to preserve from the Frankish

³ Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” in *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne*, translated with an introduction by Lewis Thorpe (Hammondsworth and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), chapters 7-13, 49-92; in particular chapters 7-13, pp. 61-68.

⁴ Einhard, *prev. cit.*, ch. 7, p. 62.

onslaught, then their sustained refusal to accept a foreign religion being imposed on them by force takes on a very different aspect from that suggested by Einhard. It is not stubbornness or deceit, but steadfast piety and the willingness to give their lives to defend their own faith.

From the Pagan perspective, there is also reason to be skeptical of Einhard's insistence that the Franks' war against the Saxons was merely a necessary response to Saxon banditry and raiding. Though this was an age rife with such behavior, there are other factors to consider. Long before the onset of Charlemagne's campaigns against the Saxons, Christian missionaries had become active in the lands of the Saxons and other Germanic peoples.⁵ When gentle methods such as preaching and reasoning failed to convince Germanic Pagans to abandon their ancestral traditions, these missionaries often resorted to more forceful methods. The Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface chopped down a sacred oak tree in the village of Geimar, in the region of Hessa, in order to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian god to the Pagan god associated with the oak.⁶ After this act of destruction, Boniface confiscated the wood from the fallen sacred oak to use in building Christian churches, as if to add insult to injury.

Such desecration and destruction of Pagan sacred sites and objects became an accepted missionary practice in this period,⁷ one which Charlemagne himself used to inaugurate his hostilities against the Saxons. This happened in 872, when Charlemagne's

⁵ Summarized with a distinctly pro-Christian bias in Richard E. Sullivan, "The Carolingian Missionary and the Pagan," in *Speculum* 28, no.4 (1953): 705-740. A more recent and extensive and balanced treatment is Carole M. Cusack, "Anglo-Saxon Missionaries to the Continent," in *The Rise of Christianity in Northern Europe 300-1000* (London and New York: Cassell, 1998), 119-134

⁶ *Vita Bonafatii* (The Life of St. Boniface) chapter VI, in C.H. Talbot, trans. and ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (1954), 43. See also Cusack, prev.cit., pp. 123-127, and Kenneth Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty: A.D. 500-A.D. 1500* (New York and London: Harper and Brother, 1938), 363.

army invaded a Saxon town on the river Drimel and hacked to pieces a sacred wooden pillar, apparently a decorated tree-trunk, known as the Irminsul, which was highly venerated in the religious observances of the Saxons as a representation of the world-tree.⁸ With this attack on one of the holiest Saxons sites, Charlemagne left no doubt as to his intention to use military force to obliterate the Saxons' religion, as well as to conquer their lands. Charlemagne's destruction of the world-tree proved to be an apt metaphor for his wholesale devastation of Saxon people, property, society and culture over the next 32 years. This attack on highly sacred sites and objects must have aroused the most powerful feelings of shock and outrage among the Saxons and possibly other Pagan peoples as well, perhaps not unlike the recent attack on the World Trade Center in New York.

Christian sources such as saints' lives and missionary correspondence routinely claim that such acts of destruction were highly successful in gaining converts to Christianity.⁹ This supposed success is explained with rather curious logic. The missionaries believed that their ability to destroy Pagan objects without incurring the wrath of the Pagan deities proved the nonexistence of the Pagan gods and, by extension, the total absurdity of the religion. These authors never ask themselves whether the same might not apply to their own religion, that is, if the merits of the Christian faith would be disproven by God's refusal to forcefully respond to the burning down of a church or the cutting in half of a crucifix.

⁷ Their ranks include Willibord, Sturm, Liudger and Willehad. See Richard E. Sullivan, *prev.cit.* 720.

⁸ Kenneth Latourette, *prev.cit.*, p. 389.

⁹ See, for example, the letter of Daniel of Winchester to Boniface from the year 723, in which Daniel urges Boniface to use the following line of reasoning in preaching to the Pagans: "If the gods are all-powerful, beneficent and just, they not only reward their worshippers but punish those who reject them. If, then, they do this in temporal matters, how is it that they spare us Christians who are turning almost the whole earth away from their worship and overthrowing their idols?" Letter of Daniel to Boniface, in *The Letters of Saint Boniface*, translated by Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 49-50.

At any rate, the same sources which boast of missionary successes through such acts of religious terrorism as the Irminsul destruction cannot hide the facts of massive retaliation by the Saxons and other peoples when their sacred traditions were threatened by Christian attacks. The Saxons repeatedly attacked and burned Christian churches; often carrying off their treasures in much the same way as Boniface had carted away the wood from the sacred oak at Geismar. In a letter of 755 to Pope Stephen III, Boniface apologizes for a delay in writing because he has been busy restoring 30 churches plundered and burned by Pagan rebels. Above all, the bare fact that Charlemagne's destruction of the Irminsul ushered in thirty-odd years of warfare before the Saxons would surrender to Charlemagne and accept the religion of the Franks underlines that such actions were as likely to incite resistance as win converts.

Although one would expect 32 years of war and destruction to produce an abundance of violence and bloodshed, there is one particular action of Charlemagne's which stands out for its excessive cruelty. On one horrific day in 782, Charlemagne had more than 4,000 Saxons beheaded for rebelling against Frankish rule and resuming the practice of their traditional Pagan religion, after having previously signed a treaty agreeing to accept Christianity and Frankish domination.

Such harsh measures did not end with the final surrender of the Saxons in 804. Charlemagne imposed stringent conditions of surrender upon the Saxons that prescribed capital punishment for a wide range of offenses, including many which were religious in nature.¹⁰ Anyone who stole from a church, ate meat during the Christian fast of Lent,

¹⁰ *Capitularia Regum Francorum*, edited by A. Boretius, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Leges, sectio II*, no. 26. pp. 68-70; trans. by D. C. Munro in *The Original Sources of European History* Vol. VI. no. 5 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania: 1900), 2-4. For discussion, see Ruth Mazo Karras, "Pagan Survivals and Syncretism in the Conversion of Saxony," in *The Catholic Historical Review* LXXII, 4

remained a Pagan and refused to undergo baptism, or engaged in a conspiracy of Pagans against Christians was to receive the death penalty. At the same time, Saxons were required to provide labor, food and other support to churches and priests. Looking at this from the Christian point of view, there is some discomfort at the harshness of the measures employed by Charlemagne, but there is no doubt about the rightness of his ultimate goal, the Christianization of the Saxons as part of the larger project of uniting Europe in a Christian empire.¹¹

Charlemagne's cruelty and intolerance in the war against the Saxons have never detracted from his popular image as a wise and benevolent sovereign. Such actions also appear to cause no concern to those people in the present day who see Charlemagne as an attractive symbol of European unity. If we take the Pagan point of view, however, Charlemagne appears to be the exemplar of nothing so much as religious intolerance, persecution and imperialism, the forefather not of European unity, but of some of the most problematic and shameful tendencies in European history. Charlemagne's war against the Saxons set the tone for such highpoints of European civilization as the Crusades and the Inquisition, and paved the way for the religious wars, persecutions and pogroms of the future.

From the Pagan point of view, we can ask what might have happened if

(1986):552-572, and Richard Fletcher, "Campaigning Sceptres: the Frankish Drive to the East" in *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 193-227 at p. 214.

¹¹ Modern historians of European religious history such as Kenneth Scott La Tourette have not failed to register their regret at the massive loss of life and social devastation caused by Charlemagne's policies and methods, but they rarely raise the question of what right Charlemagne and his Christian comrades had to use military force to wipe out the religious life of a whole nation and to compel conversion to a foreign religion. From a point of view of Christian privilege, such "sins" are easily forgiven. As La Tourette puts it, "However much the methods of Charlemagne may have been an innovation and a contradiction of the original spirit of Christianity, in the case of the Saxons they resulted in a permanent conversion." Kenneth La Tourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty A.D. 500-A.D.1500* (New Haven: Yale University, 1938), p. 106.

Charlemagne had chosen a different path. What if he had pursued a policy of religious tolerance instead of religious persecution? What if he had offered the Saxons the option to join his empire without giving up their ancestral traditions? Perhaps 32 years of war could have been avoided, and the stage set for a European civilization of tolerance and pluralism, rather than one of intolerance and fanaticism. If Charlemagne had chosen a different path, perhaps he really would be an appropriate hero and symbol for our time.

Revisiting the Vikings

If the popular view of Charlemagne has benefited from a rosy-tinted treatment at the hands of Christian-privileging historians, then the seafaring Scandinavians of the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries who we know as Vikings might be said to suffer from the reverse problem: an historical image as bloody, greedy, rapacious monsters with only the most primitive culture and religion. This highly negative portrait of the Vikings, based largely on the writings of medieval Christian authors, has been undergoing substantial revision in recent years, mainly due to the mounting body of archaeological research showing that the Vikings were builders and traders as well as destroyers and raiders. No one would deny that the Vikings were capable of great violence and savagery, but we now can see quite clearly that the Vikings were also very often occupied in peaceful and productive pursuits.

One of the reasons why such a diabolical reputation attached to the Vikings for such a long time is that they obviously had a terrible sense of public relations. In medieval times no less than our own, any leader or group of people who wished to be loved and well-regarded needed to take great pains to gain the favor of the writers of authoritative historical records and propagators of public opinion. The Viking leaders

were very good at this within their own communities, heaping honors and treasures on poets and bards who literally sang their praises. Icelandic literature contains many examples of such praise-poetry, celebrating the valiant careers of chieftains and kings from Viking times and still earlier ages. From tapestry fragments in graves, we can surmise that decorative art probably served a similar function among the elite classes. However, when the Vikings went abroad, they did not merely fail to properly flatter and bribe the people in a position to influence their reputations; they raided, robbed and sometimes killed them, thus motivating these opinion-makers and record-keepers to inscribe onto the pages of history as dark a portrait of the Vikings as possible. That is to say, medieval historical records were mainly written by Christian monks and priests, and so, when the Vikings repeatedly attacked and pillaged Christian monasteries and churches, they ensured that they would be remembered as monsters, murderers and infidels.

For the Christian chroniclers, it was not only the Vikings' violence and greed which inspired their revulsion toward the Northmen, but also the fact that the Vikings were non-Christians, worshipping gods and practicing traditions totally loathsome to the Christians. From the Christian point of view, the Pagan Vikings not only behaved like devils, but worshipped them as well.

The Christian portrait of the savage, demonic Vikings is coherent and unified. It is however quite one-sided, as it only tells us of the Vikings as they behaved in acts of aggression executed against foreign lands and peoples. It does not give any account of the society or lifestyle of the Vikings in their native lands. In this way, the historical image of the Vikings is almost the perfect opposite of that of Charlemagne and the

Carolingian kingdom. Where Charlemagne's acts of cruelty and savagery toward the Saxons and other peoples were minimized and rationalized by situating them in the background of his more positive achievements in supporting church-based arts and culture in the Frankish kingdom, the Vikings' violence and destructiveness in raiding and attacking Christian lands were magnified by the absence of any information about any other aspects of their lives and culture.

From the Pagan point of view, we find reason to praise and celebrate the Vikings, not for their undeniable acts of savagery, but for their ingenuity, their arts and literature, and above all, their defense of their ancestral religious traditions against the rising tide of Christianization sweeping north towards Scandinavia. Their attacks on Christian institutions, usually seen as nothing more than missions of plunder, may be viewed as counterattacks against the aggressive growth of Christianity. This comes into sharper focus if we compare the chronology of Viking activities with important events in Christian expansion. The first Viking attack on a major Christian institution was the attack on the British monastery of Lindisfarne in 793, contemporary with the Frankish war against the Saxons; eleven years after Charlemagne's mass beheading of Saxon Pagans and some twenty one years after his attack on the Saxon temple containing the sacred oak pillar the Irminsul. Though Lindisfarne was not part of the Frankish kingdom, the Northmen were very likely well aware that many Christian missionaries came to the continent from Britain, and so an assault on a major British Christian site might have been thought a way of striking at the source of the aggressive religion displacing Paganism. The fact that Lindisfarne was relatively unprotected and vulnerable undoubtedly added to its attractiveness as a target.

The motivations for Viking raids on churches and monasteries have been debated for many years, and the recent trend has been to emphasize the economic dimension, reasoning that the main motivation for attacking Christian sites could only have been to acquire the gold and other valuables which these houses of God contained.¹² In suggesting a possible religious dimension to Viking assaults on Christian institutions, I do not mean to dispute the obvious profit motive, merely to assert that there were very likely a number of different and overlapping motivations and purposes. As churches and monasteries were the repositories of great wealth along with being centers of religious and political authority, Viking raids on these places no doubt enabled the simultaneous fulfillment of a wide range of possible objectives: military, political and religious, as well as economic. The same could be said of the Frankish assault on Pagan temples and sanctuaries in Saxony and elsewhere, as such Pagan sites often possessed wealth which Christian attackers would not hesitate to carry off.

If we take the Vikings seriously, and do not simply dismiss them as savage, rapacious brutes, I think we can dare to pose the question of whether the various raiding and military activities of the Viking might not represent a progressively larger-scale and better organized Pagan counterattack against Christian, and particularly Frankish, expansion and imperialism. Just as the Franks went from small-scale attacks on Saxon border areas to large-scale conquest and colonization, so did the Vikings progress from hit-and-run raids on coastal sites like Lindisfarne in the late eighth century to mass invasion and colonization of England, Scotland, Ireland and other areas in the ninth

¹² The viewpoint is summarized and critiqued in Niels Lund, "Allies of God or Man? The Viking Expansion in a European Perspective", in *Viator* 20 (1989): 45-60. See also Timothy Reuter, "Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* vol. 5, no.3 (1985): 75-94.

century and beyond. It is to be noted that invading Vikings were often able to come to terms with local political authorities, but continued to devastate Christian institutions. For example, when the so-called “Great Army” of Danish Vikings conquered the English kingdoms of East Anglia and Northumbria between 865 and 867, they quickly reached an accommodation with the local people and their rulers, but brutally ravaged the Whitby monastery.¹³ In such an instance, it would seem that the Vikings had a special grudge against the Christians.

The hypothesis of Viking activities as Pagan retaliation to Christian and Frankish expansion finds further support in the cultural sphere. Between the eighth and eleventh centuries, there was an impressive flowering of Pagan art and literature in Northern Europe, what we might describe as a Viking renaissance, roughly contemporary, and perhaps self-consciously competitive with the cultural resurgence sponsored by the court of Charlemagne, the so-called Carolingian renaissance. Many of the documents that we rely upon as source-materials for Nordic religion and mythology were first composed in this era, though our surviving texts come from several hundred years later.¹⁴ The theme of Valhalla, the afterlife paradise, ruled by Odin, the god of war, poetry and wisdom, where warriors feast and fight in preparation for a final, apocalyptic battle, is prominent on the famous runestone and picturestone memorials of the Baltic Sea island of Gotland from the 8th through the 11th centuries and in skaldic poetry of the 10th century. Contemporary royal tombs from Denmark and Norway, constructed on an impressive

¹³ Else Roesdahl, *The Vikings* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 235-36.

¹⁴ Icelandic literature of the 12 and 13th centuries, composed some two to three centuries after the official conversion to Christianity, draws on oral traditions of the Viking times and earlier, and provides crucial information about mythology and folklore, though from a post-Christianization point of view.

scale and luxuriously equipped with exquisitely carved and crafted objects, express a confident expectation of a joyful afterlife, a Pagan counterpoint to the proud monuments to the Christian faith being raised in the Frankish lands. The surrounding of these majestic Nordic royal tombs by lesser graves containing warriors buried with weapons, riding gear, and even horses,¹⁵ may echo the myth of Odin and his warriors dwelling together in the afterlife paradise of Valhalla.¹⁶ One thing we can be sure of is that the Vikings did not view themselves as infidels or monsters. They had their own refined traditions, of which they were quite proud, all of which were threatened by the expansion of Christian hegemony in Northern Europe.

When we view all of the artistic, cultural and religious expressions of the Viking era together, we see a confident Pagan culture possessing great vitality, originality and refinement rooted in a religious tradition with a rich and imaginative mythology. In our time, there is increasing appreciation for Viking artistry and culture, but this recognition was long delayed by the tendency to focus on the savagery of the Vikings to the exclusion of these other more positive aspects. It is only with the deflation of the grand narrative of Christian supremacy, and in particular, the notion that European civilization is one and the same as European Christianity, that we become able to better appreciate Viking culture and other Pagan aspects of European history.

To close the discussion of the Vikings, let me again ask, as I did in regards to Charlemagne, *what if*. What if the Vikings had not converted to Christianity? What effect would this have had on European history? From the Christian point of view, this would

¹⁵ Klavs Randsborg, *The Viking Age in Denmark* (1980): 127.

¹⁶ Else Roesdahl, "Pagan Beliefs, Christian Impact and Archaeology" in *Viking Revaluations* (1993): 128-135, at 131.

seem a nightmarish prospect. The Viking religion is associated with idolatry and sacrifice, including human sacrifice; far better to be done with it. Such a perspective, however, overlooks the important point that all religions change and develop over time. Just as Christianity has become more peaceful and tolerant over the centuries, refined and reformed through generation after generation of scholarship and theology, not to mention internal conflicts and upheavals, could not the same have happened, with the Pagan religion of the Vikings or other peoples, if they had been given the chance? We know that Hinduism, the majority religion of India, was long ago a religion of animal sacrifice with cattle as a favorite sacrificial victim. Over time, and with the influence of new religious ideas, such animal sacrifice fell out of favor, and vegetarianism became established as a moral imperative, with cows as a special category of sacred animals protected from harm. Could not a similar process of evolution and refinement have taken place with the Pagan religion of the Vikings? The answer cannot be known, because the Christianization of all Scandinavia closed the book on any further development of Norse Paganism. Scattered pieces of information about Viking-era culture and society do however suggest that the Vikings were capable of accepting Christianity within their communities, so long as Christians did not seek to undermine native Pagan traditions. Iceland, for example, was settled by both Pagans and Christians, and the two religions coexisted in relative peace for more than a century. As I see it, the Vikings did not hate Christianity per se; they attacked Christianity where it was perceived as part of a larger threat. Or to put it another way, they became aggressive against Christians in response to the Christian aggression of Charlemagne and others.

In archaeological remains as well as Old Icelandic literature, we find a good deal

of evidence of Christian-Pagan syncretism which suggests that the Vikings were capable of combining Christianity with their own native traditions. If Christian authorities had been willing to tolerate a more flexible kind of Christianity, a distinctive Nordic blend of Christianity and Paganism could have developed which might have served as a bridge between the two religious traditions and ameliorated conflicts between them. This was not to be. The powerful Christian authority structures of medieval Europe were only interested in one kind of relationship with other forms of religion: the total destruction of these religions and the Christianization of all peoples, by force if necessary. Only now are we beginning to realize how much was lost as a result of that harsh policy of intolerance.

Conclusions

Today, the leaders of Europe and other highly developed regions have embraced the ideal of multiculturalism and pluralism, at least in rhetoric. This includes tolerance for other religions, not merely the various forms of Christianity that for so many centuries dominated the cultural life of Europe. I believe that if this 21st century experiment in pluralism and tolerance is to succeed, the history of Europe needs to be re-written to include the perspectives of the non-Christian peoples of the European past, and to examine the processes by which ancient Pagan religions were wiped off the European map. If we accept the proposition that religious intolerance is a dangerous evil that has no place in the modern world, let us understand full well that it was just as dangerous, and just as evil, for the peoples of the past.