

Perceptions of Pagan and Christian

Phases of Conversion: Where was the dividing line between pagan and Christian?

Boniface: distinction drawn between his work with *pagani* (e.g. Frisians, Saxons) and the ignorant (e.g. Thuringians) – an essential threshold had been crossed by latter but not by the former i.e. baptism, [even if there were limits to how far Boniface could consider them to be considered a properly functioning Christian community].

Although there might be ‘a conversion moment’ (as Bede records for the different AS kingdoms), in terms of fully embedding Christianity conversion was a longer phased process with opportunity for interaction with earlier cult practices and for integration with pre-existing social structures. Consider Birkeli’s phases for conversion of Norway (1973): (1) infiltration (2) mission (3) institution. An ‘Infiltration phase’ in AS conversion is not generally seen as such a feature as in Scandinavian conversion, but should be considered; ditto possible influence of Christianity on practice of AS traditional religion as well as possible influences from Romano-British paganism (e.g. Blair 1995 on AS shrines/temples).

Gregory the Great: conversion by increments (1) AS to be brought to level of the OT Jews with concept of a single deity (2) to be introduced to more complex Christian concepts – original sin, Trinity, life of Christ (Spiegel 2007). Stresses need to establish common ground with compatible existing religious practices, and ‘diversity within unity’. Heathenism as a more primitive phase through which all peoples might be expected to pass [cf Bishop Daniel to Boniface].

Stages observable in conversion of northern Germanic peoples c.600-800 as identified by Ludo Milis (*Revue Nord* 1980):

1. New forms of collective public behaviour – baptism and suppression of older cults
2. Acceptance of new moral codes in public life reflecting Christian values
3. Inner individual behaviour changed through interiorisation of Christian moral code (confession to parish priest more developed after Fourth Lateran Council 1215; Milis 1998, 133)

Importance of distinguishing pagan practice at public and private (or familial) levels. Public likely to have been at both kingdom level and that of the smaller subgroups within kingdoms. Likely that evolution of kingship involved manipulation of cult to aid relations between king and his *comitatus* as well as more widely between king and subject regions through impressive public display at centres of royal authority. History of conversion of AS kingdoms as presented by Bede clearly operated as part of consolidation of royal power.

AS evidence suggests a significant phase before (1) is reached whereby public worship of Christian and pagan gods co-existed e.g. Kentish ‘temples’ not destroyed until reign of Eorcenbert; Radewald’s two altars; Caedwalla accession to throne of Wessex apparently unbaptised 685. Suggests a difference of perception between laity and clerics on how Christianity might be related to non-Christian religious practices.

When does a kingdom qualify as baptised? Bede appears to count from the date that a functioning bishopric was established; only with a bishop in place could a permanent church structure be set up and maintained; a limit to how far a group of Christians could maintain themselves in any meaningful way without bishops. Bede's views on centrality of bishops for a Christian nation contained in his *Letter to Ecgbert*.

Milis's concept of stages in conversion useful way to approach that of AS, but with adaptations to particular local circumstances. Different kingdoms of AS England and different social groups within these might progress at varying rates through stages of conversion.

Presentation of paganism by earliest Anglo-Saxon Christian authors

Tendency by earliest AS Christian writers to present paganism as Christianity's evil twin, and/or to base it on unacceptable religious practices of OT, is likely to have obscured the variant nature of AS paganism, and of differences between how it and Christianity functioned as religions (e.g. Stephanus on Wilfrid's encounters with paganism). Bede's approach is more subtle, and more open to debate: contrast Page 1995 and North 1997 on HE II, 13: Coifi and the desecration of the temple at *Godmundingaham*. Description of shrine and enclosures seems to fit with archaeological evidence (Blair 1995), but was Coifi a real person and a *pontifex*, or the mirror, negative image of Bishop Paulinus. Was there a noble priestly caste, and was it integrated into the Christian priesthood (cf. Ireland) (Campbell 2007)?

The recognition of parallels and the substitution of Christian *signa* for pagan part of the strategy of conversion (e.g. crossing oneself, recitation of Lord's Prayer and Creed in place of pagan 'incantations') (De Reu 1998). But what aspects of pagan practice could not be matched (see 'Magic' below), and were the 'disgusting pagan practices', to which Daniel alluded, a reference to the wilder shores of paganism that some would recognise in ON heathenism and to which pale echoes have been detected in some OE sources (North 1997; Price 2002)?

Stage 1: Baptism and the gods

- baptism essential preliminary stage – compulsory for infants in laws of Ine (688-726)
- renunciation as well as acceptance (e.g. II, 13 [King Edwin] 'accepted the gospel Paulinus preached, renounced idolatry, and confessed his faith in Christ')
- Bede stresses some education in Christian belief a necessary preliminary for adult baptism (e.g. in presentation of Paulinus's work in Northumbria)

Major named gods of Germanic paganism were significant part of the collective public behaviour that had to be changed in first stage of conversion. They do not represent totality of 'paganism', of course, or even totality of gods (and not all pagan practices are necessarily 'Germanic' as Romano-Celtic continuity likely in some areas, perhaps especially areas with earliest AS settlement where Christianity may

never have spread to countryside and/or British church hierarchy unlikely to have survived).

Some features and issues that were thrown up in this phase this phase which may help to explain how the change from pagan to Christian was negotiated and compromises that were made, knowingly or unknowingly:

1. **Old Saxon baptismal formula** may reflect Anglo-Saxon practice – in Old Saxon dialect but with OE orthography therefore probably introduced by AS missionaries {Green 1998, 345}. *Diabolae* to be rejected (defined in one version as Wodan, Thunor and Seaxneat) and belief in Christian trinity to be substituted (Rau 1968, 448-9); [N.B. paralleling of 3 divinities and depiction of 3 gods (?) on some bracteates]. Gods and other supernatural beings became associated with the devil and his works – allowed continuation of belief in a range of badly behaved beings that needed to be assuaged, e.g. ‘nicor’ – a water demon that lurked in ponds as in Nucker Hole, Lyminster church, Sx; see possible pike-like depictions on 6c shields (Dickinson 2005).

2. **Seaxneat** – not part of wider Germanic pantheon, but an embodiment of the Saxon people – therefore potentially a different category of god from Thunor and Woden. Known also in East Saxon genealogy, and equivalent figures in other genealogies e.g. Gewis in West Saxon; Bernic in Bernician. Kingdom as a community under particular protection of god(s) carried forward in Bede’s emphasis of equivalence of bishopric and kingdom (though some early exceptions) – indignation when West Saxons denied Jutes of Hants and I of W their own bishopric.

3. **Assemblies** Christian God not only to be observed at an early stage in court circle, but on public occasions when king or representatives were present e.g. assemblies. Bede narratives of Northumbrian conversion by Paulinus take place on royal estates where ordinary people are gathered, presumably for other purposes besides the purely religious (e.g. Yeavinger). Evidence from AS N. Sea homelands – and other continental Germanic – for assemblies being under protection of gods (often very local) and taboos – therefore both a medium to aid conversion, but also essential to establish public role of Christianity in replacement of non-Christian e.g. in making of oaths.

4. **Euhemerisation**: rejection of Wodan et al. as gods did not necessarily have to mean their disappearance from contemporary culture. B. Daniel in his letter of advice to Boniface (Tangl 24; Rau 64) promoted the argument, following Tertullian, Augustine, Isidore [and Irish?], that as gods behaved like men that in fact was what they were and devils had led people to worship dead men as gods. The way was open to incorporate former gods into genealogies and directly, or indirectly, as heroes in Beowulfian-type oral literature (still flourishing in time of Alfred).

Pagan categories did not necessarily fall neatly into the Christian categorisation of diabolic or human – elves [Hall 2007; gradual move to the demonic side]; heroes and monsters/giants (*eotena*) not always easily distinguished e.g. *Liber Monstrorum* (650x750) includes Hygelac, king of the Geats, among the *gigantes*; his bones were preserved on an island in the Rhine. Although the *eotena* are descendants of Cain in *Beowulf*, Beowulf himself clearly has some ‘giant’ characteristics, a supernatural

strength. Hercules is also included in LM, but was presented as an exemplary hero (son of an euhemerised Jove) in the Alfredian Boethius. Wulfstan, *De falsis deis*: '[the heathens] began to worship various giants and fierce worldly men, who had become mighty in the pursuits of the world, and were awe-inspiring while they lived' (Orchard 1997, 102) [N.B. Augustine: equation of pagan warriors and antediluvian giants].

Humanised gods + 'giant' heroes + human ancestral kings mingle in the royal genealogies: possibility in the late pagan period that dead human heroes might transpose into the supernatural category – all associated with burial in mounds. Alfred prepared to accept that the burial place of bones of the hero Weland is of no significance (Semple 1998 for gradual demonisation of burial mounds), but not that the deeds of heroes could not be exemplary for Christians. Alcuin may have ruled that Ingeld and Christ were not compatible, but evidently for many AS contemporaries they were. Via euhemerisation elements of Germanic myths might survive embedded in poems like Beowulf – e.g. parallel of killing of son of Hrethel has archetype in death of Balder (O'Donoghue 2007, 93).

5. The 'good' Pagan: dilemma encapsulated in story of Frisian King Radbod's retreat from baptism as he did not wish to be separated from pagan ancestors in the afterlife (*V. Wulframmi* ch. 9). Concern addressed by Irish missionaries (Charles-Edwards 2000, 199-200). Likely to have been a major concern in England as well:

- some continuation of family burial grounds in England as in Ireland.
- inclusion of pagan ancestors in churches (Penitential of Theodore II.i.4)
- interest in 'harrowing of hell'
- Beowulf; 'his soul departed from him to seek the righteous' (line 2820) seems to have been envisaged as having a place in Christian heaven.

6. Pre-Christian Social customs: important to distinguish social customs which might be at variance with Christian belief (e.g. marriage; working on a Sunday) from the religious customs to which missionaries took exception (though complete separation not possible as some religious activity would be incorporated into all these important milestones in daily life). Confrontation with Eadbald over marriage with step-mother nearly saw expulsion of Gregorian mission from Kent; marriage irregularities in royal houses of 9c and 10c – a much slower projectory of change than for more central issues of belief and practice.

Phase II: Appointment of natives as clergy and foundation of minsters

Creation of a native clergy to take the place of 'foreign' missionaries another essential stage in conversion of Germanic peoples and for embedding Christianity in the countryside.

- Foundation of minsters as aspects of royal and noble consolidation of their own positions [in addition to foundation of religious communities that were more directly under episcopal control]. Importance of Irish and Frankish precedents.
- Concern with annexing British church assets and eliminating their 'aberrant' customs arguably the major focus in those kingdoms expanding westwards,

and in Canterbury's agenda especially after archepiscopate of Theodore (669-90) rather than elimination of low level, non-Christian religious practices.

- Issue of how systematic the provision of pastoral care (minster controversy) was - a not insubstantial proportion of peasantry would be tenants on land of episcopal, royal and noble minsters and so be subject to pressure to adhere to their expectations of religious behaviour, at least in a public capacity.
- Prevalence of burial in accordance with Christian norms (though not necessarily in vicinity of a church) and disappearance of burial customs not compatible with contemporary Christian belief (e.g. cremation) by c.700 may be some of the best evidence for spread of Christian norms among a large percentage of population and awareness of one of the central tenets of Christianity i.e. concepts of afterlife, Christian heaven (Hoggett 2010).

But a number of issues that may mean that aspects of the practice of Christianity did not necessarily conform to later medieval expectations and were adaptations of aspects of traditional religious behaviour:

- how far did worship of ordinary people involve church buildings before 10c/11c? Possibility of open air worship at natural sites e.g. Heavenfield [Hugeburg early 8c: practice seen in her youth (7c) of crosses erected on estates as centres for local worship [In Hampshire? wooden crosses]. Christian burial grounds within settlements (initially without churches) may have been local Christian foci.
- Saints from elite groups that had previously produced 'heroes' of ambiguous status after death, especially AS tradition of murdered and martyred kings (Cubitt 2000).
- Shared motifs in late AS pagan and Christian hagiography e.g. man between 2 beasts/Daniel and the lions' den; eagle and snake; ambiguous terminology e.g. word for god. Such things may have blurred distinctions between Christian and pagan beliefs and mores, especially for the laity.

Magical Practices: aka sorcery, superstitious or folk-beliefs; subject of condemnation in Penitentials etc, but not very seriously punished and tending to recur i.e. remained part of religious practice by Christians of ASE (and beyond). Milis 1998, 152: pagan customs survived (1) because they related to functions for which Christianity did not adequately cater (2) church lacked means to oppose them fully.

- anything that attempted to involve agency of, or to combat effects of, non-Christian beings, including sacrifice to demons or at natural places
- use of polluting substances or failure to avoid pollution e.g. in food and drink
- auguries and attempts to foretell the future, especially involving animals and non-Christian incantations
- particularly any of the above, and attempts to bring evil to people, carried out by unacceptable practitioners e.g. 'wise' women
- attempts to coerce God into certain actions

Penitential of Theodore: 'He who sacrifices to demons in trivial matters shall do penance for one year, be he who does so in serious matters shall do penance for ten years [distinction of private and public practices?]

Complicating factors:

- different concepts of what was acceptable and unacceptable in the different church traditions that had influence in the early stages of AS conversion e.g. British and Irish churches may have been more concerned with ritual pollution than some other traditions (Meens 1995).
- differences of opinion among churchmen about such matters as substitution of Christian for pagan amulets or foretelling the future; traditional verse and dress which might have pre-Christian connotations (Boniface: refs to animal Style II art on dress; Alcuin: 'pagan' haircuts in Northumbria i.e. as found in Scandinavia; tattoos condemned by papal legates). Boniface and Alcuin aware from experiences in mainland Europe that there was some variance between AS and Frankish/Italian Christian norms.
- Even a hardliner such as Bede not immune from assumptions that were traditional for his elite social class e.g. interconnection of high birth and greater sanctity. Not 'pagan', but others less well-educated in Christian behaviour from the age of seven may have found it more difficult to distinguish between religious and social aspects of the traditions that underpinned their moral codes.

Conclusions

A trend to speak of early medieval 'Christianities' as well as 'paganisms', but former is not acceptable and fails to recognise the 'unity within diversity' that was the hallmark of early medieval Christianity i.e. though some customs and practices could be diverse (including liturgy, monastic rules), central tenets of belief were not negotiable. This was a major distinction between pagan and Christian belief, and one of the major selling points of Christianity that it offered apparent certainties, especially on key matters such as what happened after death – a topic on which even Snorri Sturluson could apparently find little to report for Norse beliefs.

Baptism marked the initiation into Christianity, and confirmation the acceptance of its basic tenets. Public worship of pagan gods seems to have disappeared relatively quickly (40-50 years after introduction of Christianity in most kingdoms – as far as we can tell), while, on an only slightly longer timescale, aspects of burial ritual that were not generally considered compatible with being a Christian (or unnecessary in a world under the Christian God) were abandoned. However, when it came to other customs and practices there were opportunities for distinctive features of Anglo-Saxon culture that had 'pagan' origins or associations to be preserved or adapted, consciously or unconsciously. Room for differences in opinion in subsequent centuries between reformist clergy and others on how far some of these cultural borrowings were compatible with Christianity (and they are sometimes labelled as 'heathen'), especially when there were moves towards a greater uniformity in Christian practice from 9c.

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