The Effects of Germanic Mythology on Christianity and the Creation of a Germanic Christianity

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Shauna Croarkin

Dr. Christine R. Shea

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

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Abstract

Germanic mythology was a religion practiced in the Scandinavian region before the area was converted to Christianity. It was a belief system that was integrated into the culture and based on oral stories and general practices more than a ritualized system of worship. The recorded Norse myths were not written until after the conversion to Christianity, so influence from the new religion can be interpreted in the stories; nonetheless, one can also ascertain the important elements of the mythology from said tales. The religion of the Teutonic people reflected their lives and lifestyles.

The way of life for the Germanic people was and still is integrated into the character of their culture. When Christianity came to be accepted in the area, the Teutons did not fully give in to the values imposed by the church, but instead created a Germanic version of Christianity that maintained some of the Norse people's core values. An original version of Christianity arose in the North that found itself often in conflict with the Roman Church. The character of the Scandinavians, seen in their heathen religion, permeated and reshaped Christianity until it reached the Protestantism that is known today.
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The Effect of Germanic Mythology on Christianity and the Creation of a Germanic Christianity

Introduction

The term "Germanic Mythology" refers to a cultural and spiritual belief system that persisted in northern Europe before its residents converted to Christianity. Rome, upon exploring and consequentially expanding its empire, mapped and divided northwest Europe into the Celts (also known as the Gauls), the Germans (also referred to as the Teutons), and the Scandinavians (also called the Vikings or Norsemen). The last of these groups to be evangelized to Christianity were the Scandinavians, so the most preserved records about the pre-Christian religion of the North comes from Scandinavia. The belief systems of the Celts and Germans are known to have been similar (Turner, 1993). "Norse", "Germanic", "Scandinavian", "Northern", and "Icelandic" are interchangeable terms in relation to this area and said mythology. "Teutonic" is also a term that refers to the same beliefs, but it is considered to be old-fashioned. The word "Germanic" is currently perceived to be the most correct term (Cawley, 1939). This paper will use the various terms interchangeably.

The Roman Catholic Church did not have the same intolerance for Germanic paganism that it expressed for other heathen religion, so Norse myths and culture consequentially did not suffer from the purge of traditions and knowledge that occurred to other pagan religions (Cawley, 1939). This preservation of Icelandic mythology is strongly due to Pope Gregory the Great. Pope Gregory the Great was elected pope in 590 AD. He was the first monk to become a pope. He understood that the Benedictine monks were trained in discipline at least as well as a military troop and were more educated. He therefore chose to send these monks as the Church's missionaries to the barbarians. Pope Gregory the Great has his evangelists assist local leaders in
understanding finances, adopting the Roman style of writing, and creating laws. The Christian monks made themselves essential to the success of the barbarian leaders. These monks also taught the barbarians how to tend land, and in return for this understanding of how to be vintners and farmers, the barbarians were forced to give the monasteries more and more land in order to evade taxes (Turner, 1993).

Pope Gregory the Great preached tolerance. He encouraged discussions of Christian beliefs, but not forceful conversion. This approach, although criticized in the future, is what allowed the Christians to get their foot in the door in Scandinavia; a more heavy-handed approach would have utterly failed. He encouraged the missionaries to study and observe the local customs, although this command was in part because they fascinated him. (Turner, 1993). Pope Gregory the Great decreed that, when possible, missionaries should utilize heathen customs already in place and simply change the object of worship from the pagan deity to Christ. This refocus was both in places of worship and methods of worship, including festivals, holidays, and symbols such as animals. This approach created a merger of the Germanic heathen religion and Christianity (Chaney, 1960).

History

Early pagan worship in Scandinavia was a mix of customs and culture with an element of basic nature worship. The Germanic people believed that simple and childish spirits roamed the Earth and caused the natural world. Gods existed to regulate everything. These gods served to symbolize the forces of nature and the social relationships of men. Odin was the god of battles, storms, and the dealer of fate. Thor ruled thunder. Freyr and his sister and/or possibly consort
Freya, also called Freia and Frouwa, were fertility gods of the soil as well as of human marriage and love (Pfleiderer, 1892).

The gods were not ideal models for how people should behave; for example, Odin often deceived to gain advantage and Freya was not chaste, as a Norse woman should have been. But the gods were the paragon of the most important characteristics of humans: vigor, strength, courage, success in combat, and enjoyment of life. Since the gods were forces of nature, the combative character of nature in regards to both its nurturing and destructive powers was also evident in the gods’ behaviors. The harsh conditions in which the Teutons lived and their combative temperament was exemplified in the gods’ constant struggle with the giants. Emulating the gods was the way to be a good person and to be delivered to a pleasant afterlife; if one died in glorious combat, he would be carried off by Valkyries, virgin female servants of Odin, to Valhalla, Odin’s meadhall, to enjoy himself until he was called to serve Odin at Ragnarok. This culture glorified both life and death (Pfleiderer, 1892).

Ragnarok is the Icelandic end of the world. The gods battle the forces of evil, and almost none survive. Ragnarok, foreshadowed by sly Loki killing innocent Baldur, is the time of atonement for both men and gods for wrongs and sins that have caused them to fall into such a state of war. Although it is likely that the story of Baldur’s blameless death and resurrection into a new world was reworked after the area’s conversion to Christianity, there must have been some component of the religion that already believed that the innocent and good would alone survive the purifying of the world through catastrophe and struggle (Pfleiderer, 1892).

There is not much information available on Teutonic religious ceremonies. It seems that there were no formal gatherings or practices, just spiritual understanding and folklore. Even now the
Germans have a concept of feeling the divine as valued above perceiving physical items with one’s senses. German priests were simply the oldest members of the community. The priest’s responsibility was to correctly perform simple sacrifices, uphold the law, keep order, and make sure punishments were enforced (Pfleiderer, 1892).

Women also played a revered and sacred role in Germania. Anyone could prophesy and interpret outward signs; however, the ability to do so from a power within oneself was regarded highly. Those who had this internal gift were referred to typically as “wise women”, since prophesying is a female gift. These wise women also possessed the power to perform magic. The acknowledgement that women have an internal power which is potentially greater than men’s external strength set a precedent of respecting women was set that included valuing chastity and family (Pfleiderer, 1892).

**Influences of Individual Gods**

Unlike many religions Germanic mythology does not clearly define good and evil. Norse gods are morally ambivalent. A story may have characters in it that lean toward being right or wrong, but moral lessons were taught from the context of the story itself, not by which character performed which act. Because of this abstract nature, the gods of Iceland came to be associated with a variety of aspects in Christianity; sometimes a god would even be cast into contradictory roles (Russell, 1984).

**Odin**

Odin, also known as Wodan and Óðinn, was the god of battles, storms, and dealer of fate. He was the lord of the Aesir, the “good” group of gods, and was prized for his wisdom. His
influence was widespread; this power over humans was accounted for by saying he would often travel in disguise amongst men (Pfleiderer, 1892).

All pagan gods were easy to convert into something evil, and Odin was no exception. It is logical then that initially similarities were found between him and Satan. Odin influenced the understanding of Satan in Europe. For example, Wansdyke, a large ditch, is named as such because it is a shortened version of Woden’s Dyke. Wansdyke has also been called the Devil’s Ditch. It is said to have been built on Wednesday, which is a shortened version of Woden’s day and is also understood to be the Devil’s day (Chaney, 1960).

Odin later was also equated with Christ. For example, there is a “Nine Herbs Charm” that Christ is said to have discovered while upon the cross. This charm protects against poisoning. The Nine Herbs Charm has been equated to Odin’s discovery of runes. Runes were the Teutonic people’s system of writing as well as a charm that was suppose to have divine powers. Odin learned runes while he also hung on the cross. Odin and Christ are both hanging gods who suffer in order to attain something that will benefit their followers. It would be easy to convert those who already worship an old hanging god to revere a more powerful hanging god (Chaney, 1960).

The “Harrowing of Hell” is from old and middle English. It refers to Jesus’ descent into Hell in between his death on the cross and resurrection, bringing salvation to the souls who had been trapped in Hell since the beginning of Earth. There is a parallel harrowing in Norse mythology that occurs when Odin descends into Niflhel to retrieve mead that Baldur required (Burnstein, 1928). Odin’s gift to mankind is “önd”, which translates to “breath”. This word is both related to Odin’s name and was used to form the word “soul” for Christianity (Singer, 2002).
Loki is one of the oldest figures in Norse mythology. There are many opinions about Loki and his role in the Germanic folklore (Cawley, 1939). His character seems to have evolved through time. The origins of Loki are altogether a mystery. However, his role in Icelandic mythology is clear enough. Although Teutonic gods are ambivalent, some lean in a particular direction. Loki, the frost giants, and the Vanir lean towards evil (Russell, 1984).

**Meaning.** Many think that the name Loki derives from the word “lygi” (Taylor, 1983), or Loge, which both mean “flame”. As is the nature of fire, Loki is cunning and treacherous, bringing doom to the gods. Also, the world is thought to end by fire, which shall be brought about by Loki. However, this character is better represented in the fire demon Logi, who is a force of nature rather than a more developed deity like Loki. In Iceland, where volcanoes erupt frequently, Loki was in fact associated with Logi. Some scholars think Loki started as Logi but then further developed into also being a god of water (his monster child Fenrir’s name indicates an association with water, “fen”) and a god of the air, “loptr” (Cawley, 1939).

The name “Loki” may mean “the closer”. This connotation could relate to Loki being considered a giant and being connected to destructive and evil powers. It is more likely that “Loki” comes from “lúka”, “to end”, because he brings about the end of the gods and is the limit of their powers. Others think “Loki” means “the deceiver” or “the tempter”. Loki could derive from “loca”, or “prison”, since his punishment is to be confined underground after killing Baldur (Cawley, 1939).

It is possible that Loki was part of a triad of ancient, important gods: Othin, Loki, and Hœnir. Some scholars believe that Loki is derived from the goblin Loeke or water sprites Lodder or Kludde. It is more likely that Loki started out as a primitive character who was a mix of a death
god and a servant or son of Thor. He probably was called Loki in what is now Estonia and Finland and Thjalfr (the name that persists for Thor’s servant) in Sweden. There tends to be a connection between fertility gods and death gods, and Loki’s bisexual nature and frequent siring and bearing children certainly indicate fertility powers. Loki has also been interpreted as a vegetation god. In this interpretation, he was probably originally an elf-like creature (Cawley, 1939).

Loki was a culture hero in some ways, but was also a fire-god and a thief. Loki’s main and enduring characteristics are his sly and clever nature, his inventiveness, and his thieving skills. The culture hero role is fulfilled when he steals from the giants to assist the gods in their times of need. The culture hero stands as a link between gods and men. In this scenario, Loki’s name was probably originally “the fashioner” or “the creator”, but later became “the crafty one” (Cawley, 1939).

Satan. “Loki” could be a shorter version of the name “Lucifer”, but it is likely that this interpretation overestimates Christianity’s influence on Norse traditions. When Christianity did arrive in Germania, though, it was easy to change Loki from a helpful and mischievous being into a diabolic god similar to Lucifer who slays Baldur the Christ-like and brings about the end of the world. Loki was originally innocent and playful, but under Christianity, he developed into a malignant foe of the gods. (Cawley, 1939). Loki and Satan are analogous. Both are evil without provocation and are the eternal exile. Both are bound to an underground pit. Loki and Satan are both considered smiths of misery (Chaney, 1960). Fairy tales depicting the devil sometimes have their roots in tales of Loki and his deceptions (Rohrich, 1970).
Loki’s being evil has its roots in the ninth century. When Snorri Sturluson wrote the *Prose Edda*, Loki was virtually a personification of sin. He fathered or mothered Hel, the Night, the Jormungand, Fenrir, and Sleipnir. (Russell, 1984). Christians identified Baldur with Christ, since he was the shining god of beauty. Frigg, the mother of Baldur, sought to spare her son from harm. She asked everything in the world to vow not to harm him, but overlooked the mistletoe. Loki cunningly discovered this oversight. Loki used Hoder, Baldur’s blind brother, to kill Baldur.

Loki could change shapes like the Devil. This ability is considered a symbol of the duplicity of both. Loki and Satan are both beautiful physically but with evil and corrupt souls. The Devil can transform into a number of human forms, including male or female, rich or poor, attractive or ugly, holy man or servant of evil. Satan can even appear as an angel, Christ, or Mary. He can also be a terrifying monster. His typical form is amorphous and invisible. This ability to disappear and transform into various forms and sexes started with Loki, who would use this skill for the benefit or detriment of the gods (Russell, 1984).

Loki virtually evolved into the same personification of evil as Lucifer. Loki had three monster children who can represent the three influences that Lucifer has over the natural realm. Jormungand, the World Serpent, is selfishness and influences on the astral/soul level. Fenrir, the Giant Wolf, is false knowledge/lies. The fact that he is a wolf is even a symbol of this duplicity, for in Teutonic tradition, wolves represent giving in to an impulse. Wolves were characterized as destroyers of the light, even to the degree that at Ragnarok, Fenrir himself will eat the Sun. Fenrir acts in the mental/cognitive realm. Hel, the half-dead goddess of the underworld, functions in the physical world and bears death and disease. These monsters block man’s ability to see the spiritual, or God (Steiner, 1970). “Nið” (Nith) is a word that refers to individuals who
perform transsexual acts, such as a passive homosexual male, but more appropriately indicates shape shifting sexual practices, for which Loki was famous, such as turning into a mare and bearing monster children. Nið is negative or evil in denotation and indicates magical intervention that is not normal nor good for humans (Taylor, 1983).

Loki is a figure on whom the world’s current ideas of Satan are based. Loki is not exactly a god, but certainly is more than human. Hel is his relation, specifically his daughter. Loki was not originally totally wicked, but became so towards the gods with time. Loki killed Baldur, and, like Satan, was bound for this crime. Correspondingly to Satan, Loki will escape for Ragnarok and lead the forces of evil against good (Turner, 1993). Loki so upset the gods through his accumulation of evil actions that climaxed with the murder of Baldur that he is bound underground until Ragnarok; Satan betrayed God, created the conditions for Jesus to be crucified, and is trapped in Hell until the Day of Judgment. At some points in time during the synthesis of Norse mythology and Christianity, Loki and Satan were viewed as one and the same. (Woolf, 1953).

*Hel*

Hel comes from the English “hell”, which etymologically is related to holes and caves (Russell, 1984). Hel was the Norse goddess of the underworld, and her realm was identified by the same name or called Niflhel. Infernus, the Latin name for Hell, was replaced with the Scandinavian name (Turner, 1993). The female character “seo hell” in the Gospel of Nicodemus, which is Germanic in origin, fights with Satan and demands he leave “her” home. Seo hell can easily be compared with the Icelandic Hel, goddess of the underworld. The Apostle Bartholomew, who lived in Germania, spoke of a female Hel in his writings, stating Christ made
war upon “Hel our queen”. She is obviously perceived to be the queen of the Christian underworld and not the pagan one, as illustrated in the aforementioned examples. In another Christian work, Satan gives a speech in which he references Queen Hel. Hel appears in Old Norse biblical tradition (Bell, 1983). Slith, an icy river in Teutonic mythology that is filled with swords and knives, was used by Bosch in his depiction of Hell (Turner, 1993).

_Baldur and Freyr_

Baldur, also called Balder, Baldr, and Baldr, was the god of spring and light. He also was a god who bled and died innocently and upon a cross. Baldur, an innocent sun-god, became a competitor to Christ when Baldur came to also represent many or at least two gods in one form (Winterbourne, 2004). Freyr, or Frey, means “lord”. Baldur and Freyr easily transitioned to Christ figures since they already had characteristics of Christ. Already present concepts of trinities (such as Odin, Hönir, and Lodir) helped Germania to adapt to the concept of the Christian trinity (Chaney, 1960). Baldur represented insight into spiritual in contrast with his blind brother, Hodur, who personified the influence of evil and the fact that evil’s nature blinds one to its presence and affect. Enlightenment would be available to all if Hodur had not been influenced by Loki to destroy Baldur, the bearer of it. Although Hodur throws the mistletoe dart, Loki is the one who brings the destructive element and is the responsible caustic force. The story of Baldur’s death expressed the Nordic people’s feeling of not being close to the spiritual and the sense of emptiness that caused within them (Steiner, 1970). When Christianity spread through the area, many residents believed that the Baldur myth had been fulfilled and the best outcome arrived through Christ’s resurrection (Steiner, 1970).
The Scandinavians had a myth of spirit and soul being united with a body. Nerthus was a goddess who drove souls in her chariot over the water to unite them with their bodies. Njord was her male counterpart and represented knowledge of spiritual elements that the said spirits learned before they were brought into their respective bodies. This folktale set up the condition that there is a part of God felt within every Norseman. Freyr and Freya used to be angelic-like entities who delivered all the Godly things a human soul needs and united spirit and body. Freyr’s marriage to Gerda is symbolic of the spirit and body uniting. Gerda is a giant, a physical entity. The horse Freyr rides to her is Bluthuf (blood). Freyr is a god, a spiritual entity. It is this union that is a personification of the act of soul and body uniting as one. It is also this choice the leads Freyr to be killed at Ragnarok, displaying the danger a soul can be in when limited by the body. Freyr’s magic ship that can be folded up and fly across the sky symbolizes the soul, which is capable of both transcending the physical and being a part of it (Steiner, 1970).

Other Gods

Other gods assimilated into God, Jesus, Satan, or other Christian elements. One such god is Thor, or Donnar, who was incorporated into God’s title “God, High Thunderer, Creator of the World” (Chaney, 1960). There was a Christian understanding that unborn children belonged to the devil, though not to their detriment. This idea probably derives from the Germanic tradition that indicated that children were dedicated to Odin and Thor (Rohrich, 1970). The Devil has a mother or grandmother, whose roots come from fertility goddesses such as Holda. She is terrible and powerful. Satan’s (grand)mother is similar to Grendel’s mother in Beowulf. The Devil also has many wives, some of whom are the fertility goddesses of the pagans (Russell, 1984). Satan is sometimes depicted as green; originating from the Teutonic Green Man, a fertility figure associated with hunting. The Devil is sometimes perceived as a hunter of souls (Russell, 1984).
Thor was viewed by some to be a folk spirit, called an archangel. As an archangel, he gave man an ego, but Loki’s Jormungand, Thor’s counterpart, was in competition with Thor’s gift. The ego can also be explained as one’s conscience. One’s conscience is always in battle with one’s selfish desires. Jormungand and Thor are evenly matched universally, and during Ragnarok they kill each other at the same time. Freyr had chosen to succumb to the physical world and is defeated by Surtur, a physical entity. Odin loses to Fenrir. Odin bestows the gift of speech and communication and Fenrir counters this endowment with lies. The fact that Fenrir wins means that he can continue to interfere with man’s understanding of spiritual truths. Odin has never been enough to beat Fenrir; Christ’s coming, symbolized in Vidar, who is not mentioned until he slays Fenrir, is essential for that victory. Vidar symbolizes Christ because he is a powerful entity that can vanquish the lies that confuse one’s understanding of true spirituality. Vidar has been absent physically to humans until Ragnarok, when he manifests, defeats Fenrir, and restores man’s ability to feel and connect with his soul again. Vidar symbolizes hope for the future amidst blackness and destruction (Steiner, 1970).

Non-Deity Entities

The Devil is possibly the only biblical figure that easily relates to Norse mythology due to his already having characteristics in common with the gods of the Icelandic culture. In a culture of vengeance and imperfect gods, Christ must have been hard to accept. Satan, on the other hand, not only related to Loki, but also to other folklore characters, easily slipping into roles such as the tempter and provider of evil counsel (Woolf, 1953). Magical creatures that come from Norse mythology, such as dwarves, elves, etc., survived and to some degree became the Christian demons and, specifically, imps (Turner, 1993). The nature spirits of Norse mythology became fallen angels. Satan is equated to a dragon in the Bible, but it is from Teutonic mythology that
the dragon characteristics of being underground and hoarding treasure are derived for the Devil (Russell, 1984).

The devil was often credited with unexplainable structures that seemed to be too big or were not known to have been made by man. This concept of the evil master builder derives from the Icelandic giants (Rohrich, 1970). Just like the Teutonic giants, Satan became a lover of architecture (Russell, 1984). The earliest master builder story is of a giant seeking a goddess, which later developed into a devil seeking a Christian soul. Giants and devils are almost interchangeable. The stupidity of Satan in folklore is the same as the stupidity of any giant. There is also a tale in which the Devil hides from thunder because lightning and thunder pursue him for trying to steal the sun or moon from Heaven. This story has obvious roots in the lore of the giants; there is a tale of the giants constantly attempting to steal the sun and the moon from the god’s heaven, pitting them in conflict with Thor, the thunder god. Satan is often depicted speaking in riddles. This characteristic comes from giants and dwarves, who often did the same (Rohrich, 1970). Satan, just like the giants, can be easily defeated by those who are bright and cunning (Russell, 1984).

Influences of Tradition, Holidays, and Festival

Teutonic mythology is more defined and developed in values and concepts than many other mythologies. Although the customs were not concrete, the folklore and shared culture was enduring and permeated the Germanic lifestyle thoroughly. Since those who were trying to convert the Scandinavians were told to integrate Christ into already present customs, many Christian holidays, practices, and understandings derive from Iceland’s pagan practices (Steiner, 1970).
Satan

The concept of the devil in Christianity has been largely influenced by the folklore of other, pagan cultures. Folklore arises from storytelling that involves an unconscious level of thinking. It has its roots in oral traditions. Religion is more self-conscious than folklore, since folklore is mostly stories that derive from a subconscious understanding of a human behavior. Folklore is responsible for varied views of the Devil’s nature, from terrifying and immediate to ridiculous and laughable, and well as for his minions: demons, werewolves, dragons, etc. (Russell, 1984). The Roman Church employed a strategy of making pagan deities into demons (Winterbourne, 2004).

The Devil therefore became associated with anything pagan. For example, he is connected to certain animals because of Norse mythology. The Christians viewed the pagan worship of animals as evil, and therefore any animal worshipped represented Satan. The raven was Odin’s. Freya, Hilda, and Hel had the cat. The goat belonged to Thor (Russell, 1984).

Afterlife

Hell is perceived to be at the center of the Earth. This idea comes from Scandinavia. A cold Hell also comes from Iceland, where the glaciers and constant low temperature reminded people of torment (Russell, 1984). Anglo-Saxon poetry references a cold hell (Brown, 1904). The Norse people had a distinct concept of an underworld where souls go when an individual dies. The gods, elves, fairies, and ghosts of mythology became incorporated into Christianity’s Hell. The Teutons believed in Valhalla, a pleasant afterlife for warriors, and Hel, a place of punishment for those who were wicked in life (Burnstein, 1928). Fallen angels were said to set up their thrones in the North, which could be referencing Germanic heathen mythology (Brown, 1904).
Sacred Death

There was a concept of certain deaths being sacred; the souls of those individuals belonged to and were protected by a certain god. Deaths by hanging and burning were consecrated to Odin. Deaths by drowning, typically in mead or beer, were consecrated to Freyr or Nerthus. Death by weapon was consecrated to Thor. These ideas of holy deaths easily transitioned to glorifying martyrs for Christianity. Christians prescribed death through water and wood to symbolize baptism and the cross. Hanging and drowning are still considered sacred (Lacy, 1980). Satan began to be regarded as bringing death to saints by burning, crucifixion, and drowning. This ability to kill martyrs indicates that the Devil has power over man, and therefore Satan also became associated with “wyrd”, or fate. Wyrd typically referenced a fate pre-ordained by God that was disastrous for the person on whom it is inflicted (Woolf, 1953).

In Germania, it was the king’s relationship with a god that would save his people, which became Christian eschatology. Therefore, Christ was emphasized as being the king of kings. The king was perceived as a victory-bringer. Christ, therefore, was the victory-giver who glorified kings who worshiped Him. The frequency of sainthood being bestowed on kings who died violently could be viewed as having replaced the pagans practice of sacrificing their kings (Chaney, 1960).

Winter Solstice

The Christmas Tree. The Christmas tree has its roots in old Norse ceremonies. Yggdrasil, the Welt-Esche, or World-ash, was venerated by the Teutons. Yggdrasil can be perceived as a sun-tree. It was an enormous evergreen. In its the branches dwelt gods, giants, men, and dwarfs. It had three tremendous roots. From one root is Hwergelmir, a spring which’s depths are hidden.
A second root houses Mimir’s spring of wisdom. A third has Urdbrunnen, where the Nornen, or Norns or Fates, silently sit. Around the roots of Yggdrasil is the dragon Nidhögg and other small serpents who all continually chew on the tree; they symbolize evil and destruction juxtaposed with Yggdrasil standing for immortality and life. Eikthyner the stag feeds on the branches, and his antlers produce the stream of water that flows into Hwergelmir. All earthly streams have their source in Hwergelmir. Four other deer eat the buds of Yggdrasil, symbolizing the seasons.

Heidrun, a she-goat, also feeds off of the branches and her milk nurtures both gods and heroes. In the upper branches, the sun-eagle works on his nest and croons the song of death and life.

Ratatwiskr, meaning “whisking on the branches”, is a squirrel who runs between the eagle and the dragon, carrying back messages of hatred; the eagle symbolizes life and the dragon destruction, so friendship is impossible between them. Midgard, where man lives, is at the center of Yggdrasil and Asgard, home of the gods, is at the top. These two worlds are connected by Bifrost, the rainbow which is a bridge by which the gods descend to Midgard. The concept of Yggdrasil is clearly an attempt to understand the universe (Wenckebach, 1942).

In honor of Yggdrasil, the Norsemen would decorate available small trees with candles during festivals to symbolize the tree of light. The lights in Christmas trees derive from the ash being sacred to Thor and the candles’ being placed to symbolize his lightning. During the winter solstice, the Scandinavians worshipped the fir tree. It was a festival to show gratitude that growth was starting again, and was held during the “twelve sacred nights”. The Christmas tree started as a substitute for the divine sun-tree. The fir obviously stands for the tree. The lights are for lightning. The decorations of traditional nuts, golden apples, and balls stood for the moon, sun, stars, or gods. Horses, deer, swans, goats, eagles, and squirrels are still symbols of Christmas that are derived from the Yggdrasil myth as well as were animals that are sacrificed to the gods;
wolves and ravens for Odin, bucks for Thor, cats for Freya, and boars for Freyr. On a traditional Christmas tree all of the above-mentioned animals appear. Nidhogg, the dragon, is represented with strings of popcorn or raisins wrapped around the trunk. Gifts were given to bring holiday joy during the festival. The symbols incorporated into the Christmas tree entirely derive from Icelandic mythology and have their true meaning in that belief system. (Wenckebach, 1942).

The Christians found it easier to change the significance of the tree symbols to have Christian meaning than to try to destroy the tradition outright. This approach helped ease the conversion process. Jesus was traditionally said to have been born the night of December 24th or the morning of December 25th, so it was simple to transfer the holiday celebrations from December 21st to Jesus' birthday. The fir came to symbolize Christ, who was born in winter and darkness but is the light of the world. The dragon is referenced in Revelations. Christ was perceived as the giver of all perfect gifts, so the custom of giving presents was easily transformed to be in honor of Christ (Wenckebach, 1942).

*Mistletoe.* Mistletoe was another symbol that could be used to represent the lighting on the trees that stood as reminders of Yggdrasil during the winter festival. Mistletoe represented both the wonderful and destructive power of lighting. Mistletoe banished demons, brought freedom and happiness, healed wounds, protected against illness and poison, and would indicate treasure or victory. It also killed Baldur, the god of the sun and spring. Baldur was loved by all except Loki, so Loki schemed and found that mistletoe was the only thing in the world that had not vowed to never harm Baldur. Loki shaped the mistletoe into a spear and had Baldur’s blind brother Hodur, guided by Loki, shoot it at Baldur. Therefore, mistletoe came to represent death as well as new birth for Baldur, who later was replaced by Christ (Wenckebach, 1942).
Yule. Freyr and Baldur were both sun gods. Freyr brought sunshine and therefore was also the god of harvest, fruitfulness, marriage, and family. His sacred animals were the golden-bristled boar, which represented the sun, and the stag, which could represent the deer of Yggdrasil. His flower was rosemary, which brides still wear. During the winter solstice, Freyr was reborn, and Yule was the twelve night long festival to celebrate that. The word “yule” is probably derived from the word for “fiery orb” (a.k.a. the Sun), “hoel”. To symbolize the sun, a wheel was covered in straw, lit on fire, and rolled down a mountain when the days were shorter and up the mountain when the days were became longer. Fires were lit in Freyr’s honor everywhere during the holiday season (Wenckebach, 1942).

The Yule-log is burned in accordance with the tradition of having a fire going to worship Freyr. Customarily, a log was cut, decorated, saluted by the public during transportation, brought into a castle with celebration, placed in the fireplace, and lit by pieces of the previous year’s log. The Yule log would protect the house from fire damage. As long as the Yule-log burned, the servants were allowed to have ale with every meal. The Christmas feast also derives from Yule, where traditionally the boar is eaten. The boar head was customarily decked with rosemary and brought into the room with much pomp; behind it the nobles entered (Wenckebach, 1942).

Santa Claus. During the winter solstice, the gods would descend to Midgard. Odin would come down wearing a grey cloak and broad-brimmed hat that shrouded his face. He would ride upon a white horse and would have the souls of the individuals who had died during that previous year travelling behind him. After Christianity, only the unbaptized children were part of Odin’s army. Originally, Odin was a frightening entity for children, but eventually came to be perceived as their friend. He became an entity that came to children, bringing toys and candy to the good and a birch rod for the naughty. The German name “Nikolaus” translates to “conqueror
of nations” and references a death god. Odin was a winter god and therefore a death god. Christians changed Odin to be an evil spirit and developed him into the Devil, bearing the name “Old Nick” (Wenckebach, 1942).

St. Nicholas’ costume comes from Odin’s (Wenckebach, 1942). He rides a white steed and delivers gifts to good children and threatens bad children with his rod. The reindeer of America and England replace Odin’s steed. Reindeer are derived from Freyr’s sacred stag. St. Nicholas would not accept gifts, so to please him, children would fill their shoes with oats for his horse. The next day the shoes would be full of candies, nuts, and apples, which were originally sacrifices offered to the death god Odin and to the dead themselves. The shoe represented resurrection, since the great shoe of Odin’s son will defeat Fenrir and help bring the new world into being after Ragnarok. For practical reasons, future generations used stockings instead of shoes (Wenckebach, 1942).

**Germanic Christianity**

There was a mingling of Norse mythology and Christianity into a Germanic Christian culture (Cawley, 1939). The monks sent by Pope Gregory the Great would often include the Teuton’s religious culture into Christianity instead of try to combat these practices with an already established doctrine (Turner, 1993). Extensive as the Icelandic lore is, the records are typically not regarded as primary sources due to their having been written down after the area’s conversion to Christianity (Cawley, 1939). Northern mythology and Christianity affected each other. Therefore, both reflect the other’s influence (Russell, 1984). The Scandinavians shaped Christianity with their own heritage and culture (Pfleiderer, 1892).
Germania first came in contact with Christianity through Arian missionaries. Arianism viewed Christ as half divine messenger and half servant of God; he was therefore entirely subordinate to God. This understanding of Christianity is both simpler to grasp and enmeshed more readily with the Norsemen’s already hierarchical civilization. Future tribal kings would view themselves as converters for Christ through conquering and their followers in battle as their apostles. Such conversions by war were directed by God, the heavenly king, and any Christian involved must be willing to die for God’s cause. The Scandinavians, therefore, still continued their practice of enjoying life and partaking in battle for the divine (Pfleiderer, 1892).

It was easy for the Teutons to accept Christ as their highest king because they viewed him foremost as a man who suffered and struggled for the position and for the sake of his chosen people. Since Satan and evil were the enemies of Christ, his death could be viewed as a sacrifice of war. After his hardship, Jesus rose as a divine hero and led his people to victory, earning his position and the appropriate reverence. Hero-worship was such an intrinsic element of Norse mythology that transitioning into worshiping Christ as a hero was easy. Furthermore, this view of Jesus continued to allowed the Scandinavians to interpret death as glorious and life as something to be enjoyed as well as being a constant battle. Dying for Christ’s glory brought one to heaven as dying in battle for Odin delivered one to Valhalla. The folklore of the Norse tended to involve a hero and villain fighting over a moral ideal. This mindset easily transitions to Christ and Satan battling for moral influence over man. The concept that deeds and sacrifices of love and devotion earning one salvation is derived from this comparison to previous beliefs (Pfleiderer, 1892).

Purity, vigor, sympathy, and self-esteem were infused into Christianity from the Germans to define what a healthy spirit is. The ideal ethical person’s characteristics were evangelized by these set standards. Bravery, courage, and fidelity for Christ as a believer also became the
standard from Germanic precedent. The Christian concept of renunciation of self and the physical world for the greater Heaven came to be prominent due to its stark contrast with heathen beliefs in enjoying life. When the Roman Church was established, it became the standard to deny oneself and the world, and followers of the religion were simply to do as the priests told them to succeed in attaining Heaven. This system is in itself contradictory, for it demands a renunciation of the world and a hierarchical control of it. Germans rejected the idea of denial of the world and self, believing firmly in self-esteem and enjoying life. The Roman Church worked very hard to bring Germania under its control, and still only succeeded in part; the Germans felt they had the liberty to contradict the Church whenever needed. Conflict between the Norse royalty and the Pope was always prevalent due to Scandinavia's disagreeing with the Church's hierarchy compared to its own. Teutons were a people of knighthood, not monasteries. The Roman Church promoted sacrifice of personal liberty, while Romanticism emphasized honor, valor, and a woman's love. The Crusades, perhaps ironically, only strengthened this Germanic Romanticism (Pfleiderer, 1892).

The Roman Church viewed romantic love to be a sin due to its sensual nature, even though marriage was elevated to something sacred. Romantic countries rebelled against this restrictive view. Instead, the Germanic Christians view love as spiritual, and focused on tenderness, purity, and sincerity. The feminine soul was treasured rather than looked down on for instilling lust in men. The Roman Church viewed the Holy Virgin Mary as a mix of maidenly and maternal ideals. However, this idealization only increased its congregations' desire to find the perfect lover. In Scandinavia, the Holy Virgin Mary only refined and deepened the sentiment of sexual love. It is from this German understanding of love that the popular and current idea that sexual love is healthy and moral arises (Pfleiderer, 1892).
The Germans, finding the Roman Church was failing to meet their religious needs, fell back on their own value of feeling the divine within themselves instead of perceiving the divine through external means. The belief that a piece of God is within everyone derives from this sentiment. One must strive to know himself or herself and connect with the part of God that is within him or her; it is through this connect that one achieves salvation, not by mimicking the behaviors of others that he or she has been told are correct. This view of attaining salvation destroyed the barrier the Roman Church had established which required a person to go through it to reach Heaven. The positive aspect of this approach is an ability to achieve salvation independently, and the negative is the separation from community that derives from such self-sufficiency (Pfleiderer, 1892).

Martin Luther finally and totally unified the German cultural spirit with Christianity in founding Protestantism in rebellion against the Roman Catholic Church. Luther neatly fell into the traditional role of the spiritual hero and was therefore easy for the German people to follow; Luther was pious and devoted to his lord as long as he could be before his responsibility to Christ, his king, became greater than that to his lord, the Church. Luther can be perceived as a spiritual hero on behalf of Christ against the oppressive and erring Church. Luther also personified the Germanic stubbornness and individualism that allowed him to withstand all that was raised against him and persist in establishing a “pure” Christianity. However, this refusal to ever compromise or yield led to the tremendous amount of factions of Protestant churches that arise over every basic theological concept (Pfleiderer, 1892).

Since Christ, through his death, purified the world of sin, Protestantism incorporated the importance of individual self-discovery and discovery of God within him or her and the value of being enriched by experience rather than by denial of the world. In fact, to demonstrate God’s
love, one had to interact in the world. Instead of the Roman view of Christ's success and consequent salvation as something that bound everyone to serve him, Luther expressed Christ's grace as a weapon one can use against any who attempt to prevent one's success in reaching Heaven. Marriage became a spiritual bond that was preferred to a celibate life of privacy. Nature was viewed as a beautiful work of divine creation rather than as a reminder of humanity's fallen state. Celebration and enjoyment of life were regarded positively since they served as a good defense against sin and temptation (Pfleiderer, 1892).

Government was returned to its sovereign power and glory when autonomous control separate from religion was restored to it. Education resumed and became valuable due to earthly pursuits' being viewed positively. Work became a moral act in which the individual served both God and the world God created. However, Protestantism cost Germany by dividing it into factions, destroying its economy, and bringing said factions into war and encouraging prosecution due to the people's need to conquer in order to prove their beliefs were the "true" doctrine of Protestantism. Finally, when Philip Spener was able to refocus the Protestant factions from feuding over theological details to practicing said doctrines in their lives, the Scandinavians regained their sense of morality and spirituality again and reawakened in a new era of religious practice (Pfleiderer, 1892).

The Effects of Germania on Christianity

After conversion, both Christianity and paganism continued to be practiced for some time before they entirely merged (Chaney, 1960). The culture and religion already in place in Scandinavia molded Christianity (Pfleiderer, 1892). Heaven and Valhalla and Hell and Niflhel were easily merged. Wyrd synthesized into the Anglo-Saxon Christianity of predestination
(Chaney, 1960). For some, gods became cultural entities, and were renamed archangels of that nation. Odin was the archangel of speech and runes and Thor of egoism and respiration (Steiner, 1970). Many converts believed that the old gods were still real, but were forced to pretend they were not. This understanding of continued practice has support from the number of pagan symbols that have lasted until modern time (Winterbourne, 2004).

The early church worked to make the conversion to Christianity from paganism easy by accommodating pagan practices on some level. The most powerful of these was to utilize the Germanic concept of fate, wyrd, by having an omnipotent God who could prevent Ragnarok from affecting them. The word “gop” turned into the word “god”, a term that originally meant something like fate. It indicates a gender-neutral singular diety. The use of the word gop made it so the layman could at least understand that Christ was a god (Winterbourne, 2004). “Searo” is a word that indicated interconnecting parts of armor. It is unclear if it was of a positive or negative denotation, but the word evolved to be a part of “syrwan”. Syrwan is “to create”, and was used to explain the dichotomy of Christ and Satan, and God’s capacity to shape both good and evil. Most of the time searo is negative and used to indicate those who oppose God. Syrwan, the verb form, has been used to indicate God’s act of creation (Taylor, 1983).

The Germanic people always had an understanding that internal (the soul, God) and external (natural) forces work on a person. They had a clear sense of free will, which puts one in competition between good and evil (Steiner, 1970). Skirnismal is a poem from Norse mythology that parallels the fall of man in Genesis. One can conclude from this evidence that, when converted, the idea of man’s fallen state was already present within the Teutonic culture. Christianity made the concepts of mind, soul, and spirit easier to grasp but also created a separation and conflict between body, soul, and spirit (Winterbourne, 2004).
Christianity was not suddenly introduced, but instead old concepts like Ragnarok were gradually reshaped to fit with Christian traditions and beliefs (Winterbourne, 2004). Ragnarok will come about when evil Lucifer/Loki’s influence overcomes the good God’s power (Steiner, 1970). Germanic people would not have accepted the concept of baptism and that the sins of the past can be simply washed away, so Germanic Christianity emphasized the Old Testament. The Old Testament’s stress on lineage and retribution coincided with the Norsemen’s belief that vengeance was a social responsibility (Winterbourne, 2004). Despite the fact that pride and honor were so important to the Scandinavian people, they viewed Satan’s pride as wrong. This ability to distinguish two types of pride existed because hierarchy was also important to the Teutons. Because Satan betrayed his king, his pride was misplaced and he erred (Woolf, 1953).

Christianity had an advantage to the Norse gods in that it offered a reward for being moral and a punishment for failing to be so; those who were devout and virtuous attained Heaven and the rest went to Hell. In the Icelandic belief system, those who died gloriously in battle or, for women, died virgins and were chosen by Odin would go to Valhalla and the rest went to Niflhel, no matter what kind of life they had led (Winterbourne, 2004). Heaven is frequently illustrated like a meadhall: Heaven is like a banquet. The best entertainment is made available to the guests. It is a place of rejoicing and happiness. Satan’s role as a faithless retainer to God is also his punishment; he is denied his meadhall (Woolf, 1953).

**Media**

The integrated Christianity is demonstrated in many works, including art, poetry, and prose (Chaney, 1960). In 830 AD, an unknown author penned “Der Heliand”, which depicted the Redeemer in the role of a warlike hero who defended a kingdom of the mortal world. This work
is a great example of how the people of Germania existed in a semi-converted state for a while and in turn shaped a Germanic Christianity (Phillips, 1895). *Draumkvaede* depicts a typical vision of Hell, except that the imagery is all Northern. It is a Norse poem written in the thirteenth century (Turner, 1993).

*The Gosforth Cross.* The Gosforth Cross is a fifteen-foot tall stone cross in Gosforth. It is a relic of the Norse Vikings from their colonies on the British Isles. The purpose was probably to represent the Tree of Life. The Gosforth Cross was likely a religious meeting place for services. The ornamentation of the cross is interlacing bands that are geometric and the same. This type of ornamentation is only found on crosses made by the Norse sculptor Gaut. The Gosforth Cross lacks the typical animal ornamentation of the Scandinavians, and where there are animals, their bodies are made up of the interlacing bands (Berg, 1958).

Different interpretations of the significance of the symbols exist, including explanations that are entirely Christian or entirely Germanic in meaning. But possibly the best explanation of the images is a combination of both Germanic mythology and Christianity; each image symbolizes something from both religions. On the west side: Loki/Satan is bound. Odin is mounted on Sleipnir while Heimdal fights back the wolves Skoll and Hati, which can also symbolize Death of the Four Horsemen being conquered by Christ. Fenrir is shown trying to destroy the sun or Satan is trying to destroy the cross. On the south side: Odin rides through Nastrand, the hall of serpents or Jesus stomps upon the Devil. Jormungand and Fenrir attack Eikthyrnir, a hart, which could also be general evil attacking Christ symbolized by a hart. Fenrir is shown bound/Leviathan is depicted tamed. On the east side: Baldur with Hodur and Nanna or Christ with Longinus and Mary Magdalene. Fenrir being slain by Vidar, which could also be Jesus descending into Hell. On the north: There are the endlessly interlacing bands, which symbolize
eternity. Odin on Sleipnir is shown being conquered by Fenrir, which can also be seen as Christ casting the Devil out of heaven (Berg, 1958).

The Gosforth Cross, when interpreted in its entirety, symbolizes the triumph of Christianity over the old religion. It was policy to make the conversion to Christianity as simple as possible. Pope Gregory the Great even said that the same religious practices could be continued as long as they were done in the name of Jesus. The continued depictions of Nordic legends are proof that the old religion was not forgotten. The Gosforth Cross possibly represents a synthesis of Christianity and Germanic mythology, where Christ brought Ragnarok to the old gods and defeated them, but spared humanity from the consequences and created a new world with Him as God. The fact that the Gosforth Cross shows the gods’ dying during Ragnarok and Christ’s surviving as the centerpiece exemplifies this idea. On the cross, the sun is eaten by monsters, there is an earthquake, Loki is bound, Fenrir is bound, Garm is breaking free, Heimdall is defending Bifrost, the gods are riding out of Valhalla, Surt and his army are ready for battle, and Vidar is slaying Fenrir. These images are all signs of Ragnarok. The cross’s west side depicts Ragnarok’s beginning. The south shows individual battles. The north displays a Gigantomachia (the battle between the evil army of Surt’s and the good army of the Aesir). The east shows the end of the gods and the establishment of Christianity through Christ’s death (Berg, 1958). Loki on the Gosforth Cross is analogous to the devil bound in hell. This same double-meaning of Loki and Satan bound is found on the Kirk Andreas Cross (Collingwood, 1903).

_Muspilli_. Ragnarok and the Final Battle of Christianity parallel each other. _Muspilli_ is a poem about the Christian apocalypse that was written in Old High German, Bavarian dialect (McGinn, 1979). No one knows who wrote it (Phillips, 1895). It survived, probably by accident, as one manuscript that seems to be from around 850 AD. The Germanic tribes gradually converted to
Christianity over about five hundred years, and during this slow process odd fusions of myth and Biblical teaching occurred. The poem *Muspelli* is about Elijah battling the Antichrist at the End of Days (McGinn, 1979).

*Muspelli* combines Ragnarok and the Apocalypse. Fenrir fights on the side of Satan and the Antichrist. Surt and those from Muspell, the land of fire, conquer the Earth (Turner, 1993).

No one knows what the word “muspilli” means. However, it is generally accepted that it denotes a catastrophe connected with the end of the world or possibly means the end of the world itself. It could also mean “mouth-utterance”, insinuating an oracle (Hagen, 1904). “Muspilli” could also be translated to mean “world-fire”. The world-fire is a reference to the world being destroyed by fire due to the blood dropping from Elijah, who conquers the Antichrist in their fight but is also wounded. The poem details the joys of heaven and pains of hell (Phillips, 1895).

**Conclusion**

It is evident that Germanic mythology had an overt effect on Christianity. Many concepts that are now familiar, such as sexual love being acceptable and finding God through connecting to God on a personal level, are derived from the characteristics of the Scandinavians that already existed in their previous belief system. Elements of Christianity that are commonly accepted but not found in the Bible, such as the characteristics of Satan and Hell, have obvious roots in Norse mythology. Holiday traditions that are customary symbols of Christ actually derive from Teutonic pagan worship festivals. The Icelandic culture was so profound in its different approach to Christianity that it ended up leaving the Roman Church entirely and founding Protestantism, a serious competitor to Catholicism. Grasping the reasons why an active religion has the culture it does is an important element of understanding both the people who practice it and the society in
which it is practiced; connecting parts of that culture to other cultures merely strengthens both
the understanding of and the social connections between the elements of significance. Norse
mythology will forever be an intrinsic part of Christianity, and to understand its impact is to
understand both Christianity and Germanic mythology better.
Gosforth Cross Images


Retrieved April 28, 2010, from ancestry.com’s website:

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