Christian Success or Pagan Assimilation? The Christianization of the Germanic-Speaking Tribes in the Late Roman Empire

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Christian beliefs not only found a fertile territory within the Western Roman Empire but also were directed northwards from the fourth century onwards. Contact with the region's Germanic cultures, however, presented several difficulties that the evangelizers had to tackle in order to ensure a successful Christianization, which ultimately was characterized by a fusion of Germanic and Christian elements. Indeed, in an environment different from the Roman imperial infrastructure, the missionaries had to devise new methodologies , leading to a syncretic process that blended together Christian and pagan cultures.

First of all, two main factors, namely, space and time, are important to consider when analyzing the complex process of Christianization of the Germanic-speaking peoples. Spatial locations can be understood through the movements of the Goths, the first Germanic-speaking Christian converts, who came in contact with the belief in the fourth century through the actions of several missionaries, among whom Ulfilas occupied a central role.[1] Although they adopted a different branch of Christianity (Arianism), the Gothic tribes played an important part in

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[1] A. Thompson, "Christianity and the Northern Barbarians," in *Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, ed. A. Momigliano (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 62.

spreading the religion northwards.[2] It is also important to note that Christianity did not spread in Europe during the same time span. An example might be provided by Iceland, which became Christian only in the tenth century, hence six centuries later than the Goths.[3] The modalities and means through which Christianity in Iceland was achieved, furthermore, differed from the ones used in early Christianity. By the tenth century, Christian ideas were categorized and spread through an established source of power, the Church, whose aim was to reach, following the Lord's command, *fines terrae* not only for religious, but also for political purposes as will discussed later.[4]

Interestingly, the diverse examples of the Goths and the Icelanders further highlight the difficulty and the importance of postulating a "neuter" definition of Germanic-speaking tribes, a term that might be applied to a broad variety of tribal groups that lived in diverse geographical locations, ranging from Ireland to the Scandinavian peninsula. In order to reach a uniform definition, two possible interpretations might be suggested--linguistic and ethnic. Linguistic commonality, however, cannot be useful since across the several centuries, Germanic languages have departed from each other, despite retaining a common substratum, rendering difficult the identification of a common linguistic *pan-Germanitas*.[5] If the tribal ethnicity is analyzed instead, the problem of "neutrality" might be solved. In fact, although the process of Christianization covered several regions and centuries, the different Germanic populations presented similar societal and cultural features, which acted as a basis upon which Christian belief and practices

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[2] Arianism dealt with the relationship of God the Father and Christ the Son. Although many councils were summoned (Nicaea, Constantinople, Antioch) to resolve this theological issue, Arianism survived late into the Early Middle Ages.

[3] L. Abrams, "Germanic Christianities," in *Cambridge History of Christianity,* vol. 3, eds. Thomas F.X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 116.

[4] *Acts of Apostles* (Washington: Bible Society, 1999), 1-8.

[5] Abrams, "Germanic Christianities," 110.

could be built. Thus, the study of pre-Christian Germanic society will be the starting point for the assessment of the Christian and Germanic syncretic process.

The Germanic-speaking tribes presented a cultural background whose common features can be identified in two main areas: social sphere and religious practices. The commonest element found within Germanic societies related to the administrative structure.[6] Germanic society was based on a system in which the tribal chief was advised by his fellow warriors, who later formed the aristocracy (from *aristoi,* the best men).[7] The importance of this hierarchical pyramid in the Early Middle Ages was rooted in the relationship between politics and religion, which could have been spread by the conversion of the rulers, who would pass or force the belief upon their subjects.[8]

Secondly, pre-Christian pagan religiosity and society were deeply connected to nature. Temples and shrines were located in woods or near sources of water, thus symbolizing the power of natural forces. As in Greco-Roman religion, Germanic cults associated several divinities to natural elements or features connected to everyday life.[9] Another similar aspect was the concept of mutual assistance between the god and the worshippers, known as *do ut des,* which produced interesting features in the passage from paganism to Christianity. *Ex-voto* figurines and statuettes were representative of this process, in which the pre-Christian faithful asked for a favor in exchange for a sacrifice or a gift.[10]

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[6] R. Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (New York: H. Holt & Co, 1998), 90.

[7] G. Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West: 450-900* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 6-7.

[8] J. Bossy, *Christianity in the West: 1400-1700* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 153.

[9] M.Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 78.

[10] Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 361.

In order for this mutuality to be functional, a professional religious group (the druids) was needed. The druids' tasks not only related to the religious sphere but also to civic life. They were responsible for law courts and the education of the youth. Thus, the influence they wielded on a single tribe is often explicative of the resistance of paganism to Christanity, since the presence of the druids in the royal courts acted against the new religion.[11] Even after Christianity's triumph, the druidic component did not completely disappear, but developed in underground practices, such as magic, which blended in with the syncretic form of Germanic Christianity.[12] Indeed, prior to the encounter with Christianity, magical practices were used as an alternative form to seek supernatural favor; since the gods were not effective, magic was supposed to be functional because it provided a more visual means through which the desired outcome was to be achieved. In the contact with Christianity, though, negative connotations were bestowed unto magic. It was nevertheless still practiced and, as mentioned above, some of its features, such as visual display, were introduced into the Germanic Christian practices.

The introduction of Christianity met an array of difficulties due to cultural and social differentiation between Roman civilization and Germanic identity. In this sense, it would be useful to understand the reasons underpinning the spread of Christianity within the Roman Empire, comparing them with the conditions of Northern Europe. Four main factors will be discussed below: the road system, the uniform language, the common legal structure, and the oral culture.

The architectural artistry of the Romans is demonstrated nowadays in the preservation of the roads, used to link the peripheral regions to the centre of the Empire. Although they

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[11] C. H. Robinson, *The Conversion of Europe* (London: Longmans & Green, 1917), 56.

[12] Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 92.

originally were built for military use, these routes proved of the utmost importance for the dissemination of Christian thought, both within and outside the empire's borders. As one can infer from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's preaching took place in the main cities along Roman roads and culminated in Rome.[13] Christian preaching, furthermore, might have occurred even in those Germanic countries located within the Empire's boundaries before the fall of Rome. Roads, however, were not used only by missionaries but also by merchants and as mentioned above, by soldiers. It is possible to affirm, in fact, that Christian ideas did not spread solely through the work of Christian preachers but through the indirect intervention of Christian believers, albeit in a minor degree, as demonstrated by the economical contacts in Ireland that spread Christianity before the missionary work of Patrick.[14]

Moreover, the acceptance of Christianity could not have been possible within the Roman Empire without the assistance of a common linguistic knowledge that was strictly related to jurisprudence. Latin and law were so related to Christianity that both were adopted within the ecclesiastical administration and rites. The importance of Latin and Roman Law, then, was mainly connected to its wide use within the Roman Empire.[15] Although Greek was also an important idiom, Latin was the official language of the legal and administrative spheres.

In this setting, it is possible to understand the types of difficulties that missionaries had to tackle, since they did not find among the Germans the same administrative or cultural background as the Latin West. They found themselves among people with different dialects and with diverse tribal laws. Moreover, the geographical locations of those tribes did not facilitate the

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[13] *Acts of Apostles* (Washington: Bible Society, 1999), 28, 14-28.
[14] Thompson, "Christianity and the Northern Barbarians," 60.
[15] Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 38.

penetration of Christian thought. In fact, the rural nature of Germanic society meant that villages were scattered across the countryside, without good connections.[16] In this case, the work of Augustine in England might prove useful to explicate this concept. Although he is often referred to as the first official Christian preacher in England, his missionary zeal was not able to reach the entire country but was originally limited only to Kent and the neighboring regions. This can be explained by the socio-political structure of England, which was formed by different tribes with different customary law systems.[17] As mentioned above, there was no concept of a single monarchy among Germanic tribes, but each single ruler had authority over its tribe's norms, which were also dictated by tradition.

Lastly, the main difficulty the missionaries encountered in Christianizing the Germanic-speaking people was linked to the difference between Germanic oral tradition and Latin culture--in particular, philosophy and theology. It must have been rather difficult to explain high philosophical and theological concepts to people who had had no previous knowledge of those disciplines.[18] In order to be successful, a different approach was needed. The preachers comprehended that it was necessary for them to adapt the new features of the Christian religion upon the old pre-existing pagan cults.

The new methodologies adopted by the early missionaries are paramount to survey the extent to which Germanic Christianity retained orthodox features and pre-Christian beliefs, as shown in four main areas: the Christian reaction to pagan temples, the importance of relics, the

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[16] Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 36.

[17] Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 320

[18] Ronald Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims. Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1977), 23.

link between natural elements and Christian thought, and the utility of Germanic oral tradition as an implant for Christian beliefs.

The central place in which pagan cults took place was the temple, often substituted by a shrine in rural areas.[19] When Christianity came into contact with the Germanic-speaking tribes, missionaries adopted different manners towards these sacred spaces, as shown in the deeds of two important characters, Martin of Tours and Pope Gregory the Great. The attitude of Martin towards temples belonged to the earliest stage of Christianization, in which temples were perceived as dangerous places where pagan demons proliferated. Therefore, the main aim of the missionaries was to destroy all vestiges of the pagan past.[20] With Pope Gregory, by contrast, the reactions against temples were not as harsh as before. As one can infer from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Gregory understood the importance of keeping pagan temples, destroying only the symbols within, for they could have been used as a means through which Christianity was accepted. Gregory, in fact, wrote to Mellitus stating that "those temples [should] be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God."[21] In the mind of the pagans, then, the process of cleansing the temples was not disruptive but gradually allowed Christian practices to be built upon pagan customs.

As mentioned above, Germanic culture was characterized by a strong visual component. In this setting, the use of relics proved to be extremely important in the process of Christianization. The relevance of these relics, though, is only fully understood in relation to miracles. Bodily remains of saints were brought to the Germanic-speaking world to prove both

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[19] Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, 205.

[20] J. N. Hillgarth, *The Conversion of Western Europe: 350-750* (London: Prenctice-Hall International, 1969), 16.

[21] The Venerable Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of England*, trans. A.M. Sellar (London: George Bell & Sons, 1906), Chapter XXX.

that they were capable of performing supernatural deeds and that they were more powerful than the pagan items.[22] The case of Genoefa, for instance, related how Parisians demanded proof of miracles, after the death of the saint.[23] As in the temples, pagan visual culture, expressed through rites and magic, was adjusted to the new set of beliefs. Furthermore, the use of miracles and of relics proved to be useful to the missionaries, who were able to explain physical phenomena through the invocation of divine intercession.[24]

The ideological value of natural elements permeated all strata of Germanic society, creating a symbiosis between nature and religion. This concept was soon adopted by the early missionaries, who adapted it in a way that could be interpreted in a Christian manner. It is important to note, as previously stated, that there were many shrines, dedicated to local rustic divinities, scattered across the countryside.[25] Through the intervention of Christian preachers, these were replaced with shrines dedicated either to martyrs, saints, or, more popularly, to the Virgin Mary. The adoption of the latter can be related to the close affinity with the natural element of water, symbol of purity and regeneration, as demonstrated by the presence of shrines to Mary in proximity to water sources.[26] Even fire acquired a different meaning with this syncretic process. The cathartic function of fire was interpreted from a pagan perspective to a Christian one, in which it became representative of the Holy Spirit.[27] Through the adoption of old pagan symbols and means, the early missionaries were able to render those complex

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[22] Robinson, *The Conversion of Europe*, 458.

[23] Lisa Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genoefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.

[24] Ramsay MacMullen, "Superstition," in *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, ed. Ramsay MacMullen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 91.

[25] Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe,* 204.

[26] Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, 258.

[27] Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe*, 258.

Christian ideas more accessible to the Germanic-speaking people. This process is exemplified by the amulets used in Late Antiquity, which contain mixed features of pagan, Christian, and Jewish beliefs. In fact, the apotropaic function of the amulet is often accompanied by the image of Solomon, the Holy Knight or the invocation *Kyrie bothei the phorotousa.*[28]

Finally, within the conversion, importance should be given to the function of oral tradition in relation to monarchy. The lack of a written form of culture allowed orality to flourish. Nevertheless, oral culture took part in the Christianization of the Germanic-speaking populations by relating epic poems to the Christian origins of royal dynasties. The analysis of *Beowulf* would be representative of this particular phenomenon. Whereas, in the past, royalty claimed to descent from divinities, after Christianity was embraced, monarchs claimed to impersonate the *exemplum perfectum* of Christian faith and piety. Hence, in *Beowulf*, there were numerous passages taken from the *Patrologia Latina*, which connected religion to Monarchy.[29] Even in Gregory of Tours' *De Gloria Martyrum* there was a parallel between Frankish Queens and Saints; Queen Radegund, in fact, was portrayed in a similar way to Saint Helena, Constantine's mother.[30] This connection had a twofold outcome. On one side, it was used as a way to spread the Christian religion from the higher to the lower classes.[31] On the other side, it had a political aspect. In fact, Christian monarchs might have used Christianity as a means to achieve unity. Through Christian ideology, the *Populus Christianus* was the highest symbol of

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[28] "Christ, protect the bearer"
Mary Margaret Fulghum, "Coins used as Amulets in Late Antiquity," in *Between Magic and Religion*, eds. Sulochana R. Asirvatham, Corinne Ondine Pache & John Watrous (New York & Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 147.

[29] E. Irwing, "The Nature of Christianity in Beowulf," in *Anglo-Saxon England*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 7.

[30] Gregory of Tours, *De Gloria Martyrum*, trans. Raymond Van Dam (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1988), 22.

[31] See footnote 8.

unity, which expressed itself through a common set of ideals and beliefs.[32] Although already Christian, the Carolingian Era offers a vivid example of this. Charlemagne strived to conquer new territories in which Christianity was affirmed as the true religion. As Einhard stated, Charlemagne's task was to "restore the Church."[33] Moreover, through scholarship, he created an official academic centre, which focused on the study of pagan literature interpreted in a Christian light.

The Christianization of the Germanic-speaking peoples poses fascinating issues among which the syncretic process offers varied interpretations. Firstly, it must be understood that it took place across different locations and times. Furthermore, as an ethnic group, the Germanic-speaking peoples shared common cultural and customary features. The difficulties met by the first missionaries arose from the cultural differences between the Latin West and the Germanic Northern Europe. In order to be successful, preachers were compelled to create new methods, which blended together pagan features with Christian teachings. Through the analysis of temples, relics and natural elements, this syncretic process has been explained from a cultural perspective. Moreover, political features have been identified in relation to the affirmation of a new *populus Christianus,* highlighting how the actions of the missionaries not only had the purpose of spreading belief but also of ensuring political stability and cultural proliferation in relation to religion.

About the author

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[32] G.S.M. Walker, *The Growing Storm: Sketches of Church History from A.D. 600 to A.D. 1350* (London: Paternoster Press, 1961), 36.

[33] Einhard, *Vita Caroli Magni Imperatoris*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Folio Society, 1970), III.

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