Christianity and Norse Paganism

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Celtic Christian cross

Chi Rho christogram

Vegvisir magical stave

Norse Thor's hammer

Why choose to compare Christianity with Norse paganism?[1] Firstly, Norse paganism is a reasonable proxy to Germanic paganism, which was widely practiced across Europe. Secondly, as the mythological ecosystem in Europe came to be dominated by a single religion, namely Christianity, Norse paganism disappeared. Thirdly, I currently happen to be interested in Viking culture, and the Vikings were Norse.

"Pagan" Christianity. Christianity is considered by many to be a monotheistic religion, alongside Judaism and Islam. This is not surprising. All three religions share a common heritage. And all three emerged from the Mediterranean Near East during the classical antiquity period.[2] After gaining traction in the Greco-Roman world during middle classical antiquity, Christianity spread across Europe and the Americas. Along the way, it supplanted regional forms of pagan worship.[3] By the end of the Middle Ages, all of Europe had been Christianised.

One of the last forms of Germanic paganism in Europe to succumb to Christianity was Norse paganism. It was practiced in Scandinavian northern Europe. It is a polytheistic belief system. A pantheon of gods occupy metaphysical realms. The gods act capriciously, and interact with humans in relation to the gods' humanlike attributes. The gods expect human fealty and acts of propitiation such as animal and human sacrifices.

Shared pagan themes. At first glance, Christianity and Norse paganism appear to have little in common. Christianity's monotheism conflicts with Norse paganism's polytheism. The "rules of engagement" between the gods and people are different. And the respective cosmologies depict incompatible world sagas.

But is this lack of commonality really so? Is Christianity strictly a monotheistic religion? No. And are there pagan elements both within the Christian worldview, and in the actions of its adherents? Yes. In support of these assertions, I identify six themes which are common between the two religions. These are as follows:

1. A pantheon of gods.

   Norse paganism—There are two tribes of gods, Æsir and Vanir. Better known Æsir gods include Odin, Thor, Frigg, Balder and Týr. Vanir gods include Freyr, Freyja, Njörðr, Heimdaller and Ullr. The god Loki seems not to be a member of either tribe.

[1] I declare this to be my own work, entirely. In particular, no AI was used in any research, analysis, synthesis, writing, nor typesetting of this work. In short, AI was not recruited at any time in this work. Errors and inaccuracies are therefore proudly my own.

[2] Classical antiquity is the period of cultural history between the 8th century BCE and the 6th century CE, centered on the Mediterranean Sea. It comprised the interlocking civilizations of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. During this period, Greek and Roman societies flourished.

[3] Paganism is a term first used in the 4th century by early Christians for people in the Roman Empire who practiced polytheism. During and after the Middle Ages, the term paganism was applied to any unfamiliar religion, which in turn implied a belief in false god(s).

Christianity—There are four deities, namely, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and Satan. Although the first three deities are ostensibly distinct entities, they are intangibly connected, constituting some unified entity known as Trinity. Many Christians believe that other spirit beings exist. They are the angels, demons, and departed human souls.

2. Multiple realms of existence.

Norse paganism—There are nine realms of existence (*Nín Heimar*). Humanity and the natural world occupy the Midgard realm. And although the gods occupy other realms, especially the Asgard realm, they seem to influence all the realms.

The gods seem at once to be identified with, and yet separate from the realms they inhabit. For example, the gods Odin, Vili and Vé killed the primordial being, Ymir. And from its body parts, the natural world was formed. This relation between god and realm resembles Christianity's implicit dualism.

Christianity—There is a Heaven, a Hell, and a physical realm occupied by humans. Additionally, there is a putative spirit (or "spiritual") realm in which angels and demons reside. Although it's not clear whether this spiritual realm exists separately from Heaven and Hell, the Bible is clear about the existence of angels and demons, and that they participate in influencing human affairs.

The Son "came down" into the physical realm to fulfill his eschatological mission. And he then left by "ascending" into the realm whence he came, possibly Heaven.

Reality is profoundly dual: God(s) *vs* Creation, Heaven and Hell *vs* earth and humanity, human spirit and soul *vs* body and mind, trascendant *vs* immanent existences.

3. The gods are humanlike.

Norse paganism—The god Thor is a fighter, fighting for the protection of humanity. Odin seeks and imparts knowledge. He gave humanity the runic alphabet. Freyja is associated with love, beauty, fertility, and war. Njörðr is able to endow humans with power and wealth. Loki is deceptive, beguiling, a trickster, and a shape-shifter.

Christianity—The Father deity is all powerful, demanding of justice, vengeful. The Son is loving and relational. The Holy Spirit is a helper and an empowerer. And as the archetypal antithesis of the Trinity, Satan is also powerful, deceitful, and full of hate.

4. The gods intervene.

Norse paganism—Freyja passes judgement on warriors slain in battle, deciding who should enter Odin's Valhalla hall located in the realm of Asgard, and who should enter her Fólkvangr hall. Shamans and "seers"—practioners of *seið*—mediate with the gods. The gods are influenced by acts of propitiation, such as, animal and human sacrifices.

Christianity—The Father passes judgement on humans after their death, deciding who should go to Heaven and who should go to Hell. Pastors, priests, prayer groups, worship leaders, and prophets mediate. The gods are influenced by acts of propitiation, such as, piety, prayer, worship, and fasting. A singular event involving the sacrifice of a human-god plays an essential role in connecting humans with the deities.

5. A creation myth.

Norse paganism—Before the creation of the world, there was a primordial hot region known as Muspell. Surrounding Muspell was a formless and void region known as Ginnungagap. The world was formed out of an interplay between these two regions, facilitated by the gods. Then, the gods Odin, Vili and Vé breathed life into Ask and Embla, the first man and woman.

Christianity—The creation myth follows the biblical account in Genesis. The Father breathed life into Adam and Eve, the first man and woman.

6. This present age will end.

Norse paganism—Ragnarök is a singular future event in which a final great spiritual battle will be fought by the gods. It will be accompanied by natural disasters, floods, and fire. The event will usher in a new world order.

Adherents to Norse mythology anticipate an afterlife that is much better than the present life.

Christianity—The "End Times" will be initiated by the Son's return to Earth as his "Second Coming." Satan will finally be defeated, consigned to Hell, heralding a new world order.

Christians anticipate going to Heaven after their death. Heaven will be a state of eternal bliss for those few humans who manage to reach it, far better than this life.

The appeal to pagans. Most religions enjoy periods of growth, followed by decline. For nascent Christianity, in particular, its growth was spurred by: 1. the disruption of conventional ways of life brought about by a rich ethnic, cultural and ideological heterogeneity in the Near East; 2. the decentralisation of Judaism arising from the political clash between Jewish nationalism and Roman imperialism; and 3. the appeal of Jesus to both Jewish monotheistic and gentile pagan sensibilities alike, albeit for subtly different reasons.

Christianity offered the Near East pagans a Jewish messianic figurehead and a personalised triune deity, which bore some resemblance to their respective local pagan deities and demigods. The new Christian message softened the hard austerity of the lonely Jewish deity, infusing it with humanlike personalities, kinship and physical body. Early Christianity was therefore a sort of ideological midpoint between strict Jewish monotheism and Greek, Roman, Parthian and Egyptian paganism. It is this ideological context which made the early Christian Jewish message seem appealing, and therefore helped it to spread.

Indeed, these same three drivers were present in the ensuing centuries, spurring the spread of Christianity throughout Europe. To be sure, the political expansion of the Christianised Roman Empire before its decline in the 5th century CE was a strong driver. Nevertheless, similarities between Norse paganism—and by extension, Germanic paganism—and Christian cosmology and eschatology provided additional impetus to Christianity's expansion into pre-Christian Europe.

In closing. Why do many of us we believe what we believe? Did we choose objectively? Or freely? Perhaps not. For it seems clear that the vicissitudes of history, the happenstance of our context, and the inflections of our beliefs relative to those of others, are all more powerful forgers of belief than are doctrinal integrity and the rigour of personal exegesis.