

CHAPTER 15 : THE CONVERSION OF SCANDINAVIA

Scandinavia is a region in northern Europe that includes Norway, Sweden and Denmark. This region was one of the last areas in Europe to abandon heathen paganism in favor of Christianity. It was the home of the Vikings - pagan warriors who in the years between 800 and 1050 colonized, raided and traded the lengths of the coasts and islands of Europe and North America. They called themselves Norse, and these Norsemen terrorized the Christian peoples of Europe.

The first report of a Viking raid dates from 793, when the monastery at Lindisfarne on the east coast of England was pillaged by foreign seafarers. For the next 200 years, European history is filled with tales of Vikings and their plundering. Vikings conquered most of Ireland and large parts of England, they travelled up the rivers of France and Spain, and gained control of areas in Russia and along the Baltic coast. Stories tell of raids in the Mediterranean and as far east as the Caspian Sea. Danish Vikings sailed south, to Friesland, France and the southern parts of England. In the years 1013-1016, Canute the Great succeeded to the English throne. The Swedish Vikings sailed east into Russia, where Rurik founded the first Russian state, and on the rivers south to the Black Sea, Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire. The Norwegian Vikings travelled to the north-west and west, to the Faroes, Shetland, Orkney, Ireland and the northern parts of England. Except in Britain and Ireland, Norwegian Vikings mostly found largely uninhabited land and established settlements. In about the year 1000 A.D, North America was discovered by the Vikings, who even formed small settlements there.

The people of Scandinavia were Christianized primarily through their contacts with Christians in areas they raided and settled. The Anglo-Saxon people in England had themselves largely migrated from Scandinavia centuries before the age of the Vikings. As we have considered in a previous chapter, the Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, primarily through the missionary efforts of Augustine sent from Rome. One of the most notable Christian Anglo-Saxon kings of England was Alfred the Great. Alfred rose up in 880, taught himself first, and then his people; and though he died early, left such Christian influence behind him, that at last his Saxons converted their enemies themselves, and Norway and Denmark became Christian too, through kings who had learnt the faith in England. For instance, in Norway Christian influence was evident in the reign of Håkon, who had been raised a Christian in England but may have maintained his paganism, and later by the rule of Harald Gormsson. It was, however, largely Olaf Tryggvason, king of Norway from ca. 995-1000, who led his people into Christianity. Converted himself in England in 994 or 995, Olaf nobly made it his mission to Christianize Norway and Norwegian settlements. A later successor, Olaf Haraldsson, was made the nation's patron saint after his death on the battlefield in 1030: not in a war against pagans, but against the Danish king Canute, who had also conquered England. Olaf helped to strengthen Norwegian religious and national identity in the face of the ecclesiastical powers of Denmark and Germany.

The Christianization of Iceland, under Norway's sovereignty, was also spearheaded by king Olaf Tryggvason of Norway. Around 1000 AD Olaf demanded that the chieftains

of Iceland embrace Christianity. Olaf sent two Icelandic chieftains to Iceland to relay his demands, where the matter was heatedly debated between Christian and pagan chieftains. The final decision was relegated to the Law-speaker of the assembly of chieftains, who then spoke the new law, declaring that all Icelanders should be baptized and accept the Christian God. Concessions were made to the pagans by allowing the continued consumption of horse flesh, a practice associated with pagan sacrificial feasts, and the exposure of unwanted children according to the previous law. In addition, although public sacrifices were banned, men were allowed to sacrifice privately and in secret. Miraculously, the chieftains unanimously welcomed the new law, Christianizing Iceland both peacefully and instantaneously.

The Vikings who settled in far-flung locations generally adopted the form of Christianity present among their neighbors. Thus the Vikings who settled in the northern area of France (called Normans, or literally “Northmen”) adopted the Christianity of their new neighbors. They swore allegiance to the king of France, adopted the Roman Catholic religion and language of the French, and received the lower Seine area (called Normandy) from the king. And the Vikings who settled in Russia generally adopted Orthodox Christianity.

Since the Christianization of the Scandinavians occurred primarily from the top, it required a process of time for the full effects to trickle down to the masses. The instruments used for such change reflect the corrupted nature of Christianity then prevalent. Accordingly, to secure the foothold of Christianity in Scandinavia, monasteries were set up in the country. The monks would preach and teach the surrounding population. And priests found an unusual way of populating these monasteries: they would buy Danish and Slav boys for a life in the monastery. In addition to the Christian presence offered by the monasteries, Christianity set about replacing paganism in almost all aspects. For example, priests took over the ceremonies required for everyday life; now, marriages, birth ceremonies, funerals and other important occasions had to be performed by churchmen. Because tithes were not yet in place, priests often charged for these services. Pagan places of worship underwent the same Christianizing treatment; there is evidence that under the decree of Pope Gregory the Great, pagan temples, groves, and other places of worship were not destroyed by missionary priests, but were simply consecrated as Christian ground so that the god figure worshipped there would be the ‘true God’. Similarly, the functions of local gods and goddesses were simply replaced by saints.

After being christened around the year 1000, the process of unification established Denmark, Norway and Sweden as separate kingdoms. Christianization – even if tainted – had the positive effect of civilizing the more savage elements of Scandinavian culture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

James A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (Cassell & Company, Limited: London, Paris & New York. 1878). (see electronic version at <http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Fellowship/James.A.Wylie.html>)

Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Let My People Go* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.