

BACHELOR THESIS ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

THE WARRIOR CHRIST AND HIS GALLOWS TREE

The Dream of the Rood as an Example of Religious Syncretism



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Abstract

The Dream of the Rood is an Old English poem that contains both pagan and Christian elements. This mix has given rise to much debate on the nature of the pagan-Christian relationship in the *Dream's* religiosity. The argument here is that Anglo-Saxon Christianity should be understood as a syncretic religion: a unique blend of different cultural and religious traditions that have merged into a seamless whole. Syncretism and inculturation are often used as blanket terms for interreligious phenomena, but Baer's framework describes syncretism as a specific stage in the conversion process. Using syncretism as a framework, we see that the pagan elements in the *Dream* are projected onto Christian concepts and even used to strengthen Christian narratives. This is Christianity as experienced through a pagan heritage. There is no exhaustive theoretical framework of syncretism, but the *Dream's* religiosity may serve as a case study to expand existing theories.

Keywords: syncretism, *The Dream of the Rood*, Old English, poetry, Anglo-Saxon, Christianity, paganism, inculturation, religion

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Introduction

The Dream of the Rood is a well-known and well-loved Old English poem detailing the poet's dream of the Cross of Christian mythology. The poem employs the poetic device of prosopopeia - the Cross speaks directly to the speaker and to the reader, describing the Crucifixion from its own perspective. The only complete version of the poem in existence is in *The Vercelli Book*, commonly dated shortly before 1000 C.E.¹ However, the Northumbrian stone monument known as the Ruthwell Cross, dated around 730-60 C.E.,² contains a far shorter poem in runic script which is closely related to *The Dream of the Rood*. Earlier versions of the poem may thus be far older than *Vercelli Book* version that remains. The poem is strongly eschatological and evangelical - aside from the Crucifixion narrative, it both describes matters of afterlife and urges the reader to follow the Christian faith, as the poet does.³

Yet at the same time, the poem has a paradoxical nature. The descriptions of Christ, the Cross, and countless details in the poem seem to imply a set of values and a worldview that would not commonly be recognized as Christian. Christ is emphasized as a strong and resolute warrior, whereas the Cross is continually referred to as a tree or a gallows. These details have drawn attention over the years and have been interpreted as non-Christian elements, as pagan religious beliefs and cultural values. This is the paradox of *The Dream of the Rood* - how can one reconcile the fact that such a strongly evangelical Christian poem seemingly presents the Christian faith with a decidedly pagan sensibility? What is the relationship between the Christian and the pagan in *The Dream of the Rood*, and how should this question be approached?

¹ Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood. Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition*. (London: The British Library, 2005), 1.

² *Ibid.*, 7.

³ Elaine Treharne, *Old and Middle English. An Anthology*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Limited, 2000), 180.

This thesis will approach this question by way of religious syncretism - a term referring to the merging and combining of religions. Although syncretism is a contested and politicized subject, I will build on the theory offered by Marc David Baer in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*⁴ in order to systematically approach the nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity and to examine and interpret the various pagan-Christian connections in *The Dream of the Rood*. These include Christ's similarities to the pagan god Woden, his striking similarities to the ideal Germanic warrior, the similarities of the Cross to a potential Anglo-Saxon world-tree, and its characterization as a loyal warrior of its warlord Christ.

If we approach this text as a product of a syncretic religion, we can see that the religiosity of this poem is one that combines elements from paganism and elements of Christianity in a way that integrates and merges them into one seamless whole - a synthetic, hybrid religion. The pagan elements are not in conflict with the Christian elements; they are used to better connect with its Anglo-Saxon audience. Because of this, the religiosity of this poem is best described as a syncretic faith; Christianity as understood through a pagan tradition's imagery, symbols, and values.

⁴ Marc David Baer, "History and Religious Conversion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

1. Searching for Anglo-Saxon Paganism

1.1 Vanished Paganism

Whenever Anglo-Saxon paganism is discussed, the first and most difficult problem is that the pagans themselves have not left written sources - only archaeological evidence remains, and although the archaeological record speaks volumes on the material culture of everyday life, it cannot tell much of the religious life. Funerary practices can be discovered through archaeology, but, although these discoveries can provide valuable information on funerary rites themselves, the illumination they can offer on the religious motivations behind these rites is limited. Paganism has left few traces. There are, however, written sources by Christian (near-)contemporaries of pagans or even former pagans themselves, from which, it is argued, we can learn about Anglo-Saxon paganism. *The Dream of the Rood* is one of these sources. It is a Christian work - written by a Christian, most likely a clerical or monastic poet⁵ and concerns a profoundly Christian theme - the Crucifixion - yet it has still attracted attention for its perceived pagan influences. Christian sources like this one are themselves a source of constant debate, which is characterized by two extremes. On the one extreme, it is argued that we can and should extract information on Anglo-Saxon paganism from Christian texts and should learn to accept that at times conclusions will have little support. On the other extreme, it is argued that these Christian texts are fully Christian and will never reveal any other influences because they simply are not there. Looking for those influences, according to this extreme, is an exercise in fabrication, not scholarship.

⁵ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 2.

1.2 Hidden Paganism

The first extreme - the idea that we can discern the shape of paganism in Christian texts - seems reasonable. After all, many of these Christian texts reference paganism covertly if not overtly. Sources like letters or histories explicitly mention pagans and pagan beliefs. However, these could be interpreted as having a polemic goal. They were written by Christians, often missionaries, who considered the indigenous pagan beliefs as false or even influenced by the devil. As such, they are not objective and not entirely trustworthy. Covert references, it is argued, can still be found in literature like poems and stories, simply because Anglo-Saxon Christianity was situated in an era, area, culture, and literary tradition that were until recently utterly pagan. Reading between the lines, the researcher analyses and interprets these literary texts in search of the hidden pagan religious and cultural heritage.

Looking for paganism between the lines is not without its drawbacks. Firstly, it erases the fundamentally Christian nature of these texts. It marginalizes the Christian elements in order to address the marginalization of possible pagan elements. The writers of these texts were Christian, and as such it seems counterintuitive and perhaps insulting or condescending to search for another religion in these texts. Secondly, this approach carries with it the risk of disproportionate subjectivity and confirmation bias. A passage or word which may have nothing to do with paganism is easily misconstrued as a covert reference. Through this approach, confirmation bias can make paganism appear where it may not have left its influence at all. Yet this approach also has its benefits. Covert paganism as unearthed from Christian literature may be more accurate than any overt references, since these covert references and traces do not seem as likely to carry a polemic purpose. These benefits should be taken into account despite the risk of confirmation bias.

An example of this side of the debate would be Richard North's suggestion that the Venerable Bede plagiarized the divine poetic inspiration that was associated with the god Woden for his account of how the illiterate Cædmon came

to compose *Cædmon's Hymn*.⁶ This seems to place the spectacle of a hypothesis above its credibility. There is no literary evidence for this hypothesis; merely the shared theme of divine inspiration - which is a recurrent theme in almost all religions, not some defining feature of Anglo-Saxon paganism. An equally likely explanation would be the Holy Spirit rather than Woden, which was already in Christian thought the cause of Biblical cases of divinely inspired speech and performance through its influence. It is not impossible that for the recent Anglo-Saxon convert, the inspiration of Woden and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit would seem similar. However, suggesting that Bede references Woden both on purpose and in secret is, while titillating, entirely baseless.

1.3 Lost Paganism

The second extreme holds the opposing view: any Christian text is inherently fully Christian, and any and every attempt to try and reveal a pagan heritage in these texts is futile. This view is best exemplified by E.G. Stanley, who scathingly accuses many authors of the above mentioned confirmation bias and fabrication. Concerning articles by authors Stephens and Wardale on *The Dream of the Rood*, in which they draw parallels between Christ and the pagan god Baldr, he writes: "That to Stephens and Miss Wardale it seemed possible for *The Dream of the Rood* to contain such a clear reminiscence of paganism is, of course, the result of their refusal to read a profoundly Christian literature as the Christian writings of a Christian people."⁷ According to Stanley, the reason his opponents exert themselves in their attempts to track down pagan elements in Christian texts is due to a personal bias and preference for paganism. To them, anything pagan is more pure, more authentic, and simply better than the more obvious Christianity of a poem. However, this point of view is also not without limitations. The writer of a text may call himself Christian and write about Christian themes, but the traces of an earlier religious ideology (be they symbols, myth, morality, cultural values)

⁶ Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 80-1.

⁷ E. G. Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Limited, 1975), 85.

cannot be purged from a person - not to mention a people - overnight, and the Anglo-Saxons were until recently completely pagan. Despite Stanley's assertions, it is not unlikely that Christian texts contain pagan references. Christianity had not completely supplanted the earlier values and beliefs.

These are the two extremes in the debate, neither of them without their merits, both proposing flawed arguments. In between lies a far more sensible middle path. Most recent authors already tread the middle path by not overtly taking a stance, instead opening with a disclaimer describing the difficulties of studying Anglo-Saxon religion and the Anglo-Saxon conversion period. However, these disclaimers are the result of a self-generated need. The loaded question that makes this debate difficult, is that at its heart it is about how "Christian" Anglo-Saxon Christians were. If we acknowledge that *The Dream of the Rood* and other Christian texts imply the survival of certain pagan concepts or values, are we to assume that these Christians, who wrote such enduring works of art as *The Dream of the Rood*, were not fully committed to their faith, or somehow practicing their faith incorrectly? This is an uncomfortable question that can slip into (unintended) value judgement, which most authors circumvent, dismiss, or ignore in order to address the specifics of the period's culture and religion. But there is value in asking, framing, and answering this question. If we approach the question in the right way, it can be answered without value judgement, and without painting the Anglo-Saxon Christians as simply "bad Christians" who were too ignorant to practice their faith correctly.

2. The Shape of Anglo-Saxon Christianity

The nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity and its relationship with the earlier paganism can be safely said to be hotly debated. Textual evidence suggests that early Anglo-Saxon Christianity is best regarded as a product of religious intermingling or interaction. Most authors already acknowledge what could be called the interreligious nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity but never really fully commit to the logical consequences or apply it into their theoretical framework. They acknowledge this difficulty and address it by using a blanket term such as inculturation, acculturation, syncretism, adaptation, or contextualization, and move on to discuss paganism or Christianity, never fully defining their terms or addressing the implications of such interreligious phenomena. As a result, describing the interreligious intermingling that litters the Anglo-Saxon conversion period is a confusing and messy process. Intermingling is treated as something to be acknowledged in order to make a point, but hardly ever is the phenomenon itself discussed. There is value, however, in considering the implications in our approach to Anglo-Saxon Christian texts. But since there are so many ways to refer to this interreligious phenomenon, we are in need of a framework with which to untangle the paradoxical relationship between Christian doctrine and pagan concepts and values in *The Dream of the Rood*.

2.1 Syncretism: An Introduction

Syncretism describes a synthesis between different religious forms.⁸ It often entails a seemingly contradictory combining and merging of elements such as worldviews, symbols, moralities, and deities. It is a part of the conversion process,

⁸ Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*. (New York: Routledge, 1994), ii.

in which the new religion and the old are no longer separate.⁹ Although most studies on conversion focus on the individual rather than the group, it is worthwhile to note that, while historically conversion was understood as a sudden change, recently conversion is seen more and more as a gradually unfolding progress.¹⁰ Baer writes “While the conversion may be set in motion by a single event (such as baptism or circumcision) that lasts but a single moment, the full process of converting may take years.”¹¹ The conversion process can be subdivided into a number of processes, summarized below.

Process	Description	Example
acculturation	Accommodating a conquering culture.	Islamization of North Africa or Christianization under Rome. The conquered accept the dress, cuisine, language, art, and religion of the conquerors.
adhesion	Adopting a new religion besides the old one, “one foot on each side”.	When the Andeans were converted to Catholicism, they wanted to baptize their deceased, mummified ancestors. Ancestor veneration and Catholicism were not mutually exclusive for them.
syncretism	Combining and mixing of new and old religion.	In Bengal, Islamic superhuman agents - Allah, Muhammad, minor spirits - were accepted alongside Krishna, Shiva, and natural deities and eventually became identified as them. They actually merged - no difference existed between the two pantheons.
transformation	End of syncretism and denouncing of old religion.	After five centuries of syncretistic/adhesive Islam, Indonesia was fully converted by a revival movement.

⁹ Baer, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 26-33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

(After Baer.¹²)

A conversion - be it of a person or of a group - is not a clean break, but a long and protracted process in which the religious beliefs and rites of the populace go through many slow stages. It can take centuries before a converted populace's religion is identical to that of the converter, and during that process we speak of adherence and syncretism. These two terms are often used interchangeably even though they describe different concepts. Not only adherence and syncretism, but acculturation and transformation too are phenomena that are not clearly separated and may have considerable overlap with each other. Yet Baer's system provides a much-needed and useful theoretical framework with which to approach the "interreligious" nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Building on Baer's classifications, we can classify and unravel the peculiarities of Anglo-Saxon Christianity in general and the religiosity of *The Dream of the Rood* in particular.

In theological circles, syncretism is a pejorative term. The term can seem to imply inauthenticity, deviation, and contamination.¹³ The phenomenon is known to religious institutes and is, up to a point, even encouraged by Christians, although it is never referred to as syncretism. This "light" syncretism is considered a necessary and beneficial part of missionary activity, although Christians have preferred the use of terms like contextualization, adaptation, accommodation, or indigenization.¹⁴ All these terms refer to the entrenching of the Christian faith in a culture, usually by means of relating to the existing symbolic repertoire. Old symbols and words are used to refer to new ideas, Christian concepts are translated into the terminology of the native religion. An example is how Jesuit missionaries allowed converted Chinese to use the Confucian term for the Supreme Being, *Shàngdì*, for the Christian God; or how certain Voodoo spirits came to be identified as being the same entities as certain Catholic saints - a process known as syncretisation.

The most common term used today by missionaries is inculturation. Inculturation is understood as the healthy and necessary translation of Christianity

¹² Ibid., 26-33.

¹³ Stewart and Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 1.

¹⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books), 448.

to another culture's context. Inculturation is not only necessary; it is unavoidable, as "the Christian faith never exists except as 'translated' into a culture."¹⁵

Syncretism, on the other hand, is a term missionaries use when the synthesis goes too far and, according to them, the true message of Christianity is distorted or lost.¹⁶ This difference is relevant only from a theological or missiological point of view. If we do not operate from a theological or missiological approach, we can see that the difference between inculturation and syncretism is one of degree, not category. Inculturation is simply syncretism in the limits of what is acceptable to missionaries. Even Bosch, after a call for inculturation and what he calls interculturalism - the exchange between Western and Third-World theologies - states that "...local incarnations of the faith should not be *too* local."¹⁷

This thesis will use the word syncretism instead of inculturation (and adaptation, accommodation, and indigenization), because it is not written from a missiological or theological approach. Inculturation here refers to specific missionary activity, not to the phenomenon of religious combining or merging in general - that will be called syncretism. The use of the word syncretism is in the anthropological sense. No value judgement is implied.

If we adopt this framework and definition of syncretism, the answer to the question "How 'Christian' were Anglo-Saxon Christians?" has to be "Fully, although they related to their new faith in different and sometimes unorthodox ways incorporated from their old religion and old symbolic repertoire." We can thus acknowledge these texts as fully Christian while also acknowledging any pagan influences. They are no longer mutually exclusive.

¹⁵ Ibid., 447

¹⁶ Stewart and Shaw, *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, 11.

¹⁷ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 448.

2.2 Anglo-Saxon Christianity as a Syncretic Religion

Stanley may have described *The Dream of the Rood* as “a profoundly Christian literature [...] the Christian writings of a Christian people”,¹⁸ but there is much evidence that validates a syncretic/adhesive approach to the religiosity of Anglo-Saxon Christianity.

Firstly, the Christianity that inspired *The Dream of the Rood* was relatively new to the British Isles. The earliest version of the poem appears on the Ruthwell Cross, which dates from the early 8th century.¹⁹ This means that the poem was written anywhere from 600 to 300 years later than the arrival of Celtic Christianity, but only 100 to 200 years after the arrival of the Gregorian Mission. Conversion is a gradual process which may take a long time.²⁰ During this process, a religion may go through a protracted - in some cases permanent - state of syncretism. Early Celtic Christianity depended on a clearly demarcated separation between the religious and the secular, and its ideals were extreme self-denial and the solitary life of the hermit.²¹ This lack of focus on societal engagement could conceivably contribute to a vastly prolonged state of Christian-pagan syncretism in secular society, outside the monastery walls. Conversely, the Roman influence which came to dominate Anglo-Saxon Christianity was focused on integration of the religious and secular.²² These Roman missionaries landed in Kent only in 597 C.E., long after the first tiny pre-Catholic communities were already established in the second century, when Rome still counted Britannia among its provinces.²³ Although it is likely that the Irish Celtic Christianity descended from these Roman communities, these had all but disappeared in Britain.²⁴ As such, the date of the arrival of the Roman mission should be seen as the new start of Christianity in Britain.

¹⁸ Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, 85.

¹⁹ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 7.

²⁰ Baer, *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 25.

²¹ Paul Cavill, *Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Exploring the Earliest Roots of Christian Spirituality in England*. (London: Fount, 1999), 79.

²² Ibid.

²³ Lutz E. von Padberg, *Christianisierung im Mittelalter*. (Stuttgart: Konrad Theiss Verlag, 2006), 30-33.

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

Secondly, in the remarkable letter recounted by the Venerable Bede, Pope Gregory the Great makes an unmistakable call for inculturation. His sixth century strategy is remarkably similar to the modern concept of inculturation as described by Bosch.²⁵ Gregory writes

...if those [pagan] temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God [...] And because [pagans] are used to slaughter many oxen in sacrifice to devils [...] they should [...] celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting, and no more offer animals to the Devil, but kill cattle and glorify God in their feast, [...] to the end that, whilst some outward gratifications are retained, they may the more easily consent to the inward joys. For there is no doubt that it is impossible to cut off every thing at once from their rude natures; because he who endeavours to ascend to the highest place rises by degrees or steps, and not by leaps.²⁶

This quotation shows not only the clearest possible example of deliberate inculturation, but also Gregory's intelligence. Especially by referring to "degrees or steps", he clearly demonstrates an understanding of conversion as a gradual process. Gregory had had dealings with pagans before in Italy and had never shown much clemency. Concerning Gregory's policies in Italy, Dunn writes "Gregory did not even recognize imagistic pagan practices and religion as religion and his only strategy for dealing with them, when the pagans concerned were of minimal political importance or where Christians resorted to traditional practices, was coercion."²⁷ Dunn speculates that it may be because the conversion of England was a truly daunting task. It may be that Gregory had learned from the Italian pagans that overnight conversion was an impractical ideal. Whatever the case, this text shows that Gregory's views had radically changed - religious intermingling is not

²⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 447-457.

²⁶ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. A.M. Sellar (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2011), 1.30.

²⁷ Marilyn Dunn, *The Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons c.597-c.700. Discourses of Life, Death and Afterlife*. (London: Continuum, 2009), 46.

only to be allowed, but indeed employed as a tool of conversion. This policy of inculturation, of “meeting half-way”, helps conversion but also leads to the development of syncretic religions.

A third indicator of Anglo-Saxon Christianity as a syncretic religion is the phenomenon of euhemerization. Very close to the Ruthwell Cross in both temporal and geographical terms we find the dynastic family trees, one of which is recounted in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. These genealogies describe the ancestors of the royal dynasties, and are remarkable in that they recede into distant history, even including many biblical figures such as Noah and Adam - who is curiously called the son of God - but most striking is that this chain of fathers and sons which demonstrably ends in Christian cosmology also contains the pagan legendary figures Hengest and Horsa, as well as the pagan god Woden.²⁸ One might argue this is an example of adhesion rather than syncretism - the two gods appear next to each other - but at the same time, Woden has been downgraded to a man. He has been euhemerised to fit into a Christian worldview, which suggests syncretism rather than adhesion - as stated, these classifications may overlap. Woden's existence is not retroactively deleted, but his divinity is. Once they were considered gods by mistake, but they were actually legendary ancestors. Johnson argues that euhemerization was an important part of Christian strategies of “dealing with” pagan gods.²⁹ These strategies were often combined with demonization in the literal sense: the argument that the pagan deities were actually demons.³⁰ However, these genealogies do not display any demonization at all - if anything, this euhemerization is a show of respect. It seems that after Christianization, kingship was still conditional on being a descendant of Woden. Descending from a demon could never function as a legitimization. Although some polemicists may have called the pagan gods devils and demons, the writers of these genealogies evidently did not share their opinion. And since the genealogies functioned as legitimizations of power, neither did the subjects of these kings. Their incorporation of Woden,

²⁸ “The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,” annal 855.

²⁹ David F. Johnson. “Euhemerisation versus Demonisation. The Pagan Gods and Ælfric's *De Falsis Diis*.” In *Pagans and Christians*, edited by T. Hofstra, L.A.J.R. Houwen and A.A. MacDonald. (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1992), 35.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

Hengest, and Horsa shows that they considered these figures important and positive, their Christianity notwithstanding. It is a clear example of a pagan element transformed and incorporated into the new faith, and an argument for the classification of Anglo-Saxon Christianity as a syncretic religion.

Finally, the argument for Anglo-Saxon Christian syncretism is that Christianity is and has always been at its heart a syncretic religion. Early Christianity incorporated many Greco-Roman elements in the early years of its development from a Jewish sect into a religion popular throughout the Classical world. Christianity and syncretism has always been a controversial and politicized subject, and a full discussion of this subject would be far beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that Christianity is no stranger to incorporating elements from other religious traditions through cultural osmosis. One example of this is the Greek term κύριος - *kurios*, “lord” - as a term of address for a deity which became canonical part of liturgy. In a letter dating from the second century the Roman soldier Apion writes his father and mentions how the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis saved him from danger at sea after Apion prayed to him.³¹ He refers to this god as “Lord Serapis”- “κυρίῳ Σεράπιδι”³² - as was the custom of the time.³³ The use of the word *kurios* in Christian liturgy is thus an example of non-Christian influences on early Christianity. The only difference between the syncretism of early Christianity and the syncretism of Anglo-Saxon Christianity is that Catholic doctrine had already solidified before the birth of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. As a result, the Germanic pagan elements fall outside of what is doctrinally allowed and have over the ages been eradicated. But the idea that Christianity is Christianity and has never been influenced is incorrect and misleading, and leads us to believe that syncretic Christianity is an oxymoron, whereas in fact syncretism is the rule. Charles Stewart writes that “virtually every culture or religion is synthetic”,³⁴ and that it is “the rule

³¹ Hans-Josef Klauck. *Ancient Letters and the New Testament. A Guide to Context and Exegesis*. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 9-14.

³² Ibid., 9.

³³ Ibid., 11.

³⁴ Charles Stewart. “Syncretism as a dimension of nationalist discourse in modern Greece,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, eds. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (New York: Routledge, 1994), 127.

not the exception”,³⁵ and that “it has probably been this way for a very long time”.³⁶ Anglo-Saxon Christianity is no exception.

These arguments support the notion that pinpointing, identifying, and interpreting pagan elements in early Anglo-Saxon Christian texts is fully justified, not a misguided attempt to construe these texts as something they are not. The reason that these attempts are justified and not an exercise in fabrication or marginalization of the overwhelmingly Christian nature of these texts is because Anglo-Saxon Christianity was a syncretic religion. It was a Christianity as practiced by a culture only recently Christian, who simply lifted over and adapted many of their beliefs into their new cosmology, or related to new concepts using their old symbolic repertoire. Acknowledging the syncretic nature of this religion allows us to examine these elements and explore the diverse nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. It is through this lens that I will examine *The Dream of the Rood*.

2.3 Remaining Difficulties

At the beginning of this chapter, I wrote that the most difficult problem when discussing the interplay between Anglo-Saxon paganism and Christianity is the dearth of knowledge concerning Anglo-Saxon paganism. Although we can now acknowledge that Anglo-Saxon Christianity is the combined product of pagan as well as Christian elements by way of the syncretic synthesis inherent to the conversion process, we are still left with some issues that need to be addressed before the indicators of syncretism in *The Dream of the Rood* can be discussed. There have been many attempts to reconstruct paganism, and although these attempts root themselves in the archaeological and textual records of the time, speculation is required to move beyond mere platitudes. This does not mean that these reconstructions are baseless, but neither are they conclusive.

An example of the strategies employed in reconstructing paganism is the use of later Scandinavian developments to fill in the gaps of Anglo-Saxon paganism. We may, for example, use the image of the Norse god Óðinn (Odin) as portrayed in

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

the Icelandic sagas to inform our incomplete picture of Óðinn's Anglo-Saxon cognate Woden, as authors like North³⁷ and Branston³⁸ do. On the one hand, this is justified because in remaining information, Woden and Óðinn share remarkable similarities, and are commonly accepted to be the "same" god. But on the other hand, the far more extensive sources on Óðinn are not only written down by Christians rather than pagans, they are geographically and temporally quite far removed from Woden. The 10th century portrayals of Óðinn may be influenced by developments that never reached the Woden of before 597 C.E. As a result, we can never be sure if, in reconstructing Woden using Óðinn's record, we are justified, or painting a decidedly Anglo-Saxon god with far too Scandinavian a brush. The insights gained this way could either be incorrect, or of considerable value.

Another difficulty that remains is the distinction between culture and religion when it comes to Anglo-Saxon paganism. Are the strong warrior values found in Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic societies a product of religion, or a product of culture? This is a distinction that is almost automatically made, but is meaningless in the context of Anglo-Saxon paganism. Renowned scholar of religion Max Weber (1864-1920) suggested a typology of religions which distinguishes between 'world rejecting' and 'world accepting' religions.³⁹ The former "...exist in a state of tension with the political, economic, familial, sexual, aesthetic, scientific and intellectual aspects of society"⁴⁰ whereas the latter "...are concerned with the here and now - matters of health, prosperity and security in this world, the welfare of the family, avoidance of drought or flood, and the safe gathering-in of the harvest".⁴¹ Another typology of religions, by Gustav Mensching, contrasts 'folk religions' with 'world religions', of which the latter concentrates on survival and prosperity in this world, and where ethics are determined by the

³⁷ North, *Heathen Gods*, 78-110.

³⁸ Brian Branston, *The Lost Gods of England*. (London: Book Club Associates, 1974), 93-108.

³⁹ Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 323-359.

⁴⁰ Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

welfare of the sib, tribe, or people.⁴² Anglo-Saxon paganism appears to have been a world accepting folk religion that did not distinguish between the religious and the societal, and as such, distinctions of culture and religion, while vital in the western world in the modern era, are meaningless when referring to it.

Finally, Anglo-Saxon paganism was a religion of spontaneity and ritual, rather than one of repetition and doctrine. Whitehouse distinguishes between two modes of religiosity. The first is the 'doctrinal' mode, which is characterized by orthodoxy, centralization, and the repetition of ritual and narrative, which are stored in the semantic memory.⁴³ The second is the 'imagistic' mode, which is spontaneous. Ritual happens infrequently, is invariably intense, and characterized by high emotional arousal which is stored in the episodic 'flashbulb' memory.⁴⁴ As such, imagistic religion leads to intense personal experience and group cohesion, but also to a lack of orthodoxy, leadership, and ability to spread widely, as the religion is not often or easily put into words. Furthermore, imagistic religion is incredibly varied, as local communities are not under any sort of orthodoxy check - unlike communities of doctrinal religions. As such, the reconstruction of paganism through the various methods discussed above - be it archaeology, philology, textual analysis, or comparative religion - can only offer a glimpse of a small and changeable part of paganism, i.e. the narratives and the beliefs. We can never observe the ritual experience of Anglo-Saxon pagans, even though that might have been the core of their religious expression.

When examining *The Dream of the Rood* for pagan-Christian syncretism, all these difficulties should be kept in mind. The conclusions that can be drawn are tentative and speculative, never conclusive. This is a problem inherent to the subject - it cannot be avoided. Yet in order to be able to begin answering our question - what is the relationship between the Christian and the pagan in *The Dream of the Rood*? - we must allow ourselves to postulate. The framework of Anglo-Saxon Christianity as a syncretic religion allows us to do this, and although it may,

⁴² Gustav Mensching, *Volksreligion und Weltreligion* (Leipzig: J.C. Hindrichs Verlag, 1939), cited in Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 2.

⁴³ Harvey Whitehouse, "Modes of Religiosity: Towards a Cognitive Explanation of the Sociopolitical Dimensions of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 14 (2002): 296-304.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 304-307.

due to all difficulties mentioned above, be impossible to draw firm conclusions, it may be possible to get closer to the truth.

3. Exploring Syncretism in *The Dream of the Rood*

The Dream of the Rood does not contain the most spectacular religious intermingling. There are far more salient examples of Christian and pagan intermingling - such as the Franks Casket, which shows pagan deities such as Weyland alongside Biblical characters. The Franks Casket is often called syncretistic. Yet taking into account Baer's classification it is clearly an example of adhesion - Weyland the smith and the adoration of the magi literally appear side to side. Syncretism, as I have defined it, is best found in *The Dream of the Rood*. It contains pagan sensibilities alongside the evangelical message and ostensibly, orthodox worldview. Several articles of faith are explicitly mentioned, including the Crucifixion, the Day of Judgement, angels, the Second Coming, saints, and heaven. There can be no doubt about this poem's religiosity. And yet, the poem deviates heavily from the established narrative, and the depictions of Christ and especially the Cross are unorthodox at least. Syncretism allows us to look closer at the motivations and effects of this juxtaposition between paganism and Christian orthodoxy - especially in the portrayals of the Cross and Christ.

3.1 The Cross as a (World) Tree

The depiction of the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood* is unique in a number of ways. Although the Cross is the symbol *par excellence* of Christianity today, at the probable time of the composition of *The Dream of the Rood*, veneration of the Cross was a recent development. The earliest liturgical text from Rome which venerates the Cross dates from the seventh century.⁴⁵ It stands to reason that the precise nature and portrayal of the Cross was not yet entirely decided upon, and we can see this lacuna in doctrinal consent in *The Dream of the Rood*, and the many aspects this

⁴⁵ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 190.

Cross has. It is a unique, vivid, and emotionally engaging reinterpretation of the Cross. However, some aspects about it are so far outside of accepted Christian doctrine that they deserve more scrutiny.

The most salient of these details concerning the Cross is how much emphasis is placed on its status as a tree. The first time the Cross is mentioned, the poet calls it a “syllicre treow”,⁴⁶ a “beama beorhtost”,⁴⁷ the “sigebeam”,⁴⁸ a “wuldres treow”.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the felling of the tree that would become the Cross is described in detail, how it was taken from the woods, separated from “stefne minum”.⁵⁰ The larger part of the poem continually refers to the Cross as a tree. Raw even points out that until the line “Rod wæs ic aræred”⁵¹ we have no way of knowing this poem is about the Cross at all.⁵² At face value, it is a poem concerned with a tree that was once used in the Crucifixion, but is and remains fundamentally a tree. This is remarkable from the context of syncretism, as there are references to tree- or pillar-worship throughout eighth century Germanic paganism.⁵³ In England specifically, an eleventh-century *Penitential* specifically forbids the giving of alms to wells, stones, and trees⁵⁴ - a sin apparently still in need of forgiving almost five hundred years since the arrival of the Roman mission. A similar version of Halitgar’s *Penitential* describes non-Christians making offerings to stones, trees, and wells, failing to see that such objects are dumb and dead, and cannot heal or help them.⁵⁵ This assertion implies that pagans did believe stones, trees, or wells to be capable of healing. Compare this to the *Dream*’s Cross, which claims “...ic hælæn mæg æghwylcne anra, þara þe him bið egesa to me.”⁵⁶ Not only does this fall in line with the descriptions of pagan belief on trees, it also falls well outside of doctrinally

⁴⁶ “Wondrous tree,” *The Dream of the Rood*, line 4.

⁴⁷ “Brightest tree,” *ibid.*, line 6.

⁴⁸ “Victory-tree,” *ibid.*, line 13.

⁴⁹ “Tree of glory,” *ibid.*, line 14.

⁵⁰ “My trunk,” *ibid.*, line 30.

⁵¹ “A Cross I was raised up,” *ibid.*, line 44.

⁵² Barbara C. Raw, “The Dream of the Rood and its Connections with Early Christian Art,” *Medium Ævum* 39 no. 3 (1970): 240.

⁵³ North, *Heathen Gods*, 275.

⁵⁴ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 482, s. XImed; Worcester, fol 9a.

⁵⁵ *Die altenglische Version des Halitgar’schen Bussbuches*, ed. J. Raith (Darmstadt, 1964) cited in North, *Heathen Gods*, 275.

⁵⁶ “I can heal anyone if he is in fear of me,” *Dream*, line 85-6.

accepted Christianity. However, the author was also Anglo-Saxon, and this poem was written before the Benedictine Reform, which (re-)introduced a stricter adherence to the Rule of Saint Benedict and a stronger emphasis on doctrine. To the author, there may not have been anything contradictory to Christianity in this characterization of the Cross. Similar veneration of supernatural agents besides God can be seen in for example the cult of Mary. One might argue that the Cross takes up a similar role in the *Dream*. The poem even draws a parallel between Mary and the Cross, saying that the Cross is elevated among trees as Mary is among women.⁵⁷

It is also worth noting that *The Dream of the Rood* avoids the contemporary convention of the Cross being the Tree of Life from Biblical Paradise. One might speculate that this is because the Cross is meant to represent a different, pagan tree, although Ó Carragáin notes that it supports the activist and evangelical nature of the poem - the Cross was an ordinary tree in a forest, an everyman protagonist.⁵⁸ Yet a Cross which is constantly called a tree and is capable of healing fits right into the early conversion period of the Anglo-Saxons. To its audience, it may well have been the Cross on which Christ suffered *as well* as a pagan healing tree.

Furthermore, the Cross has a cosmic quality to it. The Cross towers under the heavens - “hlifige under heofenum”⁵⁹ - and it is so huge that it is witnessed by both holy spirits, men on the earth, and the entirety of creation,⁶⁰ and the jewels on the Crossbeams shine from the corners of the earth.⁶¹ It is of such an enormous scale that it “quarter[s] the universe.”⁶² This brings to mind the concept of the world-tree. Scandinavian myth contains the famous world-tree Yggdrasil, an enormous ash that connects the nine worlds - the centre of Scandinavian cosmology. If later Scandinavian paganism had a world-tree, it stands to reason that its earlier cognate, Anglo-Saxon paganism, may also have had one. There is no direct evidence for this, but many scholars speculate on the existence of such a tree.

⁵⁷ *Dream*, line 90-4.

⁵⁸ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 2-3.

⁵⁹ “I tower under the heavens,” *Dream*, line 85.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, line 9-10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, line 7-8. The translation of this ambiguous line is contested.

⁶² Michael Swanton, introduction to *The Dream of the Rood*, ed. Michael Swanton (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1987), 64.

Bede mentions a place called *Hefenfelth* - 'Heavenfield' - in relation to King Oswald of Northumbria, who erected a Cross there, and asserts that the field, which had been named *Hefenfelth* before Christian times, must have been named so as a prophecy of Oswald's later erection of the Cross.⁶³ Dunn offers a likelier explanation: *Hefenfelth* already had a connotation with the heavens and was a sacred plain or meadow to the pagans.⁶⁴ Furthermore, this place became later known as 'Oswald's Tree' - presumably to distinguish his Cross from the other, pagan tree which may have stood there. In Welsh, the place is called 'Croes Oswallt.'⁶⁵ Apparently, the difference between a tree and a Cross was either hard to distinguish, or irrelevant. Oswald's Cross may thus have been a Christian rival to a pagan world-tree or Irminsul - 'Great Pillar' - as found among the continental Saxons.⁶⁶ The Scandinavian Yggdrasil connects and supports nine worlds, whereas the Anglo-Saxon *Nine Herbs Charm* refers to seven worlds. It is also worth noting that a tree that connects worlds is found in many circumpolar shamanistic traditions, and is a way through which the shaman may access the other worlds. Rolf Pipping even suggests that Óðinn's sacrifice on Yggdrasil is a shamanistic initiation ritual.⁶⁷ Although it is far from conclusive that the Anglo-Saxons had shamans among them, there is some evidence. Shamanistic traditions often entail the belief in multiple souls, one of which could leave the body to roam free. Dunn notes that in the Anglo-Saxon poems *Wanderer* and *Seafarer*, "...the speakers send out their disembodied souls over the seas, making the conventional image of poet as rambler a metaphor for their shamanistic journey."⁶⁸ As such, the seven Anglo-Saxon worlds from the *Nine Herbs Charm* may have had a world-tree at their centre, and it may be that the Cross in *The Dream of the Rood* alludes to this sacred tree. Concerning this, there is one striking detail in the following passage:

⁶³ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.2.

⁶⁴ Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 64.

⁶⁵ A.M. Sellar, notes to *Ecclesiastical History* by Bede, 154.

⁶⁶ Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 64.

⁶⁷ Rolf Pipping, "Oden i Galgen," *Studier i Nordisk Filologi* 18, no. 2 (1928): 4, as cited in Stephanie von Schnurbein. "Shamanism in the Old Norse Tradition: A Theory between Ideological Camps," trans. Brian Currid, *History of Religions* 43, no. 2 (2003): 117.

⁶⁸ Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 80. For a longer discussion on possible Anglo-Saxon Shamanism, see Dunn, 79-83.

ond ic wene me
 daga gehwylce hwænne me dryhtnes rod
 þe ic her on eorðan ær sceawode
 on þysson lænan life gefetige
 ond me þonne gebringe þær is blis mycel
 dream on heofonum⁶⁹

In this passage the Cross fulfils a clear role as psychopomp - the poet prays that the Cross will fetch him and bring him to Heaven. Not only is this perhaps the most obviously unorthodox element in the *Dream*, it is especially noteworthy when considered in the context of a possible world-tree. This passage could be interpreted as the Cross functioning as an allusion to a pagan world-tree, which was of cosmic scale and importance, supported the cosmic order, and functioned as connection between worlds - pagan worlds, or heaven and earth - allowing transportation between these worlds. It is a fascinating parallel, but it should be noted that evidence suggests that at least some pagans conceived the entrance to the next world as a precarious bridge over a foul black river.⁷⁰ Another interesting parallel between the Cross and Yggdrasil is the death of a key religious figure on the Cross-tree, and the references to the Cross as a gallows.

Considering pagan-Christian syncretism, this does not imply that the Cross secretly represents such a tree. If the Cross was indeed associated with a world-tree, for which there is only indirect evidence, the two would not have been mutually exclusive in the Anglo-Saxon's eyes. Paganism had been imagistic, and one might imagine that doctrine and orthodoxy are initially little understood by converts who formerly held imagistic beliefs. To an ordinary Anglo-Saxon, the Cross could have been both the Cross and a world- or healing-tree without contradiction or inauthenticity. The Cross could be said to take up the mantle of the world-tree, assuming its attributes and function. These are projected onto the Cross. This

⁶⁹ "And I look forward every day for when the Lord's Cross, that I here on earth beheld, from this transitory life might fetch me, and then bring me there where is great bliss, joy in the heavens..." *Dream*, line 135-140.

⁷⁰ Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 170.

would explain the extreme focus on the Cross' status as a tree in *The Dream of the Rood*.

3.2 Christ and Woden

Christ is a versatile figure in *The Dream of the Rood*. Although he is referred to as the Saviour or Healer, and is called both the Son of God as well as God Almighty himself - all quite within doctrine⁷¹ - there is a decidedly pagan quality to him. To a pagan (or a Christian with knowledge of his pagan heritage) there could have been strong similarities between the role of Christ, the pagan god Woden, and the typical Germanic hero, such as Ingui. They would also have recognized Christ as an embodiment of the ideal pagan warrior or lord.

The Dream of the Rood's Christ shares some characteristics with certain pagan gods, most prominently Woden. Woden was an Old English god whose cult was widespread,⁷² but became less popular during the 8th century.⁷³ Reconstructing Woden through Scandinavian sources, Branston postulates that Woden may have had two sides to his character: he was both a storm god with power over the dead who led the Wild Hunt through the skies, and a divine magic practitioner who gained this knowledge through self-sacrifice and shared it with mankind.⁷⁴ Woden is a cognate to the later Scandinavian god Óðinn, who rules as the “Valföðr”, meaning “father of the slain” or “corpse-father”, in his dominion over one of the afterlives. Woden also had associations with royalty and was the ancestor of almost every royal house.⁷⁵ At the time of the arrival of the missionaries in Kent, Woden's cult had been adopted by many nascent royal dynasties.⁷⁶ The identification of

⁷¹ Although the *Dream's* earlier version on the Ruthwell Cross implies that God died on the Cross - a heresy. The intricacies of the Trinity have always been hard to comprehend, especially for recently converted populations.

⁷² Branston, *Lost Gods*, 93.

⁷³ North, *Heathen Gods*, 80.

⁷⁴ Branston, *Lost Gods*, 94.

⁷⁵ William A. Chaney. *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England. The Transition from Paganism to Christianity*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 7.

⁷⁶ Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 99.

Woden as a death-god is made plausible by how Woden was identified with the Roman god Mercury, a psychopomp. In his commentaries on the Gallic wars, Julius Caesar proclaims that the Germanic peoples worship principally Mercury.⁷⁷ Woden's side as self-sacrificing magic practitioner is reconstructed through Óðinn gaining the magical knowledge of runes by being sacrificed to himself on the world-tree Yggdrasil.⁷⁸ Branston supports this by quoting the *Nine Herbs Charm*, in which Woden appears and smites a snake with nine *wuldortanas*.⁷⁹ The meaning of this word is mysterious and widely contested, but Branston interprets it as branches inscribed with runic symbols, thus drawing the parallel between Óðinn's runes and Woden's *wuldortanas*. Having struck the snake, Woden creates nine herbs with healing properties and sends them to the seven worlds. In this way, Woden and Óðinn both bring beneficial knowledge to mankind, knowledge of runes and knowledge of herbs. However, Óðinn's gift extends beyond runes. In the Norse *Hávamál*, Óðinn gives advice on the medicinal properties of, among other things, oak, ear of corn, and elder.⁸⁰ This shared display of herblore while hanging is another connection between Woden and Óðinn.

The parallel between Christ and Woden is their sacrifice and the benefits for mankind. Although the sources on Óðinn hanging from Yggdrasil are far more complete, *The Nine Herbs Charm* refers to Woden as a wise lord who once hung.

þa wyrte gesceop witig drihten,
halig on heofonum, þa he hongode⁸¹

However, the *Charm* also refers to Christ in later lines - being an example of what Baer calls adhesion - and it is therefore not impossible that the hanging aspect of this wise lord is not derived from Woden, but rather from Christ. North states

⁷⁷ Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*. Trans. W.A. McDevitte and W.S. Bohn, VI.6.

⁷⁸ As described in "Hávamál", in *The Elder Edda*. trans. Andy Orchard. (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 138.

⁷⁹ "The Nine Herbs Charm", in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliot van Kirk Dobbie. (New York: Columbia University Press), line 33.

⁸⁰ "Hávamál", in *The Elder Edda*, 137.

⁸¹ "These herbs the wise lord created, holy in the heavens, when he hung," *Nine Herbs Charm*, lines 37-8.

This is not to say that the hanging Lord of *The Nine Herbs Charm* was understood to be Woden rather than Christ - far from it; but I suggest that the continuing need to practise herbal magic within Christianity led this poet to characterize Christ's sacrifice as if it were Woden's, because the extraction of curative herbs from Hell does not appear to be a biblical motif.⁸² [emphasis added]

If we entertain the possibility that the Anglo-Saxon Woden was indeed associated with sacrifice, hanging, gallows, and an eventual boon for mankind, we could postulate that for an Anglo-Saxon audience, Christ takes up the mantle of or even surpasses Woden in *The Dream of the Rood*, assuming many of Woden's properties. The *Dream's* constant focus on the Cross as a gallows conjures up the unfamiliar image of Christ being hanged rather than crucified. Woden's cognate Óðinn was not only hanged on a tree - which the Cross is also continually referred to, but was also known as the Gallows God and received human sacrifices⁸³ who were likely killed by hanging.⁸⁴ Woden was also the object of a royal cult, and Christ is typified as the ideal lord and a mighty king in the *Dream*. Through his sacrifice, Christ benefits mankind as Woden did with his - although the importance of Christ's sacrifice could be said to be more immediate. As with the world-tree and the Cross, Woden's properties are projected onto Christ. Not only that, but Christ has taken up the mantle of Woden before. In a German charm, Woden's horse sprains its leg and has to be healed. Later versions have replaced Woden with Christ riding into Jerusalem.⁸⁵ Christ is fulfilling Woden's function, in this charm as well as in *The Dream of the Rood*.

The allusion of Christ to Woden is not impossible, but not as well supported by textual evidence as the Cross-Tree allusion. It seems unlikely, however, that the Anglo-Saxon audience would not have connected the dots between two sacrificed

⁸² North, *Heathen Gods*, 87.

⁸³ Tacitus, *Germania*. Trans. Alfred John Church, William Jackson Brodribb, and Lisa Cerrato, 9.

⁸⁴ Branston, *Lost Gods*, 98.

⁸⁵ Richard Kieckhefer. *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 45.

lords hanging on a tree who benefited mankind. Yet death, resurrection, and a resulting boon are common in Indo-European myth - the similarity may have been accidental, not a tailoring or reinterpreting of Christ. Some scholars have even suggested that all religious myths boil down to this ritual death and rebirth of a god-king.⁸⁶ However, the constant focus on the Cross as a tree and a gallows suggest that the Anglo-Saxons were quite aware of the similarities between Christ and Woden. One might argue that the hanging lord in *The Dream of the Rood* is a decidedly Woden-shaped Christ - if Woden indeed was a “hanging lord”. But contemporary Latin tradition also regularly referred to the Cross as a tree, and it is possible that “gallows” is to be taken as shorthand for “public execution”, since native Anglo-Saxons would not be familiar with the concept of crucifixion. The Cross is still pierced with dark nails,⁸⁷ which is not necessary for a hanging. Although this would imply that the allusions between religions are not as pronounced, it would show an adaptation of religious material to better align with its new audience. Furthermore, it is possible that the “hanging” characteristics of Óðinn that Branston uses to reconstruct Woden are, due to their later date, influenced by Christianity, in which case, this portrayal of Christ is not an allusion to Woden-Óðinn, but reversed - Óðinn’s portrayal in *Hávamál* would then be an allusion to Christ.

There are other gods that the Anglo-Saxons may have connected this unorthodox portrayal of Christ to. One of them is Ingvi. Ingvi is a badly documented god or hero the textual remains of which are so vague that we cannot even be sure of his name: Anglo-Saxon documents mention Ing, and Scandinavian myth mentions *Yngvi-Freyr*, from which North reconstructs Ingvi.⁸⁸ North postulates that Ingvi is associated with fertility, a special hero or god to the tribe Ingvaeones, and in early Anglo-Saxon history, the progenitor of all royalty.⁸⁹ Although the precise details and reconstruction of Ingvi is beyond the scope of this thesis, suffice it to say that Ingvi, too, was ritually sacrificed, and was also an

⁸⁶ Catherine Bell, *Ritual. Perspective and Dimensions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6-7.

⁸⁷ *Dream*, line 46.

⁸⁸ North, *Heathen Gods*, 26-43.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

example of the Germanic hero character. Christ features heavily as lord, warleader, and hero in *The Dream of the Rood*.

3.3 The Cross and Christ as Thegn and Lord

Combined with the Cross' characterization as a tree, its anthropomorphization is the most conspicuous feature of the *Dream*. The speech of the Cross is a poetic device commonly used in Old English known as prosopopeia. The Cross is a tree capable of feeling, thought, and speech, while also being capable of several supernatural feats such as healing and taking the dead to heaven. The Cross emphasizes that its healing powers derive from suffering with Christ, but even as an ordinary tree on the side of the forest, the Cross seems to have been conscious. Coupled with the descriptions of pagans venerating stones, trees, and wells, this suggests a type of animism or worship of nature or nature spirits. However, the concept that the Cross possessed life, identity, and power of its own is one that we find elsewhere in the early Christianity⁹⁰ and does not necessarily betray pagan influence. Furthermore, in this poem we have no reason to assume that this anthropomorphization is any different from the poetic prosopopeia of the riddles in *The Vercelli Book* - the same manuscript as *The Dream of the Rood*. At the same time, the assertion that the Cross is able to heal and function as psychopomp do not seem to be a poetic device, but rather the religious beliefs of the poet. However, this does not necessarily confirm an animistic stance towards trees as religious beliefs as well - the poet could very well be expressing both religious truth and poetic creativity in one poem.

The anthropomorphization of the Cross goes beyond merely making him a person - he is made a warrior. When speaking of his and Christ's enemies, the Cross states "Ealle ic mihte feondas gefyllan",⁹¹ emphasizing his combat prowess, physical strength, and will to fight. Furthermore, the Cross refers to Christ as his lord and acts as his thegn (thane). The Cross does not want to participate in the

⁹⁰ Swanton, introduction to *The Dream of the Rood*, 66.

⁹¹ "I could have struck down all enemies" *The Dream of the Rood*, line 39.

Crucifixion - it repeatedly voices the wish to bend or break⁹² and to bend down and fall to the earth,⁹³ or indeed to strike down all the enemies,⁹⁴ but refrains from doing so because of “dryhtnes word.”⁹⁵

Wolf writes that the connection between the “efstan elne mycle”⁹⁶ which characterizes Christ’s approach to the Cross, and the “eaðmod elne mycle”⁹⁷ with which the Cross delivers Christ’s body into the hands of his fellow thegns serves to connect Christ and the Cross.⁹⁸ Not only does this symbolize the courage and zeal of both warriors, the Anglo-Saxon audience may have been alert to the fact that the Cross’ eagerness in being humble and passive is due to the fact that in doing so, he fulfils the wishes of his lord, Christ.⁹⁹ In many ways, the Cross is the ideal thegn, which only increases the dramatic paradox of the faithful Cross as instrument of Christ’s death.

The Cross is a loyal thegn in the *Dream*, and Christ, who is his lord, is an ideal hero-warrior. The similarities between Christ and pagan gods are evident and abundant, and this pagan view of Christ is also exemplified by the emphasis on Christ’s status as a Germanic hero. The Christ presented in *The Dream of the Rood* is not a passive victim suffering an execution, but a warrior fighting a battle. He rushes into battle with “great zeal”, he is described as a “young hero, [...] strong and resolute”,¹⁰⁰ a “lord”,¹⁰¹ a “prince”¹⁰² whose enemies are “strong foes”.¹⁰³ He is “courageous in the sight of many.”¹⁰⁴ He is the opposite of passive: he actively climbs the gallows, because he “wanted to release mankind”¹⁰⁵ - Christ is not only

⁹² *ibid.*, line 36.

⁹³ *ibid.*, lines 42-3.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, line 39.

⁹⁵ “The lord’s word,” *ibid.*, line 35.

⁹⁶ “To hasten with great zeal,” or “Hasten greatly” *ibid.*, line 34.

⁹⁷ “Humble with great zeal,” or “Greatly humble” *ibid.*, line 60.

⁹⁸ Carol Jean Wolf, “Christ as Hero in ‘The Dream of the Rood’” *Neophilologische Mitteilungen* 71, no. 2 (1970): 204.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 202

¹⁰⁰ “geong hæleð, [...] strang ond stiðmod,” *Dream*, lines 39-40.

¹⁰¹ “dryhten,” *ibid.*, lines 35, 64, 75, 101, 105, 113, 136, 140, 144.

¹⁰² “æðelinge,” *ibid.*, line 58.

¹⁰³ “strange feondas,” *ibid.*, line 30.

¹⁰⁴ “modig on manigra gesyhðe,” *ibid.*, line 41.

¹⁰⁵ “he wolde mancyn lysan,” *ibid.*

here voluntarily, he actively wills it. Furthermore, he is accompanied by “warriors”¹⁰⁶ and “retainers”.¹⁰⁷ When he dies, they sing a “sorhleoð”,¹⁰⁸ a ritual lamentation that may be a remnant of pagan Anglo-Saxon funeral rites.¹⁰⁹ The Cross describes a battle rather than an execution - he even claims to have been “wounded with arrows”,¹¹⁰ which have no basis in orthodoxy, but further the image of the Crucifixion as battle. This is not the suffering of Christ that became emphasized in the later church; rather, the suffering is supplanted to the Cross. It is the Cross who is “pierced with dark nails”;¹¹¹ on its surface are the open wounds of malice still visible. Christ does not suffer; rather he battles and is victorious. It deserves to be mentioned that Christ’s resurrection is not described in the poem. It is mentioned, but the narrative of the Cross is solely focused on the Crucifixion. The battle is the miracle. Christ’s death is simultaneously emphasized as well as euphemized. Although he “gives up the ghost”¹¹² and is referred to as a “body”,¹¹³ the poem also describes his time in the tomb as “resting from the great battle.”¹¹⁴ Thus, both Christ’s sacrifice and victory are addressed. The Christ in *The Dream of the Rood* is not a suffering Christ, but rather a champion for mankind. This heroic and lordly portrayal of Christ - who epitomises the courage that Anglo-Saxons admired - neutralizes the bewildering image of a shameful death on the gallows.¹¹⁵ But not only is this Christ a hero, he is also a king. Chaney suggests that in Anglo-Saxon culture, the rule of a good king meant that the entire world was in harmony. In this way, Christ functions as the greatest king.¹¹⁶ It seems plausible that this portrayal of Christ - as a young, heroic warrior-king who fights for mankind, is heavily tailored either for or by pagan religious and cultural values. This is a Jesus

¹⁰⁶ “hilderincas,” *ibid.*, line 61.

¹⁰⁷ “Þegnas,” *ibid.*, line 75.

¹⁰⁸ “sorrow-song,” *ibid.*, line 67.

¹⁰⁹ Swanton, introduction to *The Dream of the Rood*, 128.

¹¹⁰ “ic wæs mid strælum forwundod,” *ibid.*, line 62.

¹¹¹ “Purhdrifan [...] mid deorcan næglum.” *ibid.*, line 46.

¹¹² “he hæfde his gast onsended.” *ibid.*, line 49.

¹¹³ “hræw,” *ibid.*, line 53 and “lices,” line 63.

¹¹⁴ “he hine þær hwile reste / meðe æfter ðam miclan gewinne.” *ibid.*, lines 64-5.

¹¹⁵ Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 136.

¹¹⁶ Chaney, *Cult of Kingship*, 86-119.

that has earned respect through his courage rather than miracles, resurrection, or suffering.

The Cross is the ideal faithful thegn to this warrior-lord Christ, but is forced to be an important instrument in his death. The Cross has no wish to do this - it would rather kill the enemies, fall, or break - but he must follow the command of his lord, who *does* want to be crucified. The Cross even refers to itself as “bana”,¹¹⁷ a judicial term meaning “slayer”. Although there is no criminality involved in the term, it does designate the Cross as the cause of Christ’s death.¹¹⁸ It is a thegn who slays its lord. To an Anglo-Saxon audience, the Cross must have been a unsettling character forced to commit a tragic act. It is forced to break the bond between thegn and lord, the Germanic warrior culture’s “*praecipuum sacramentum*”¹¹⁹ as Tacitus described it - their fundamental vow. Doing so is cause for lifelong infamy and shame, a deep betrayal. Throughout the poem, the Cross is clearly horrified by what it has to do. Because of this, its eventual redemption and exaltation is even more awe-inspiring. Through suffering this moral anguish and fulfilling the instrumental role in the killing of Christ, the Cross has opened the way for salvation and redemption for all men.

Iu ic wæs geworden wita heardost,
leodum laðost, ærþan ic him lifes weg
rihtne gerymde, reordberendum.¹²⁰

By way of becoming the “slayer” of its lord, the Cross has sacrificed as well, and has in this way been responsible for the salvation of humanity. We see then, that the Cross is an example of courage, sacrifice, and redemption that mirrors the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ.

The sacrifice of the Cross, however, is completely dependent on pagan cultural values. This shocking tragedy and its joyous reversal would not have been

¹¹⁷ *Dream*, line 66.

¹¹⁸ Swanton, introduction to *The Dream of the Rood*, 126.

¹¹⁹ Tacitus, *Germania* 14.

¹²⁰ “Before, I was made the hardest of punishments, most hateful to the people, until I opened for them, the speech-bearers, the right way of life.” *Dream*, line 87-89.

so effective if the poet had not invoked and arguably deconstructed pagan warrior values. *The Dream of the Rood* is an example of the syncretic creativity of a (recently) converted population. Concerning new understandings of conversion, David Mosse writes

The assumption that Christianity will supplant local systems of belief and ritual is part of a wider view of colonial experience as ‘modernization’, which portrays subject groups as progressively absorbed into dominant colonial cultures. This view is revised in several recent studies which attempt a writing of the mission history from the point of view of the missionized themselves [...]. The image of the passive proselyte is replaced with a view of *converts as active creators and manipulators of symbolic and ritual systems which serve indigenous social and political ends.*¹²¹ [emphasis added]

Although Mosse is discussing the syncretic creativity of contemporary Indian converts, we can see the same principle at work in *The Dream of the Rood*. Decidedly non-Christian cultural values are utilized to dramatize a Christian narrative. This makes for a more engaging version of the story for an audience that shares those non-Christian values. *The Dream of the Rood* strays from orthodoxy and incorporates certain pagan aspects - but with an evangelical goal. It is the product of a syncretic, hybrid religion that resulted from Gregory the Great’s inculturation policy.

3.4 Wyrð, Wuldor, and the Afterlife

Although the Cross and Christ are the most extensive examples of possible syncretism in *The Dream of the Rood*, there are other, smaller elements which may be indicators. For example, it has been tentatively established that the pagan Anglo-

¹²¹ David Mosse, “The Politics of Religious Synthesis. Roman Catholicism and Hindu village society in Tamil Nadu, India,” in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism*, eds. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (New York: Routledge, 1994), 85.

Saxons worshipped “wuldor” - “glory”, “brilliance”¹²²¹²³. The Roman writers rendered this as “numen”, a word which can mean both “deity” and “power”. Tacitus describes the Germanic cults as frequenting holy groves and woods - which he identified with Roman gods - holy places which apparently contained images and effigies¹²⁴. Apparently the Germanic peoples did not build a temple to house their gods, which suggests a reverence towards nature, possibly a belief in some immanent abstract force, which may be what is indicated by “wuldor”, although this abstract force may have developed into a more anthropomorphic deity later. Furthermore, the word is also used in describing Woden’s mysterious *wuldortanas*. Considering this, we must account for the fact that word wuldor is used six times throughout *The Dream of the Rood*, twice in conjunction with the Cross - “tree of glory”,¹²⁵ “beam of glory”¹²⁶ - twice in conjunction with Christ - “chief of glory”,¹²⁷ “king of glory”¹²⁸ - and twice when describing conditions in the afterlife. It seems that “wuldor”, whatever shifts in meaning it may have had, still lended itself well for religious subjects. If it still retained the same meaning as it did in pre-Christian times, it could well be seen as another syncretic transition - a word that previously referred to an immanent supernatural force now describes Christian concepts. There is no way of telling if in the *Dream* the word simply means “glory”, as comparable to “fame” or “awe”, or whether it still carried the possible pre-Christian meaning of a numinous, immanent divine force or presence.

Another word that is used in a similar way is the word “wyrd”. This refers to a pagan deterministic view of fate. In the *Dream*, this word is also used to refer to that: “Ðæt wæs egeslic wyrd!”¹²⁹ However, whether the deterministic world-view of pagan Anglo-Saxons was still associated with this word is impossible to determine. The use of the word does not necessarily betray a pagan worldview. It could simply be used to refer to fate in the general sense.

¹²² Dunn, *Christianization of the Anglo-Saxons*, 69.

¹²³ North, *Heathen Gods*, 208-209.

¹²⁴ Tacitus, *Germania*, 7.

¹²⁵ “wuldres treow,” *Dream*, line 14.

¹²⁶ “wuldres beam,” *ibid.*, line 97.

¹²⁷ “wuldres ealdor,” *ibid.*, line 90.

¹²⁸ “wuldres cyning,” *ibid.*, line 133.

¹²⁹ “That was a dreadful fate!” *ibid.*, line 74.

Furthermore, the depiction of the afterlife is quite reminiscent of the Norse afterlife for the chosen few, Valhöll (Valhalla). Both afterlives are a lavish feast for a chosen few. Valhöll is reserved for valiant warriors hand-picked by Óðinn, whereas Heaven is reserved for pure saints. Both are overseen by a “father” - Óðinn the “Valföðr” and God the “heahfæder”;¹³⁰ corpse-father and high-father. This exclusivity is further emphasized by the speaker expressing his wish to seek the Cross - which will fetch him from this life - more often than other men. Although this may be an interesting concept concerning the early Anglo-Saxon Christian view of the afterlife, it should be noted that only a few lines before Heaven is described in this way, the speaker hopes he will be fetched soon from this “transitory life”. Having already discussed the difference between imagistic and doctrinal as well as world-rejecting and world-accepting religions, this word choice seems to imply a world-rejecting and wholly Christian notion of the afterlife. This does not necessarily discount the possibility of a pagan-influenced description of the afterlife, since in syncretism, it is to be expected that both religions influence the believer's worldview. However, the aforementioned exclusivity of the afterlife is not necessarily a pagan element. The idea that only few will be able to enter Heaven is not unorthodox, and the assumption that certain people will not be able to enter Heaven at all even has a scriptural basis. Furthermore, in order to make this connection we must again rely on Scandinavian sources, the problems of which have already been discussed.

Considering these three elements - wuldor, wyrd, and the afterlife - it is also possible that the connections between the pagan use and the *Dream* use are only linguistic. If this is the case, the relationship between the old and the new is not strictly religious, but merely old words applied to new ideas. Although this certainly is a type of adaptation and reinterpretation, it is not an overt example of religious syncretism. However, the difference between religious syncretism and linguistic reinterpretation is impossible to determine by reading *The Dream of the Rood* alone. Considering the earlier made comments on the inclusive nature of world-accepting religions and the associated problem of distinguishing between

¹³⁰ Ibid., line 134.

religion and culture, one may argue that there is no difference between the two at all.

3.5 Speculations of Audience and Intention

3.5.1 The Author

Having examined the possible syncretistic elements in *The Dream of the Rood*, it is time to consider the motivations behind these elements. If we are to conclude that the more striking typically Anglo-Saxon aspects of the Cross and Christ in this poem are undoubtedly an example of religious syncretism, with what purpose were these aspects introduced? The possible motivations could be simplified into two possibilities. The first is inculturation as Gregory prescribed it in his letter: syncretism as a tool of conversion. In this case, the decidedly Anglo-Saxon depictions of the Cross and Christ have been actively sculpted in order to appeal to the Anglo-Saxon's audience cultural and/or religious history. The second possibility is that the poet himself creatively framed his new religion in the conventions and symbols he understood from his old religion and traditional culture. This fits into the concept of the convert as a highly creative agent as mentioned by Mosse.¹³¹ Wolf also describes the poet as surmounting the difficulties of describing unfamiliar material by way of reaching back into tradition.¹³² Ó Carragáin writes that the poet was most likely a clerical or monastical poet,¹³³ and as such, it may seem likely that he may have been more orthodox than the poem's audience. However, this poem predates the Benedictine Reform by far, and the obvious lack of orthodoxy suggests that the poet was either unaware of official doctrine, or - more likely - did not perceive the traditionally Anglo-Saxon elements in his poem as conflicting with Christian doctrine. It stands to reason, then, that the image of Christ as a warrior-hero cannot have been considered out of line. If anything, this must have been the dominant view of Christ among the Anglo-

¹³¹ Mosse, "The Politics of Religious Synthesis", 85.

¹³² Wolf, "Christ as Hero," 202-3.

¹³³ Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 2.

Saxons, given how well it aligns with traditional values. Ó Carragáin does mention that, conversely, the portrayal of the Cross must have risked rejection.¹³⁴ At the time, the place and nature of the Cross in doctrine was not yet clearly established, and it is in this portrayal that the poem truly shines in creativity. The earlier mentioned use of pre-Christian cultural values to strengthen the emotional impact of a Christian narrative is truly a creative find and a device that was used with clear purpose.

The similarities between Christ and Woden and the Germanic hero, however, may not have been entirely a conscious decision on the part of the author. The author may have naturally interpreted Christ in this pagan way. Alternatively, he may have followed the decree of Gregory, retaining some “outward gratifications”,¹³⁵ i.e. the similarity of Christ to the familiar gods and heroes of old, to lead the Anglo-Saxons more easily towards “the inward joys”.¹³⁶ Although there is a definite interaction taking place between Anglo-Saxon tradition and Christian doctrine, the motivations behind this interaction are difficult to reconstruct. It seems we are forced to conclude that we cannot simply establish the truth of the matter. However, we should take into account that *The Dream of the Rood* was written at a time when virtually every inhabitant of the British Isles was already Christian. As such, it seems quite unlikely that this poem functioned as a tool of conversion, as there was no one to convert. We must then conclude that this poem is far more likely to be a product of the poet relating to his religion through the conventions, symbols, and concepts of his pagan heritage. This is syncretism as a creative act by the “convert”,¹³⁷ not as a tool of the missionary.

3.5.2 The Audience

So far we have discussed the possible motivations of the author, without taking the possible interpretations of the audience into account. The author, as a member of the clergy, may have had a stricter adherence to doctrine, but the

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 1.30.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ In this case, more likely an act of a member of the converted populace rather than a convert per se.

ordinary Anglo-Saxon is likely to have attached little importance to orthodoxy. As we have seen in Baer's description of syncretism, the same way the Andeans integrated their reverence for their mummified ancestors into their newfound Catholicism, it seems likely that the Anglo-Saxons integrated their traditional beliefs into their new Christianity. Doctrine is not important for adherents of an imagistic religion, and it seems likely that during the conversion period at least some expressions of Anglo-Saxon Christianity were more imagistic-like. It is likely that the idea that their traditional beliefs and Christianity were mutually exclusive would not have initially occurred to Anglo-Saxon Christians. The paradox of "pagan Christianity" was not a paradox for them - although it is worth mentioning that it is syncretism we keep seeing, not adherence. Christ has perhaps taken up the mantle Woden and the Cross has mantled the world-tree, but Woden and the world-tree make no overt appearance. Although this is clearly pagan Christianity, the fact that it displays syncretism rather than adherence shows that while the new faith had in striking ways taken on the shape of the old faith, the old faith was on the way out. Over the years, the Woden-shaped Christ would lose his resemblance to Woden and the world-tree-shaped Cross would lose its resemblance to the world-tree. One might hypothesize that the display of syncretism rather than adherence is an early indicator of the onward march of conversion. Eventually, Anglo-Saxon Christianity fell in line with Roman doctrine and the Anglo-Saxon elements were lost. The *Dream* is a unique snapshot of a syncretic religion that was eventually transformed, as Gregory had intended all along.

Alternatively, the display of syncretism rather than adherence could potentially be a testament to the predominantly doctrinal nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. I would hypothesize that the imagistic mode of religion is more likely to produce adherence, as there is no doctrine which states what is and is not acceptable. If the Anglo-Saxon Christianity of *The Dream of the Rood* was imagistic, the Cross and the world-tree could appear alongside each other. However, the doctrinal nature of Anglo-Saxon Christianity rules out a world-tree. As such, the same religious intermingling "impetus" that causes adherence is forced to fit the figure of the world-tree into the nearest neighbouring concept, in this case the Cross, making the Cross take on many of the characteristics and attributes that

previously defined the world-tree. It seems likely then, that a doctrinal mode of religion rules out adhesion and leads to syncretism, whereas an imagistic mode of religion could allow for both. This hypothesis could be an avenue for further research.

Acknowledging *The Dream of the Rood* as an example of religious syncretism, it seems likely that an Anglo-Saxon would have seen the likeness of a world-tree in the Cross, the likeness of Woden's sacrifice in Christ's, the likeness of the Germanic hero in Christ himself, and that these connections were in no way contradictory or odd.

4. Conclusion

I began this thesis by asking “What is the relationship between the Christian and the pagan in *The Dream of the Rood*, and how should this question be approached?” Building on Baer’s framework, we can see that *The Dream of the Rood* has to be an example of syncretic Christianity and should be approached in this way. The relationship between the Christian and the pagan initially seems paradoxical. This paradoxical nature is also seen at a more detailed level: how can the Cross be a gallows, a tree, and a Cross at the same time? Yet this paradox is only superficial paradox. The *Dream* is an example of Christians relating to their faith through their pagan heritage - its imagery, worldview, symbols, themes, values, and conventions. This is the relationship between the Christian and the pagan in the *Dream*. To the Anglo-Saxons, there would have been nothing contradictory about experiencing Christianity this way, because Anglo-Saxon Christianity was a syncretic religion. This does not mean that the Anglo-Saxons did not understand their faith or practiced it badly. They practiced it in the only thinkable way: by relying on their heritage. This did not cheapen Christianity; in fact it likely strengthened its popularity among the Anglo-Saxons.

The syncretic religiosity of the *Dream* is a product of the Gregorian inculturation policy. It may seem superfluous to point this out, but by encouraging pagans to experience Christianity by way of their pagan heritage in order to help the conversion process, missionaries set the stage for a religion in which Christianity is, indeed, experienced by way of the pagan heritage. The *Dream* exemplifies what this religion looked like. Christ is a brave warrior and has much in common with Woden, the Cross is presented as a sacred tree and a gallows, and together they exemplify the lord-thegn relationship - the breaking of which is even used to strengthen the Christian narrative.

This type of syncretism is often only a temporary stage in a protracted conversion process, and it seems that the uniquely Anglo-Saxon Christianity that

produced the *Dream* already shows signs of being on the later end of the process. It contains syncretism rather than adhesion, and even in this syncretism, Christ and Woden are not merged, or said to be the same god; Christ has taken up Woden's mantle. Christ has become *like* Woden, Woden has been projected onto him, but Woden is never mentioned. This is already a syncretic religion that leans more towards Christianity than it relies on paganism and is on the verge of what Baer calls transformation. Although it may seem that the missionaries have inadvertently caused a syncretic religion, in which the converts are free to reinterpret everything however they want, any of the syncretic elements that fall outside of what Rome calls doctrine were slowly but surely purged from the faith. Over centuries, Anglo-Saxon Christianity has moved towards transformation - the end of syncretism and the denouncing of the old religion. Although the Anglo-Saxons themselves have creatively and ingeniously reinterpreted and reworked their old and new faiths into a fresh, cohesive, and fascinating whole, it was never to last. *The Dream of the Rood* is a snapshot of this time of creativity and reinterpretation. It is a product of a particular stage in the development of Anglo-Saxon Christianity - a stage which it has since left behind. For Anglo-Saxon Christianity, syncretism was only ever the undercoat; it easily took hold and prepared for the next coats of paint, by which it was eventually covered completely.



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