

## Opening Address

*at the Symposium on Encounters between Religions in  
Old Nordic Times and on Cultic Place-Names, arranged by  
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Ladies and Gentlemen

Some of you may wonder why a historian of religions who is not himself a Nordacist should introduce our sessions. This circumstance may illustrate the lack in Scandinavia to-day of specialists in Old Norse religion. Even a non-expert is often obliged to move outside his own field of competence, both in his research and still more in his teaching. Under such circumstances he clearly needs the good written information of reliable handbooks and scholarly works, as well as the oral advice of helpful colleagues. Our symposium is intended to offer both of these possibilities.

Irrespective of our different fields of research we are also dependent on common traditions of scholarship and on problems of methodology. A more formal reason for standing here is the fact that I was chairman of the board which once chose the theme of our transactions to-day.

In this paper I shall try to consider some questions concerned with bibliography, history of scholarship, methods and special problems. This will be done in connection with a recently published report.

The first announcement of this symposium mentions the recommendation of the Nordisk samarbetsnämnd för humanistisk forskning (NOS-H = Nordic Cooperation Committee for Humanistic Research) which in May 1985 nominated a collaboration group, composed of representatives from all the Nordic countries. The task of those appointed was to work out a programme to intensify the meagre research in the field of Old Norse religion in the Scandinavian countries. Under the presidency of the Norwegian historian of religion, Gro Steinsland, from the University of Oslo, the collaboration group presented a document in September 1986 entitled *Innstilling om førkristen nordisk religion*

(Report on pre-Christian Nordic Religion) (NAF Steinsland et al. 1986). Our symposium may be seen as an unplanned first realisation of these projects.

During the 25 years in which the Donner Institute has arranged symposia on the history of religion, including the phenomenology and psychology of religion, we have tried to establish interdisciplinary contacts. We have been more or less successful in these efforts. Thanks to co-operation with Nordiska samarbetskommittén för namnforskning (NORNA = the Nordic Collaboration Committee for Name Research) the Donner Institute has been particularly lucky this time in attracting participants from an important neighbouring discipline. For those of us on the board who planned this symposium years ago it has been most gratifying to meet such a warm response from place-name scholars and Nordicists.

As a scholar you may now and then discover that a special subject which interests you somehow seems to be in the air. Studies and themes suddenly appear which supplement, contradict or confirm your own work. When one is planning a dissertation, it is of course necessary to begin with a bibliographic inquiry to decide whether it is worth exploring the subject in question. In our case part of this preparatory work has been carried out by the Nordic Co-operation Committee for Humanistic Research. But, it must be added, time moves fast and the material expands rapidly.

Even if the Nordic field seems to be rather limited, at least from a geographical point of view, it is not always easy to follow what happens in different areas. The first inter-disciplinary Conference covering Archaeology, History of Religion, and Nordic Philology and Literature was held in Norway in 1984 (Words 1986). In 1983 and 1984, to take another example, a Seminar on the Conversion of Scandinavia was given at the University of Gothenburg. Swedish, Danish and English historians, literary historians, Nordicists, runologists and archaeologists — with even a participating Soviet scholar — delivered 16 papers on different aspects of the main subject. Among the more specific topics was “The myth of the sacrificial death of King Dómaldi — did there exist a sacral kingship in the North?” This paper was later translated into English (Lönnroth 1986).

This seminar was concluded by an international symposium on the conversion of Scandinavia at Kungälv, Sweden, 4–9 August 1985. No papers were read on this occasion. Instead, the ten sessions centred around discussions on specially chosen topics. The summaries with comments and additional observations by the session leaders were pub-

lished in the Symposium volume *The Christianization of Scandinavia*. The three editors have contributed, each with one paper: "Christians and pagans in ninth-century Scandinavia" by Ian Wood from the School of History, University of Leeds, "The process of Scandinavian Christianization in the tenth and eleventh centuries" by Peter Sawyer, and "Scandinavian conversion histories" by Birgit Sawyer, the last two scholars resident in Alingsås, South-Western Sweden. The fourth contribution, which together with the other three, covers the same field as our present programme here in Åbo, is by Pirkko-Liisa Lehtosalohilander from Helsingfors and deals with "The conversion of the Finns in Western Finland" (The Christianization 1987; cf. Boyer 1987).

In his critical, even hypercritical, evaluation of Rimbert whose Latin *Vita Anskarii* is the oldest source for the conversion of the Swedes (*sueones*), the historian Ian Wood seems to be dependent on or in line with the Swedish Weibullian school. A more positive attitude is taken by Carl Fredrik Hallencreutz, whose field is missionary history, in his comments on the new Swedish translation of *Vita Anskarii*, where he discusses Rimbert, Sweden, and the encounter of religions (Hallencreutz 1986, 163 ff.). *Vita Anskarii* is naturally hagiography with a theological interpretation of history. But this circumstance does not preclude the fact that the descriptions of geographical environments, historical events and personal traits or experiences may be correct. Here, as with Old Norse sources, a change to a more positive appreciation is apparently in progress. This also applies to Adam of Bremen, who has likewise recently (Adam av Bremen 1984) been honoured with a modern Swedish translation with commentary.

The publication of these two originally Latin documents, the reprints of older or more recent translation of the *Poetic Edda* (Eddan 1913; Eddan 1957), as well as of *Snorri's Edda* (Snorres Edda 1958) and handbooks (Ström, F. 1967), might be an indication that at least on a more popular level interest in Old Norse religion is on the increase. At the level of elementary school and in literature for young people the same phenomenon may be seen. This revival of interest in myths and fairy tales in general is pointed out in the preface of a small, popular textbook. It can be confirmed by an older generation with memories from the first school years immediately after the First World War: "During the post-war period the Old Norse myths and sagas gradually disappeared from school-teaching, where they earlier quite naturally belonged to general education. In later times this has changed" (Eriksson & Svantesson 1984, 4). The demands of the young public were met by reprints of Scandinavian mythology books

from the 1880's, written by such diverse authors as Victor Rydberg, poet, cultural historian and specialist in Germanic religions (Rydberg 1887), and Kata Dalström, the subsequent socialist activist but one time teacher of her own children at home (Dalström 1887; Dalström 1889).

In May 1987 I was invited to the top class of a State secondary school in Stockholm for a dialogue on Old Norse mythology. Four years earlier, no less than three different State museums in the same city had organized extremely popular exhibitions on myths, the historical museum with the subtitle "Gods, sacrifices and sagas". Quite recently, the Swedish Board of Education delivered a proposal to the government for changing the elementary curricula in Swedish literature so as to include "the old fairy tales, legends, myths and fables". This enumeration may suffice to show that our scholarly demands of to-day are founded on a strong popular basis.

There are other, more curious ghosts from the past. Under the pseudonym "Falstaff fakir", a Swedish author from the 1890's, Axel Wallengren, wrote highly appreciated burlesques. In one of them he made fun of the Pietists, who because of their Bible reading were called *läsare* (readers), and invented a then unimaginable society termed *asaläsare* or *asa*-readers (Wallengren 1901, 175 ff.). Nowadays this fantasy has become a reality as believers in the Old Norse gods are numbered among the new religious movements in the Nordic countries (Wikström 1982, 89 f.). Even if they consist of small groups, they regularly make a sensation in mass media and have become objects of serious religio-sociological research. In our connexion they deserve attention as they stimulate publishers sensitive to the way the wind blows, with a view to restocking their literature on Old Norse religion. Another point of view in the case of Iceland is that "Asa-believers" there, besides being romantics in search of a more or less artificial national identity, may also be witnesses to the continuity of ancient popular religion. According to statistics from 1974, 30% of adult Icelanders, who are very interested in spiritism, have participated in seances, 18% have experienced ghostly apparitions, and 5% have seen fairies with their own eyes. The same study made it clear that 33% were persuaded or considered it probable that enchanted places existed, 37% were persuaded or considered it probable that female guardian spirits *fylgjur* existed, and 18% believed in the existence of fairies (Pétursson 1985, 3).

To return to the useful and suggestive little volume *The Christianization of Scandinavia*: its list of references, containing 15 pages, also

serves as a select bibliography. It naturally contains, among other things, the critical guide to *Old Norse-Icelandic literature* (Clover & Lindow 1985) by the Californian medievalists Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, where 47 pages are devoted to comments on books treating pre-Christian mythology. I have not been able to consult Lindow's annotated bibliography of *Scandinavian Mythology* from 1988 listing 3043 works as it was not published when this paper was prepared (Lindow 1988). Among still current but uncommented surveys of literature with a chronological and regional systematization, where the North is of course represented, *Bibliographie zur alteuropäischen Religionsgeschichte* should be mentioned. The first volume was started by Peter Buchholz (Buchholz 1967), a Germanist and Nordacist from Kiel (now in Pretoria, South Africa), as a preparation for a new, never realized research project, called "The Religious Geography of Pagan Scandinavia". He discerns three basic opposing categories in the common handbooks on Nordic or Germanic religion, namely: "1. structure 'versus' development and history, 2. common Scandinavian, Germanic or even Indo-European 'versus' regional characteristics, and 3. literature 'versus' real life (a pair which includes the relation of myth and cult, and their function in society)." While admitting that the members of each contrast are not mutually exclusive, he makes his choice: "Of the four aspects of time, place, structure, and function, my project emphasizes geography." There are other statements of his that are directly applicable to our symposium. As for the religious place-names, Magnus Olsen, according to Buchholz, needs complementing, and in Sweden and Denmark a corresponding inventory is still lacking. A research team, to be successful in the Nordic field, ought to consist of "two philologists (one for the names), one archaeologist, one historian, and one folklorist" (Buchholz 1972b).

Buchholz's doctoral dissertation from 1968 (Buchholz 1968), of which two abridged chapters were published in English three years later (Buchholz 1971) treated of shamanistic traces in Old Icelandic literature. This thesis has been contested by the French scholar François-Xavier Dillmann in his voluminous dissertation on the magicians of Old Iceland, presented at the University of Caen in 1986 but still unprinted (CU Dillmann 1986). One of the crucial texts discussed by both scholars, is the saga of Eirik the Red, Ch. 4 (Buchholz 1986-87, 319 ff.; cf. Boyer & Lot-Falck 1974; Boyer 1986, 189 ff.). Both have published works on runes and on the conception of Odin, and both have contributed relevant bibliographies (Buchholz 1972a; Buchholz 1980, 171 ff.; Dillmann 1975; Dillmann in Durand 1983, 55 ff.). With

special regard to the theme of our symposium, it is worth mentioning that Dillmann started his scholarly career with a still unpublished MA dissertation on the christianization of Sweden according to Christian sources, introduced by a French translation of i.a. *Vita Anskarii*. His methodological orientation has qualified him as probably "Dumezil's closest French follower among younger scholars in the Germanic area" (Clover & Lindow 1985, 46; cf. Dillmann 1979). From 1988 on, he will occupy a new chair of History and Philology of Ancient and Medieval Scandinavia at the *École pratique des Hautes Études* in Paris.

Speaking of bibliography here in Åbo it is appropriate to mention the inter-Nordic journal *Temenos*, published by the Finnish Society for the Study of Comparative Religion with professor Lauri Honko as Chairman of the board and Chief Editor. From Vol. 18 (1982) onwards, every second volume contains a general Bibliography of Nordic Research in Comparative Religion compiled at The Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History at Åbo Akademi. A particular section is reserved there for Old Norse religion. The entries under this title in Vol. 22 (Dahla 1986, 198 f.) confirm the awakening interest in this field.

The history of scholarship is important and it has been duly considered in the *Innstilling* already quoted. Much can be added, especially concerning tendencies, methods and different schools of interpretation. Limited space, of course, explains that some relevant titles are missing. However, in comparison with the other subdivisions, that on Sweden is treated in a rather general way. Helge Ljungberg's Swedish doctoral dissertation from 1938 on Old Norse religion and Christianity, i.e. the conversion of the North, ought to have been mentioned (Ljungberg 1938). It was translated into German and also influenced a corresponding work by the Norwegian Georg Sverdrup (Sverdrup 1942). Much later (Ljungberg 1980) it was followed up by its author with a more popular work founded on broadcast lectures. By the way, the author, a historian and psychologist of religion, was elected bishop of Stockholm and devoted 22 pages of his pastoral letter to the history of religions including Old Norse magic, belief in gods and in fate (Ljungberg 1954, 11 ff.). The encounter between the indigenous religion of the North and Christianity was also the subject of the Olaus Petri Lectures at the University of Uppsala in the spring of 1941, delivered by the Norwegian historian of medieval literature, Fredrik Paasche, and posthumously published as late as 1958 (Paasche 1958) by his Swedish friend, Dag Strömbäck. He was in his turn two years afterwards invited by the same foundation to lecture on the conversion

of Iceland, and a book with the same title appeared in English with 15 years' delay (Strömbäck 1975). In the meantime, Strömbäck guided the first steps of a young Icelander who worked on the same subject, published his work in his own language in 1971, revised it completely, and presented it as a dissertation in Uppsala (Aðalsteinsson 1978).

In the Norwegian survey I miss, among other things, the two voluminous and suggestive studies by Emil Birkeli on ancestor cult in Norway. Inspired by his long stay as a Christian missionary in Madagascar, where this kind of religion plays a dominant role, he discovered the same phenomenon in the North with the help of ancient literary pre-Christian sources and more recent folklore material. Both the doctoral dissertation of 1938 and the work which followed in 1944, also dealing with eschatology in older and younger traditions, have been printed in the Transactions of the Norwegian Academy of Sciences in Oslo, a certain guarantee of their scholarly merit (Birkeli 1938; Birkeli 1944).

Even if Saami religion has recently been the topic of no less than two symposia, one in Stockholm and the other in Åbo, with their own publications (Saami Pre-Christian Religion 1985; Saami Religion 1987), this adjacent field is mentioned in the Swedish contribution to the *Innstilling*, but not in the other ones. Some inquiry from the University of Trondheim: "What can we put into the hands of our students, when they want brief information on the religion of the Saamis?" My answer was: "Such an introduction has been provided by the Norwegian, Adolf Steen, in his study programmes (Steen 1967-69), which have been printed in your own city." I repeat his name here in view of the fact that the general title of the symposium was formulated with special regard to Saami religion.

Another Norwegian work, not mentioned in the *Instilling* but certainly worthy of attention, is vol. 2 of a handbook on the history of Norway written by Per Sveaas Andersen. Here he discusses the unification and christianization of Norway during the period 800-1130. His presentation of sources and history of research can serve as a model for corresponding studies in the other Nordic countries. The founder of the Norwegian historical school at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Rudolf Keyser, is given his due in the history of his time. The debate between Edvard Bull and Fredrik Paasche during the years 1912-1915 is reported. The former thought it probable that for the common people the change was only a superficial one, whereas the latter was convinced that the christianization resulted in a quite new attitude to life (Andersen 1977, 191 ff.).

The present holder of the chair of Religion at the University of

Bergen, Anders Hultgård, whose main works deal with documents of ancient Judaism, has more recently directed his attention towards Old Norse religion as represented in runic texts (Hultgård 1982). In the same yearbook of Nathan Söderblom-Sällskapet his former colleague in Uppsala, Carl Fredrik Hallencreutz, also engaged in preparation (Hallencreutz 1984) and editing of the Swedish translation of Adam of Bremen, has studied the Christian rune stones as monuments of the first indigenous theology (Hallencreutz 1982). Neither of them is a runologist or a Nordicist, but they illustrate the fact that the study of the encounter of religions, comprising the expansion of Christianity, is at home in another, important branch of research, namely Church history (cf. Estborn 1929; Wehner 1981). Very properly, the *Innstilling* mentions Fritjov Birkeli in Norway, and Hallencreutz in his paper does justice to the late Emanuel Linderholm in Sweden. From the very beginning of this century until his death in 1937, this church historian, liberal theologian and reformer in Uppsala probably devoted most of his time to the problem of the christianization of Sweden and popular magic, religion, and mysticism. His contributions to the conversion of his country were organized according to regions and founded on all conceivable sources, such as literary material, place-names, runes and Church monuments. They remained, however, a large incomplete torso, which must be reconstructed from lectures, papers and a number of unpublished variants in the archives (UUB Linderholm 62-65).

In a private, oral examination an undergraduate must be prepared for questions from his teacher according to the principle of "what the heart thinketh, the tongue speaketh". This was certainly the case with Linderholm. In such a situation in 1934 I had to translate a chapter from *Vita Anskarii*. Apparently it was a contribution to the volume in honour of Nathan Söderblom in 1926, regarding Ansgar's way to Birka, and the printed jubilee lecture on Ansgar from 1930 which directed the questions of the examiner in 1934.

Linderholm returned many times to the rune-stones, for instance in a printed statement from a session of the Chapter of Uppsala in 1933, where he was speaking on Bishop Osmund, sent out from England, and called by Linderholm "apostle of Uppland", and identified with the rune-carver Asmund Kareson: "My own studies on the christianization of Sweden, based on the Christian rune-stones from the eleventh century, have led to the general conclusion, that our people was christianized both earlier and more widely than has been hitherto believed [...]. The 'emigration' at that time resulted in the same religious change as in the nineteenth century, when our emigrants to America



started missions in their old homeland as baptists, methodists, etc.” (Linderholm 1934, 330 f.; cf. Jarlert 1987, 145).

In his bitter and self-centered retirement lecture in 1937 Linderholm prophesied that an orthodox darkness would fall over the country for 40 years after he had left his chair. His library went to Åbo, where, together with the Uppsala archives, it throws light on the work of a man who really deserves attention in connexion with our symposium.

A conclusion contrary to that of Linderholm was drawn 25 years later by an English historian, even if his opinion bears upon the early ninth century: “Christian war-prisoners, Christian merchants from Frisia and Christian Swedes who had been converted abroad when serving as traders or as mercenaries could all alike be found in substantial numbers in southern Sweden; and yet their combined influence, together with the strenuous and sustrained efforts of Ansgar and Rimbert, made little impression on the paganism of the country” (Thompson 1963, 62).

Since encounters between religions are considered as part of Church history, Germanic religion — including its Nordic branch — is dealt with in theological encyclopedias and related dictionaries, e.g. the huge *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* with the new-written articles “Germanenmission, arianische” (Schäferdiek 1984a), “Germanische Religion” (Ebenbauer 1984) and “Germanisierung des Christentums” (Schäferdiek 1984b). *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, too, contains a detailed description of “Germanenmission” (Schäferdiek 1978). It goes without saying that the second, much enlarged edition of *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* pays attention to our subject, which is treated in considerable detail by well-qualified contributors under “Bekehrung und Bekehrungsgeschichte” (Gschwantler & Schäferdiek 1976), and “Christentum der Bekehrungszeit” (Schäferdiek et al. 1981). While waiting for the article on Germanic religion we can rely on the latest, more succinct contribution to this general theme by Edgar C. Polomé in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Polomé 1987). The same author has written the chapter on Germanic religious conceptions in *Germanenprobleme in heutiger Sicht*, a supplementary volume to *Reallexikon* (Polomé 1986).

These short remarks are intended as a kind of supplement to the handbooks of Germanic religion, the last of which appeared in 1981 (Boyer 1981; cf. Boyer & Lot-Falck 1974), thus adding a French-written work to an originally German-dominated branch (more recently Vries 1956–57, [reprint 1970]; Ström, Å.V. 1975; cf. Tveitane 1979) with some more or less important English exceptions (Turville-

Petre 1964, [reprint 1973]; Davidson 1964).

Another reason for citing articles on the older contacts between Christian missionaries and Germanic peoples is that the theological interpretations of pagan religions are determined by the Bible and the attitudes of the Old Church in the environment of Late Antiquity. These different evaluations with their resultant influence on the practical actions of the Church were revived in medieval times, and they have been rediscovered by Nordicists, even though these scholars are not acquainted with exegetic or patristic scholarship. An Indologist like Paul Hacker and a classical philologist like Christer Gnilka have revealed the laws governing christianization in modern India as well as that in the Roman Empire. The process in Late Antiquity has served as a model for the encounter between religions in other regions and in later times, notwithstanding self-evident local variants (Gnilka 1984). In the pre-Christian North, for instance, there existed no philosophy comparable with the classical one.

Summarizing an older work on Christian approaches to Germanic paganism (Schomerus 1936), the Swedish literary historian, Lars Lönnroth, who has treated the conversion period in the North in many papers, writes as follows (we omit the examples illustrating the separate, not mutually exclusive attitudes):

According to Schomerus, there were on the whole three different ways in which paganism was treated by Christian authors. One way was to picture the heathens as dupes of the Devil or of evil demons, posturing as gods and inducing them to worship their powerless idols [...] A second interpretation was the Euhemeristic one, according to which the pagan gods were actually men, whose worldly exploits had become so glorified that they had finally received the official hallmark of apotheoses [...] Finally, there was the idea that paganism was really a sort of imperfect Christianity, derived from the natural instincts of the human heart and from primitive observations of nature (Lönnroth 1969, 4 f).

The creation as testimony for the Creator is an ancient biblical and patristic idea which Lönnroth and earlier Walter Baetke quite correctly find reoccurring in the Preface to the *Prose Edda*. The Norsemen are thus recognized as participants of the true Revelation, adherents to Natural religion (cf. Rom 1-2) or in reality worshipping an "Unknown God" (Acts 17). As we shall see in the following it has also been possible to apply a typological interpretation to Old Norse sacrifices, which parallel Old Testament ones, thus prefiguring the true sacrifice of Christ which cancels all of them. The historical argument which the

Church fathers utilized to explain striking similarities between biblical and classical traditions — Moses is older than Plato — comes back in the North in another connexion. Comparing similar ceremonies in ancient Israel and in Lapland, the Scandinavian clergymen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resorted to the legend of the Lost tribes of Israel and declared the Lapps (now: Saamis) to be descendants of the Children of Israel.

Snorri's prologue to his *Edda* has attracted the interest of many scholars. The English research team of Ursula and Peter Dronke, the former a Germanist at Oxford, the latter a Latinist at Cambridge have investigated "to what extent Snorri could have been influenced by twelfth-century Latin thought, as against Patristic thought". According to the Dronkes there is a greater tolerance of pagan myth among the leaders of the French cultural renaissance and their Icelandic followers than in the writings of the Church fathers (Dronke & Dronke 1977, 168 f.). Contrary to and independent of his countrymen, A. Faulkes insists that in spite of influence from the subtle doctors of "Paris and Chartres like Alain de Lille, Bernard of Chartres, or even Abelard, though it is not so unlike Peter Comestor" Snorri is "reminiscent of earlier writers like Augustine, Bede, Isidore, or Ælfric" (Faulkes 1983, 306). It appears to be a question of nuances, since we have an unbroken tradition of both positive, negative, and neutral Christian interpretations of the classical religious heritage since the beginning of Christianity.

The search for sources does not entail an atomization or reduction of Old Norse religion as in the case of older methods of literary history. The point is that there is "a general tendency to accept the Old Norse texts as literature in its own right" (Lindow & Lönnroth & Weber 1986, 7). But there are, e.g. in *Heimskringla*, "intertextual layers, not always easy to disentangle. In this respect they are the ideal objects of poststructuralist 'deconstruction'" (Lönnroth 1986, 93). Those who are accustomed to working with biblical source criticism can feel fairly at home, even if to some extent they use other terms.

So far we have exclusively followed one main trend in the study of Old Norse religion, where interest is concentrated on its superstrata of Christian ideas. Among other trends we shall now only consider the one which connects myths and cults of the North with Indo-European religion. If we trace this influence or rather common heritage to the bottom layer of complicated religious traditions, this seemingly opposite orientation does not quite exclude the first one. Such an attempt to reconcile different interpretations does not, however, simplify the

actual situation of Nordic research. The history of that discipline invites reflection and humility, but it also tends to foster relativism and genuine despair over the possibility of reaching firm ground, since the source conditions of Old Norse religion are so awkward. One general theory or hypothesis succeeds another, the gaps are filled up with material from very different quarters, and bridges are built with material from other disciplines.

When personal academic contacts could be reestablished after the isolation caused by the Second World War, the University of Lund in southern Sweden, where the present author lived at the end of the 1940's, was visited by two outstanding scholars. One was the Germanist Walter Baetke from Leipzig; the other was the comparative philologist Georges Dumézil from Paris, both historians of religion. At the interval of a few weeks, they lectured on the same subject, namely Snorri as a source for our knowledge of Old Norse religion. Their conclusion were diametrically opposed. To Baetke the source value was very limited since, according to him, the mythological material was embedded in Christian medieval philosophy of history (cf. Baetke 1950; Baetke 1951). To Dumézil, however, Snorri, if correctly interpreted in the light of Old Indian documents, could provide us with very valuable insights into Old Norse myth and religion (cf. Dumézil 1948, 81 ff.; Dumézil 1973, XXVIII, 131), terms which, by the way, are sometimes still used as synonyms, although the former represents only one aspect of religion.

In spite of considerable criticism Dumézil has exercised an enormous influence all over the world. Leading handbooks on Old Norse religion demonstrate a positive attitude towards him (Turville-Petre 1964), or alternatively are more (Ström, Å.V. 1975) or less (Vries 1956-57) dominated by him. In Sweden the Iranologist Stig Wikander was his spokesman and personal friend, and these two scholars were to a certain extent a mutual inspiration. As a matter of fact, it was in Uppsala that Dumézil, who was University lecturer in French 1931-33, realized during a series of lectures in 1938 that his sociological method was applicable over the whole Indo-European field. According to Dumézil, the threefold structure of society corresponds to the same partition of the pantheons. But in contrast to the older French sociological school, e.g. Durkheim, he does not mention any priority, i.e. that the heavenly world is a projection of the earthly one. Applied to the old Germanic pantheon, the model signifies that Odin represents the ultimate sovereignty, Thor is the incarnation of the warrior stratum, whereas Freyr stands for herdsmen and cultivators. These ideas were

first published in Dumézil's little book on the Germanic gods (Dumézil 1939), re-written 1959 (Dumézil 1959). By the way, a warning should be given against the first edition of the Swedish translation of 1962 by Åke Ohlmarks, a very productive, sometimes ingenious, but also rather careless Nordacist (Dumézil 1959). A good and exhaustive history of the study of "Indo-European religions" including Dumézil's new comparative mythology is contained in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (Littleton 1987a; cf. Charachidzé 1987), where Wikander also received one of the very few biographies (Littleton 1987b). Both these articles were written by C. Scott Littleton, one of Dumézil's American disciples.

Stimulated by Strömbäck and his remarks on an earlier paper of mine dealing with the idea of "Arbor inversa" (Edsman 1966; in Swedish 1944) I considered, in the late 1940's, the motive of Yggdrasill in the second strophe of *Völuspá*. After philological scrutiny by two Nordacists, it was published in *Arkiv för Nordisk Filologi*. Suffice it to quote the title which well demonstrates how the same text can be interpreted in amazingly different ways: "Does Völ. 2:5-8 reflect a shamanistic ritual or a celtic age-verse?" In the first case the poem is associated with North-European, Siberian, and Inner Asian rites; in the second case an influence from Irish monasteries can be assumed. A third possibility is that the *völva* has a cosmogonic vision in which she sees the birth of the world-tree. She remembers the nine worlds of that tree and what is contained in them when it is still (as a germ) beneath the ground (Edsman 1949; cf. Steinsland 1979, 120 ff; Boyer 1983, 120; Schach 1983, 89; Buchholz 1984-85, 436).

From the point of view of philology, literary history and history of religions, the different traditions of Balder contain a number of problems. What is the real meaning of the many difficult and ambiguous expressions in the varying texts? Which story tradition is the original one, and how did the various readings arise? Do the myths of Balder represent real, living religion, or are they rather the free creations of poets, comparable with the epics of Homer? Or in other words: did a real cult of Balder exist? The sun god Balder, the vegetation demon Balder, the Iranian light god Ohrmuzd, the Middle Eastern suffering god Tammuz, the disguised Christ whose side, according to the medieval legend, is pierced by the lance of the blind Longinus, the hero of the old Finnish runes, Lemminkäinen who is killed by an arrow from an old herdsman, the beautiful Ossetic (Caucasian) champion Soslan or Sosryko who is struck down by a malicious, rolling wheel, the Greek twin-Gods Dioskouroi who

alternate between heaven and hell — all these mythical figures have, through the efforts of scholarship wandered over glittering bridges of airy construction to the Hel of abandoned theories (Dumézil 1948, 149 ff., 209 ff., 227 ff.). There are few rituals which have not been glimpsed at the scene of Balder's death, from West European bonfires to Athenian bull sacrifices, Old Norse sword dances and Siberian bear ceremonies. Comparative religion has elucidated much, but it has not been able to give a definite answer to all questions. Nor do philological analysis — Balder probably means 'the Lord' and Höd evidently 'warlike' — , place-name research, archaeology and folklore give the figure of Balder any sharper contour. To be sure, the late *Friðþjofs Saga* gives a description of the cult of Balder which in 1825 recurs in the well-known poem of the same name written by Esaias Tegnér, the Swedish romantic poet, classical scholar and bishop. The historicity of his prototype, Friðþjof, however, is contested (Edsman 1951, 860).

"Only Barbarism was once native" wrote the same poet, clearly aware of the continental origin of the Nordic cultural heritage. When so much of magic, too, is revealed as *gesunkenes Kulturgut*, one is almost inclined to think that barbarism, too — if this term might be applied to magic — has been native for only a short period. As Swedes, we are often asked by foreigners whether our folklore has not retained something of the pre-Christian, Nordic religion of the Viking age. Because of the source conditions, we are unfortunately forced to answer that the establishment of such a connection is a very intricate task (cf. Olrik & Ellekilde 1926–51; Kellerman 1958; Motz 1984). It is almost impossible to break through the thick wall of medieval, Roman Catholic popular religion. This means that we are nearly always led back to the European continent with its Christian or christianized folk traditions.

We can often ascertain the manner of the continental influence. A good deal of Old Swedish literature consists of translations from Latin, German or Danish. These works contain here and there specimens of folk religion from abroad. If we closely compare the originals with the Old Swedish versions it is, in favourable circumstances, possible to trace some indigenous conceptions. This is the case when we examine the Low German edifying tract, *Seelentrost*, from the 14th century and its Old Swedish translation a hundred years later. A section on folk beliefs, including good fairies and fate, belongs to the interpretation of the first Commandment. It is obvious that the Swedish text has been expanded compared with the German one, and contains additional

matter. Thus the Low German words *guden holden*, *beteren*, *elue*, *guden wichteken* and *spoknisse* (Der grosse Seelentrost 1959, 16) are rendered with *tompta gudha*, *waetter*, *nek aeller forsa karla*, *skrattra eller tompt orma*, *maro eller elfwa* and *spook eller willo* (Siælinna thrøst 1954, 23).

The Old Swedish literature, however, does not lack original material, e.g. the *Revelationes* of St. Bridget from the middle of the 14th century. These were dictated in her mother tongue, edited in Latin and retranslated into Old Swedish. The Saint reproaches those who “venerate *tompta (penates)* and do not go to church”. She strongly admonishes wrongdoers: “Give up the snakes, to whom you put out milk, and do not give the *tompta gudhom* my tithe of your cattle and swine, nor of bread or [...] of other things. Do not say that fortune or fate determines or does that or that but believe that God allowed it to occur so” (Birgitta 1861, VI, 78).

Much of medieval Nordic folklore is contained in *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* published in Rome in 1555 by the exiled Swedish archbishop Olaus Magnus. As is shown by the excellent commentary of Johan Granlund added to the modern translation into Swedish, the author has used a great amount of comparative material from classical and medieval sources. Thus it is here again important to distinguish between general European and indigenous Nordic traditions (Edsman 1961, 441 f.; Edsman 1971, 158 f.).

It is quite natural to ask oneself, as does the Sorbonne professor of Scandinavian Philology and Civilization, Régis Boyer, how to treat such a subject as Old Norse religion. We find ourselves there in a culture which neither possesses a word for religion, but only ‘custom’ (*siðr*), nor any original expressions for ‘belief’ or ‘believe’ (*trú* and *trúa* are loan-words). Similarly terms for ‘venerate’ and ‘pray’ are lacking (*biðja* only means ‘beg’, ‘ask for’). It is, moreover, a paganism which does not know of any dogmas and where priests and temples are explicitly mentioned only in later times. And what is the reality behind such designations as “Nordic” or “Germanic”?

At the same time, we have a comprehensive documentation from both a chronological and a geographical point of view. It extends from prehistoric times — ca 10000 B.C. — to the thirteenth century A.D., and covers a space from the Black Sea to Greenland, from Northern Eurasia to Spain. Under these circumstances we must reckon with a great many different influences from other cultures and religions: analogies, loans, imitations or distorted pictures. Almost without exception, these sources consist, on the one hand, of runes, rock-carvings,

and other archeological remains, not all of them easily accessible; and on the other hand, of literary documents which are tendentious and make subjective evaluations.

To bring order into that variegated world scholars have used many different methods which, according to the short summary by Boyer, are as follows: 1. *Linguistic-etymological*, nowadays represented by Dumézil, and in the seventeenth century by the Swedish polyhistor Olof Rudbeck. 2. *Psychological*, where it remains unclear whether Boyer — who only mentions the sagas as unreliable sources — has the famous Dane, Vilhelm Grønbech, in mind, or whether he is perhaps alluding to the modern French mentality school. 3. *Symbolic*, e.g. the duel between Thor and the giant Hrungnir interpreted by Dumézil as a *rite de passage*. Boyer, however, admits that this method very often results in arbitrariness. 4. Historical, according to Boyer the only sure approach. Diachrony is here indispensable whereas synchrony becomes possible ever since the Viking age. In different periods there are anyhow certain constants that reappear, themes or structures that can be traced backwards in time. These include cosmic phenomena such as the sun, water, and earth which ought to be conceived of in a natural or concrete way, not to be psychoanalyzed or explained from a sociological point of view. In his combination of historical and systematic methods Boyer explicitly follows Mircea Eliade, who speaks of cosmic hierophanies, manifestations of the sacred, and F. Ström (Boyer 1981, 7 ff., 38 ff.).

Let us leave this more general discussion of methods and consider some concrete examples of documentation and interpretation, to counterbalance the feeling of despair or lurking scepticism. Empirical discoveries can resolve the conflict between opposite views. The three figures on the well-known tapestry from Skog, a parish in Northern Sweden, and dated to the thirteenth century, have been identified as Odin, Thor and Freyr, but also with the Magi. A closer examination of the original indicates that the figure postulated as Odin is not actually one-eyed. There are traces of a woollen thread which has marked the other eye, as Karl Hauck has demonstrated in *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde* (Hauck 1976, 586). As a consequence of this observation, the pagan interpretation which has dominated modern scholarly and popular descriptions has been definitely eliminated.

Unlike archaeological monuments, literary sources speak for themselves and can generally be fixed in place and time, attributed to a certain author, and analyzed according to intentions and tendencies. They deal with real events even if those may be conceived of and



interpreted in different ways. Later on during this symposium a paper will be read on descriptions of *blót* in Icelandic sources. Here I only intend to take up an oft quoted Norwegian document, its historical background and its *interpretatio christiana*. This term, by the way, does not mean demonization of a pagan rite, as it has sometimes been understood (cf. Schomerus 1936, 72 ff., quoting Achterberg; Schäferdiek 1987, 25), but is equal to *praeparatio evangelica*, a heathen prefiguration of a Christian idea or ceremony (correctly Weber 1981, 475, 478).

There are three Norwegian jarls of Lade in Trøndelag, father, son, and grandson, who each in turn furthered *blót*. The first, Jarl Hákon, was contemporary with king Harald Fairhair who united Norway, according to traditional chronology in 872 but presumably about fifteen years later, and whose wives included a daughter of Hákon. The king sent his youngest son with Tora Mosterstangs, Hákon, to be brought up in England at the court of king Æthelstan. There the Norwegian prince, then called Hákon *Adalsteins fostri*, received a Christian education. After the death of king Harald Fairhair at the beginning of the 930's, Hákon returned to his home country where the next jarl of Lade, Sigurd, had him elected king. Jarl Sigurd, himself pagan but loyal to his Christian king, used all his skill to settle the discords that arose repeatedly between his overlord and the farmers who were devoted to their ancient religion (Andersen 1977, 91 ff.; Sawyer 1987, 70 f.).

In ch. 14 of the *Saga of Hákon the Good*, another name of the Christian king, Snorri gives us a detailed description of the heathen Yule celebrations at the middle of the tenth century. This saga is contained in *Heimskringla*, dated about 1230. There are slightly differing translations and I choose the one which is easiest to understand for a non-expert:

It was ancient custom that when sacrifice was to be made, all farmers were to come to the heathen temple and bring along with them the food they needed while the feast lasted. At this feast all were to take part in the drinking of ale. Also all kinds of livestock were killed in connection with it, horses also; and all the blood from them was called *hlaut* [sacrificial blood], and *hlautbolli*, the vessel holding that blood; and *hlautteinar*, the sacrificial twigs [aspergills]. These were fashioned like sprinklers, and with them were to be smeared all over with blood the pedestals of the idols and also the walls of the temple within and without; and likewise the men present were to be sprinkled with blood. But the meat of the animals was to be boiled and to serve as food at the banquet. Fires were to be lighted in the middle of the

temple floor, and kettles hung over them. The sacrificial beaker was to be borne around the fire, and he who made the feast and was chieftain, was to bless the beaker as well as all the sacrificial meat. Óthin's toast was to be drunk first — that was for victory and power to the king — then Njorth's and Frey's, for good harvests and for peace. Following that many used to drink a beaker to the king. Men drank toasts also in memory of departed kinsfolk — that was called *minni* [memorial toast]. (Snorri 1964, 107; cf. Aðalsteinsson 1985, 24).

Compare this Old Norse sacrifice with a similar ceremony in ancient Israel. On the Day of Atonement the high priest Aaron according to Lev. 16:12-19 — I take the text as it was read by medieval man without any critical analysis — enters the Holy of holies with incense and the blood of the slain bull. He takes some of the blood and sprinkles it once on the “mercy seat”, the cover of the Ark, and seven times on its front. This sin-offering for himself and his household is repeated for the people with a goat as sacrificial animal and with the sprinkling of blood. Also the Tabernacle containing the Ark is sprinkled as is the altar of burnt offering outside. In the typological interpretation of Hebr. 9 these rites prefigure the sacrifice of Christ once and for all. In this connexion Ex. 24:8 is quoted where Moses sprinkles blood on the people.

We may ask ourselves whether the striking similarities between Old Norse *blót* ceremonies and the sacrificial rites of ancient Israel are accidental. Or have the biblical texts perhaps influenced Snorri in his description of the heathen Yule celebrations in the Trondheim district? Or are there certain common traits which characterize sacrifices all over the world?

Having made this comparison and these reflections as an outsider, I received — thanks to the participants of the Åbo symposium — a recently published monograph on the sacrificial feast at Lade. The author claims that the story is based neither on oral nor on written tradition. It consists of an interpolation, inspired by the blood rites of the Old Testament and introduced to prepare the coming conflict between Hákon the Good and the farmers of Trøndelag over sacrificial meat and drink. Further, Christian *minni* drinking has been projected into pre-Christian time. This does not mean that Old Norse sacrifices and temple ceremonies did not exist. Snorri, however, tried to bridge the gap between paganism and Christendom by idealizing the former or giving it an *interpretatio christiana*, or by discovering a Natural religion in his ancestors' pre-Christian belief (Düvel 1985, 119 ff.). This

is in perfect conformity with the general tendencies of interpretation noticed above and with a statement which directly concerns our text and comes from another part of the world: "For example, a closer look at authorial intentions will differentiate between *Heimskringla's* medieval Christian perspective on its subject (Scandinavian history and prehistory) and those perspectives as are embodied in its subject-matter — Snorri's sources themselves" (Lindow & Lönnroth & Weber 1986, 10).

Among these oral and written sources, scaldic poems, although composed in the period of Christianization, can reflect pre-Christian attitudes (*The discussions* 1987, 18). Jarl Sigurd's son, who derived his name from his grandfather, Jarl Hákon, was an eager *blót*-man. Many verses dedicated to him by different scalds (Ström, F. 1981) glorify his bravery, manifested for instance in the victory over the Jóns-vikings. The poets also praise Hákon's fidelity to his hereditary religion. In Einar Helgason Skálaglam's *Vellekla* (lack of gold) from the beginning of the 970's the re-establishment of the ancestral temples, the return of the ancient gods, and the flourishing of the country, which is a consequence of the restoration, is described in the following way.

The two modern translations illustrate the difficulties of interpretation, differences of transcriptions and methods of introducing an old text. At the same time they complement and explain each other:

15. Holy fanes and homes of  
hallowed godheads, known to  
all, but wrecked and ravaged,  
raised the wise lord forthwith:  
over all the seas, toward  
etin-pathways, armed for  
combat, came the warrior:  
keep the gods him ever!

16. And the gracious godheads  
go back to their olden  
sacrifices; such is  
seemly in a chieftain.  
Increase gives the earth as  
erstwhile, since the generous  
lord lets flock the folk, all  
fearless, to their worship.  
(The Skalds 1945, 107 f.)

The wise man at once allowed the men  
of þórr to uphold the plundered tem-  
ple lands and shrines of the gods well  
known to the people; and then the god  
of the fence of the spears (i.e. the war-  
rior) carried the wolf of slaughter (i.e.  
the sword) over the mountains and all  
the sea — the gods guide that man.

And the sons of the Æsir (i.e. the gods),  
needful to men, return to the sacrifices;  
the mighty tender of the red board of  
the meeting of Hlökk (i.e. Hákon) wins  
fame by such a thing. Now the soil  
flourishes as before — again the destroy-  
er of the wealth of the spear-bridge al-  
lows the merry messengers of the gods  
to inhabit the temples.  
(Turville-Petre 1976, 60 ff.)

In Old Norse religion there are testimonies of personal piety, although one would hardly expect such an attitude among the rough Vikings. This subject, too, will be treated later on in our symposium, so I confine myself to one single example, although a renowned one, the famous *Sonatorrek* (the sons' wreck or the irreparable loss of the sons) by Egil Skallagrímsson composed about 960. "Nowhere is this burning love for Óðinn expressed more clearly than it is in the *Sonatorrek*, in which Egill rebukes his 'patron', who has deserted him and deprived him of his sons" (Turville-Petre 1972, 9; Turville-Petre 1976, 24 ff.). The background of the poem is given in *Egil's Saga* (ch. 78). The second son of the old Viking, Gunnar, was snatched from him by a fever, and soon afterwards the eldest brother, Bodvar, a youth of about seventeen, was drowned. The father in his grief was prepared to starve himself to death but was skilfully prevented by his daughter, who then urged him to compose a funeral poem. To start with, Egil complains that it is not easy to make use of Odin's gift, the mead of poetry. He has just buried Bodvar at Naustness, and this son is not his only loss. The goddess of the sea, Ran, has smitten him severely. Could he fight with sword against her husband, the god of the sea, Ægir, Egil would meet him as a foe, but as the old warrior he now is, he is doomed to helplessness. Odin himself has betrayed him, even if the poet is not deprived of his skill of poetry, Odin's noblest gift. With the help of many kennings this is expressed in the following way:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>21. This I remember yet, when the friend of the Gautar raised up the ash-tree of my race which grew from me and the family branch of my wife into the world of gods.</p>      | <p>23. I do not sacrifice to the brother of Vilir, the guardian of gods, because I am eager to do so; and yet the friend of Mímr has given me recompense for my harms if I count better.</p> |
| <p>22. I was on good terms with the lord of the spear, I grew trustful, believing in him, until the friend of chariots (?), the prince of victory, broke friendship with me.</p> | <p>24. The enemy of the wolf, accustomed to battle, gave me that skill devoid of faults, and such a spirit that I made certain enemies out of tricksters.</p>                                |
25. Now it goes hard with me: the sister . . . of Tveggi's enemy stands on the headland; but yet happy, in good heart and fearless, I shall await the goddess Hel.
- (Turville-Petre 1976, 39 ff.;  
cf. The Skalds 1945, 96 ff.)

It has not been possible to do more than take a few steps into the vast field of Old Norse religion, hinting at the history of research and a discussion of methods, and giving some illustrative examples of different kinds of sources. May this introductory lecture do service, anyhow, as a challenge to the many specialists who have gathered for our symposium.

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