René Erwich

"Someday Our Gods Will Be Friends"

The VIKINGS Series as Embodiment of Religion and Liquefaction of Meaning

Abstract

This article reflects on the recent television series VIKINGS (CA/IE, 2013–) from a practical-theological standpoint. It addresses the series as a serious expression of the relationship between film and religion. Narrative, reception, style and context are used deliberately to present themes related to the clash of pagan religion and Christianity. The article contends that the development and construction of VIKINGS can be viewed in light of a liquefaction of religion.

Keywords

Film and Theology, Practical Theology, Film as Embodiment of Religion, Liquefaction of Religion, VIKINGS

Biography

René Erwich is Principal of Whitley College, Melbourne, Australia, and full Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Divinity, Melbourne. Before taking up his current position, Erwich was Research Professor in Theology at Ede Christian University, in the Netherlands. His interests are in the area of lived religion: media and religion, pastoral theology, narrative and ecclesiology. He is currently working on a book project on gender and theology.

Introduction

A quick scan of the Internet and other media reveals a variety of depictions and presentations of Vikings. In both the past and the present, "Viking" and "the Viking Age" have been used to conjure up a "warlike Viking tickling our imagination with horror and delight" or a fantasy figure and "male chauvinist symbol". Both terms are present, Gunnar Andersson writes, in "authentic academic history and simultaneously collective myth in the minds of millions, with social, economic, and political

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implications".[1] A constant interplay exists between research, knowledge and present use in the ways the ideas of the "Viking" and "the Viking Age" are addressed. Historically, between 750 CE and 1100 CE communities in Scandinavia were not as unified as we might think, and the modern use of "Viking" covers very diverse meanings. Today, we might write at length about Viking metal music or about Viking symbols that are used by American Football teams, appear in advertisements for beer, and could be found in dark depictions of the 5th SS Waffen Panzer Division "Wiking" in the Second World War. Such symbols are both deployed and exploited. Viking stereotypes often prevail in both popular mythology and historical reconstructions.

However, a further aspect of Viking discourse is apparent in a recent filmic representation of Viking life that is found in the Irish-Canadian historical drama television series Vikings (CA/IE 2013–), based on the Icelandic sagas of the Viking Ragnar Lodbrok. The series, written and directed by the renowned scriptwriter Michael Hirst, also known from The Tudors (IE 2007–2010) was first shown in early March 2013 on the History Channel in Canada and the United States and soon found millions of viewers and fans. This top-rated show, filmed on location in both Canada and Ireland, has reached its sixth season. The series website hosts infographics on each season.

Interviews given by Hirst provide strong evidence of a deliberate attempt to frame the series in light of an existential clash of religions. In an interview with Brock Swinson, Hirst stated, "During my research, the Pagan versus Christian conflict was very central to Viking sex and life at the time. It couldn't be avoided, so it had to be addressed. I loved reading about it and I couldn't have written Vikings without writing about the Pagan gods and the Christian God, who ultimately won, essentially."[2] Similarly Hirst explained:

> I wanted to show pagan fundamentalism – for audience to understand that paganism was a real religion and that people believed it very deeply. It meant a lot and explained the world to the Vikings. I think I was getting that message across. We've seen levels of belief – Floki [one the main characters] is a complete fundamentalist and I wanted to show the same for Christianity, that it was driven by people like Bishop Heahmund – young religion sweeping across the globe and one of the reasons was the intensity of belief and Heahmund was going to represent that for me – passionate Christians coming up against equally passionate pagans.[3]

Hirst successfully weaves this clash of religions into the series, including very concrete depictions in single episodes. This article explores the intriguing mix and collision of religious realities. The medium of film can support and enhance conversations about

1 Andersson 2016.
2 Swinson considers the relationship between historic Viking reality and the series.
3 Hirst in the interview (see for link bibliography).

vital and existential themes that influence identity formation.[4] This television series, as we will see, is a useful example of how film can reflect cultural and religious capital. Viewers connect to the series not just as entertainment but also in light of their own individual and collective identity constructs. The VIKINGS series contributes to societal discourse on religious tensions through its links to religious elements, rituals and symbols.

Theoretical Framework and Method

Both the relationship between religion and popular culture and a practical-theological lens are conceptually and methodologically significant for the interpretation of the VIKINGS series in this article. The concepts *religion* and *culture* are not unproblematic. The discussion employs a working definition of *religion* based on a range of characteristics that provide meaning: the formation of communities with shared understandings and values, ritualized behavior, language and language-constructs of transcendence and intimacy, sacred perceptions of time and space, and the (re) configuration of symbols and narratives.[5] Culture is seen as a *design of living*, expressed in forms that are experiential, ritual, social, mythic, ethical and doctrinal.[6] Popular culture is treated not as distinct but as a shared set of activities and meanings prominent for some populations and conveyed through mass media or other means of communication.[7] John Lyden's categorizations in defining religion, culture and popular culture are helpful, picking up on the various ways in which religion and popular culture can be framed within healthy scholarly discourse.[8] My approach in this article falls within his first category, religion *in* popular culture, for it does not seek to establish a particular Christian or theological reading or look at how religious communities or communities of faith might read, connect and adapt to major cultural shifts as expressed in modern media. That instrumental approach could produce a religious or theological domestication of the television series.[9]

As a practical theologian, I am interested in the ways religion is expressed and embodied in lived contexts and practices. In this sense, practical theology has a focus on lived religion. Rather than research a specific audience and its reconstruction and interpretation of the VIKINGS series, in this article I approach the production as an *expression* of lived religion. Reflecting on the reality of religious film, Joseph Marty has

4 Van Hell 2016.
5 See Mazur/McCarthy 2011.
6 Erwich 2013, 173–180; Luzbetak 1998.
7 Lyden/Mazur 2015.
8 Lyden 2015, 15.
9 For a range of further theoretical perspectives see also Lynch 2007.

asserted that there is no human life of faith without images.[10] Even though I would disagree with Marty that religious film should focus on finding seeds of the divine Word, I recognize that film can awaken the *homo religiosus*. According to Marty,

> cinema binds us again with the poetic and religious expression of humanity, even though subjects that are profane, scientific or areligious; all the more so if it approaches the great experiences such as birth, love, work, hope, fidelity, joy, death or their inseparable opposites treachery, lies, jealousy, hate. Everything that is human, every relationship to the world and to nature, treated artistically by the cinema becomes a poem, a tale, a re-reading, a proposal of meaning, a celebration – in short, something that resembles a first religious step. And this step may be blasphemous, contentious, provocative, pantheist, deist, mythic or revolutionary.[11]

A series like Vikings provides a secular context for religious meaning, as I will explore below. In ways that are possibly unlike other forms of art, film "summons and supports elements that belong to the religious dimension inherent in every human being".[12] For a start, Vikings mirrors religious aspects of our society. For many people film-watching has become a religious activity. In a way we could argue that the creed, the religious, belongs to humanity and not just to Christianity. And it is back at the top of the agenda! The popularity of series like Vikings and many others (such as Game of Thrones) suggests, Marty argues, that

> the religious dimension, too long assimilated to Christianity, remains fundamental for every individual and every culture. Thrown out with the water of Christian baptism, the infant homo religiosus comes back in full force and looks for his points of orientation outside of and far from mother church, in practices and beliefs ranging from the most serious to the most illegitimate, fantastical or dangerous. Our society once again rediscovers, painfully, that the religious and the sacred are fundamental for human beings and culture.[13]

Film as a Specific Embodiment of Religion – Liquefaction of Meaning

Film, as in the example of Vikings, is a symptom of a liquefaction of meaning, an idea central to this article and therefore deserving of particular attention. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman distinguished between solid modernity and liquid modernity, with

10 Marty 1997, 132.
11 Marty 1997, 136.
12 Marty 1997, 134–136.
13 Marty 1997, 139.

the former being a massive constituency regulating political, economic and ecclesial life and structures, and the latter indicative of an ongoing phase of modernization, in which nothing is fixed and everything is characterized by movement.[14] Practical theologian Kees de Groot elaborates on Bauman's thesis of a "liquid society" in a provocative book in which he sets the concept in a wider context.[15] Deploying the concept of "liquidation", De Groot contends that institutional religion is not simply coming to an end in Western societies, for religion and church are crossing boundaries. He uses the liquidation metaphor to describe the changing function and role of faith, religion and Christian institutions. Religion is liquefying, he suggests, as many elements that compose the church (counseling, education, assistance and care, for example) become part of leisure activities, health care or contemporary culture. Religious capital was once a solid asset, but in liquid modernity, such solid institutions lose power and influence. Church, class and family are eroded, and networks become key to social participation. This typical Baumanian view downplays the options for religion and community. Even more, if religion is included in the series of institutions that have lost their influence, there is no more serious space for religion and thus, as a consequence we would need to talk about its liquidation. I agree with De Groot that Bauman's views of community and the role of religion are limited, for religion continues, if under different conditions. These conditions are strongly influenced by a context in which consumption, individual choice, networks, communities "lite" and various spiritualities are central, with the liquidation metaphor therefore again relevant. De Groot characterizes the slow but inevitable process that leads to the sale of the church's capital as liquidation, not just liquefaction. Religious products appear in these different social contexts, with the church no longer the sole provider.

The framework for this examination of Vikings is provided by both the idea of film as the embodiment of religion and the concept of the liquefaction of meaning. To address the meaning of film from a practical-theological perspective, I first examine the general filmic content of this series and look into its storylines and narratives, cultural and religious contexts and style. Here I take up Melanie Wright's proposal to ensure that crucial aspects of the television series get the attention they deserve and not just their message.16 I believe this approach also does justice to the development of the series. The initial general analysis will be followed by analysis of a selection of fragments in which the relevant tensions and clashes occur. These fragments contain

- specific (constructed) dialogues about religious and/or theological themes
- specific references to clashes of religious or theological views.

14 Bauman 2000.
15 De Groot 2018.
16 Wright 2007, 11–30.

With a great variety of fragments available, I have selected examples that are connected to the main characters in the first seasons. For their analysis I deploy procedures common in qualitative content analysis, but with specific reference to religious and theological views.[17] Crucial to this method was evidence in constructed dialogues that illustrates the liquefaction thesis. The series as a whole contains numerous fragments that mirror a multicultural and multireligious society, even though it is set in the ninth century. There and then often become here and now. I have chosen not to use De Groot's term "liquidation", for the concept is not free of difficulties. Finally, I review my findings from a practical-theological point of view.

This article does not directly address the historicity of Vikings, although it does touch on Christian and pagan religious practices and realities. Because the series has not yet ended, with the fifth season underway as I write, I have made the end of the fourth season my own endpoint, a decision aided by the death of Ragnar Lodbrok, one of the central characters, close to the end of that series.

The Vikings Series – Content and Context

Storylines and Narrative[18]

The series starts at the beginning of the Viking era, in Scandinavia in the early ninth century. The men of Kattegat (not a historical location as such) are sent east on an annual raid by the chosen "Jarl" (earl), Haraldson (Gabriel Byrne), a title held by the most "prominent men below the kings in Viking-Age Scandinavia".[19] Farmer Ragnar Lodbrok (Travis Fimmel) is an underachiever, but as a result of religious experiences and with a desire to travel in other directions to the southwest, he joins the raid. He has heard the many stories of riches in the West (S1:E1).[20] He tries to find support for his desire to travel farther, and when he receives a sundial, Ragnar decides to have a boat built in secret by his friend Floki (Gustaf Skarsgård). However, Jarl Haraldson is not supportive of a southwestward raid. Ragnar navigates the open seas and arrives

17 Lamnek/Krell 2016, 447–511.

18 How have audiences responded to the series? More than 325,000 ratings on the IMDb website provide an average of rating for the series of 8.6 on a scale of 1–10. The majority of these viewers are between the ages of 18 and 44, with 24% female and 76% male. Generally, the series has been well received on websites and social media. Criticisms included the lack of development of the main characters during the later seasons, geographical inaccuracies and too great violence. Viewers are often unaware, it seems, of the composite and complex historical background to the figures of Ragnar, Björn and Ivar. Series 5 was less well received, with viewer figures for the later episodes dropping off. See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2306299/ratings?ref_=tt_ov_rthttps://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/may/23/vikings-review-history-channel-game-of-thrones [accessed 19 February 2019].

19 Holman 2003, 81.

20 Season and episode are referred to here using the format S1:E1.

at the monastery of Lindesfarne, in Northumbria (S1:E2).[21] Ragnar and his men raid the monastery and sail back home with a monk named Athelstan (George Blagden) as a slave. Athelstan becomes a central character in the course of the following episodes, and an exchange between pagan and Christian religions begins. On their arrival home, the conflict with Earl Haraldson escalates (S1:E4). Tensions with the earl grown, and soon, having been badly wounded in battle, Ragnar challenges him to a one-on-one fight. Ragnar kills Haraldson and becomes the next Earl of Kattegat (S1:E6). Between the major scenes, we encounter Athelstan, whose growing knowledge of pagan religion comes at the cost of his Christian faith. His initial aversion to pagan religion and its rituals and symbols gradually reverses. In the following episodes, the narrative takes a turn as the viewer is drawn deeper into the rituals of the Viking religion. The Vikings travel to Uppsala, bringing sacrifices. The dark depiction of these sacrificial practices involves an attempt to sacrifice Athelstan as well.

Local and regional battles prevail next as Ragnar and King Horik (Donal Logue) wage war with Earl Borg (Thorbjørn Harr). Ragnar's brother Rollo (Clive Standen) opposes Ragnar (S2:E1), but is defeated; although Rollo is brought to justice, he is then set free and in the meantime, Ragnar imperils his relationship with his wife Lagertha (Katheryn Winnick) by sleeping with Aslaug (Alyssa Sutherland), hoping that by having two wives he will increase his chances of having another son. Lagertha divorces Ragnar and leaves him, along with their son Björn (Alexander Ludwig). Ragnar continues his raids in England until he is stopped by King Ecbert (Linus Roche) of Wessex, who forges an alliance with King Ælle against Ragnar (S2:E7), Ragnar is defeated, barely escapes the coalition forces and must return to Kattegat, taking Athelstan with him. Ragnar and Athelstan's friendship is deepening as Athelstan increasingly adapts to the context in which he is now living. The second season ends violently, with King Horik killed and his kingdom taken over by Ragnar (S2:E10). Once more Ragnar sets off for Wessex, and while the Viking group develop their settlement there, looking for land to inhabit, a strange visitor confuses Aslaug about the situation and others and seduces her.

Athelstan is able to awaken Ragnar's interest in a raid on Paris, although Floki hates Athelstan and his Christian faith. Lagertha loses her earldom, and as Ragnar

21 A historical account of Lindisfarne is found in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Cf. Ford 2005. The text recounts (55) the Viking invasion: "This year came dreadful fore-warnings over the land of the Northumbrians, terrifying the people most woefully: these were immense sheets of light rushing through the air, and whirlwinds, and fiery, dragons flying across the firmament. These tremendous tokens were soon followed by a great famine: and not long after, on the sixth day before the ides of January in the same year, the harrowing inroads of heathen men made lamentable have in the church of God in Holy island [Lindesfarne, sic E], by rapine and slaughter. Siga died on the eight day before the calends of March". Generally, the "Viking age" is defined by historians as starting with the attack on the monastery of Lindisfarne in 793 CE and ending with the battle at Stamford Bridge in 1066 CE (see for further background Andersson 2016).

prepares for the raid on Paris, he and Aslaug distance themselves. King Ecbert orders the destruction of the newly developed settlement, an act carried out under the leadership of his son, Prince Aethelwulf (Moe Dunford) (S3:E5). Prince Aethelwulf's wife, Judith (Jennie Jacques), gives birth to a son, Alfred, who is in fact Athelstan's child. Floki decides Athelstan must die and kills the Christian at prayer (S3:E6).

Season 4 opens up with Ragnar being badly wounded and now near death. Floki is arrested by Björn for the murder of Athelstan. Rollo moves into his new role as a Frankish count and marries Princess Gisla (Morgane Polanski). Back in Kattegat, Floki is strung up in a cave as was the god Loki (S4:E2). Of particular note, Athelstan appears to Ragnar in a vision, repeating the word *mercy* over and over again (S4:E3); as a result, Ragnar sets Floki free. At the same time Athelstan appears on "the other side" to King Ecbert. In the course of this season, viewers see an ongoing amalgamation of cultures and religions, Anglo-Saxon, Frankish and Viking. Princess Kwentrith of Mercia (Amy Bailey) delivers a son, who is evidently Ragnar's child. Ragnar decides to go back to Paris, where he will confront his brother Rollo. In the meantime Lagertha develops her own kingdom as Earl Ingstadt, ruler of Hedeby. While pregnant, she insists on fighting the Parisians on Ragnar's side. The Vikings are forced to retreat – Rollo's preparations for the defense of Paris prove very effective – and Ragnar's leadership is called into question (S4:E8). We see Ragnar's sons now as almost grown men: Hvitserk (Marco Ilsø), Ivar (Alex Høgh), Sigurd (David Lindström) and Björn (Alexander Ludwig).

Ivar increasingly positions himself as the most traditional Norse son of Ragnar (S4:E10), which will be significant for the remaining episodes of this series. Ragnar wants to return to raiding Wessex and seeks to persuade others to join him. Their voyage is interrupted by a great storm and shipwrecked, Ivar, who has joined Ragnar on the raid, wakes up on a beach beside his father (S4:E14). King Ecbert is informed that Ragnar has returned, and Ragnar and Ivar are taken hostage by Aethelwulf. Locked in a cage, Ragnar is brought to Ecbert's dinner table, where intriguing conversations take place. Ragnar repeatedly tells Ecbert that the king must kill him. Athelstan's son Alfred (Ferdia Walsh-Peelo) meets Ragnar, who is moved to tears. Ecbert promises to keep Ivar safe, and in the next episode, called "All His Angels" (S4:E15), Ragnar is handed over to King Ælle, who will show no mercy. Ælle declares that the souls of all the innocent men Ragnar has killed will be released from purgatory. Ragnar is taken from his cage and as he is beaten by solders, he has repeating flashbacks and visions of Athelstan and his life. During his last moments he recalls Athelstan teaching him the Lord's Prayer. As King Ælle prays in his chapel, the soldiers throw Ragnar into a snake pit. In a final moment Ragnar looks up towards an incognito King Ecbert. Ivar swears revenge. Lagertha cannot believe Ragnar is dead and continues her struggle for power. Ivar raises a great army to revenge the death of his father and kill King Ælle. Ecbert dies by his own hand as the Viking army rages.

Style

As Wright states, subject matter alone does not make a film or series religious.[22] The style of Vikings creates a strong religious dynamic and conveys deliberate religious constructs. Intense imagery and stylistic effects express collisions and conflict between Christian and pagan religions, which largely revolve around the principal characters and their narratives. Camerawork blends the two religious systems, likely presenting something of the historical reality.[23] At many points, detailed attention is given to the symbols and rituals of the two religions. Visual references to Christ and his Passion, even to the point of a (historically inaccurate) re-enactment of the Crucifixion, are presented alongside pagan sacrificial rituals. The portrayal of the individual characters is complex, although in the later series the characters are less developed and somewhat flatter. Nevertheless, it is this ever changing filmic movement that sustains the deliberate attempt to create meaning throughout the episodes.

Cultural and Religious Context

The cultural and religious contexts in which the series is embedded were in reality more ambiguous than is suggested. The cultural context was likely more democratic than depicted,[24] and the society less violent.[25] Scholars have pointed out that, in contrast to the image given here, religious beliefs were diverse and the popularity of the various gods differed from place to place. Anders Hultgård and others state that Viking religion was a non-doctrinal community religion, in contrast to doctrinal transnational religions like Christianity.[26] The script, written by Hirst, across the four series suggests a transitional and syncretistic period, and indeed attempts to reconstruct a strongly unified Viking religion have proved problematic and overly harmonizing. Surviving sources suggest shifts and variety, with the underlying theology, mythology and worldviews multifaceted and connected to similar forms beyond the Viking world.[27] The figure of Ragnar is evidently a composite of various legends,

22 Wright 2007, 11–30.

23 Brink 2008, 212–257; Richards 2005, 19–29; Andersson 2016.

24 Brink 2008, 11–49; Andersson 2016.

25 Richards 2005.

26 Hultgård in Brink 2008, 212.

27 For example, the mythical representation of the world as a cosmic tree (Yggdrasill). According to Brink and others the closest comparison is found in ancient Iranian religion, with myths containing depictions of the tree and its branches: "The trunk of the cosmic tree is also thought to contain nine mountains from which all waters of the earth flow forth. These similarities together with evidence from Greek, Phrygian and Indic traditions indicate that the Scandinavian idea of the world-tree is part of an Indo-European mythic heritage, which has analogies also among Finno-Ugric peoples of northern Eurasia", Brink 2008, 215.

myths and resources: in her substantial historical and textual study, Elizabeth Ashman Rowe concludes that Ragnar Lodbrok was not a historical figure, but rather a legendary figure given the attributes of other historical personages.[28]

"Friendship of the Gods" and the Coexistence of Christian and Nordic Religious Practices

We can now move to a detailed analysis of the evidence of the clash of religious perspectives and practices in the VIKINGS series, a clash historically grounded the coexistence of the Christian and Nordic religions. The fragments examined here form a chain of evidence for the liquefaction thesis encountered above. These fragments are used within the series to convey specific religious convictions and practices, both pagan and Christian, to the audience – for example, messages about suffering, peaceful religious coexistence, an exchange of rituals such as prayer, spiritual interconnectness and mutual learning across religious backgrounds, understandings of rites such as baptism, and discourses about the existence of god(s). For the Nordic religion, as also for Christianity, we cannot readily speak of uniform religious practice,[29] but archeological and written evidence suggests the existence of "forn siðr", a set of relative rituals and activities that reinforced general values and beliefs.[30]

Dominant Themes in the VIKINGS Series

Fragments and their Meaning

With their deliberate confusion and merger of religious horizons, all of the fragments analyzed here suggest a crossing of boundaries and an exchange of religious beliefs. The scenes play out the well-attested historical phenomenon of the mixing of religions, found not only in graves that held both Christian and pagan symbols but also in daily practices. In Figure 1 I present the selected fragments with their themes and core content. Our focus is on evidence of the formation of communities with shared meanings and values, ritualized behavior, language and language constructs of transcendence and intimacy, sacred perceptions of time and space and the (re) configuration of symbols and narratives, and the ways in which these characteristics relate to the liquefaction thesis.

28 Ashman Rowe 2012, 269.
29 Andersson 2016, 82–89.
30 Andersson 2016; Brink 2008, 212–243.

Season	Episode	Theme	Core
Season 1	Episode 8	Athelstan and pagan religion	Resemblance passion narrative Christian gospel presented in pagan context
Season 2	Episode 9	Ragnar's idea of friendship of the gods	Hope for future peaceful coexistence of religions
Season 2	Episode 10	Ragnar praying the Lord's prayer	Exchange of religious symbols and rituals, hybridity of religions
Season 3	Episode 6	Ragnar's speech after Athelstan's death	Separation of spiritualities, experience of deep loss and qualified differences between ultimate allegiances
Season 3	Episode 9	Ragnar's baptism	Clash of religious values? Different levels of communication of a pagan king versus medieval Christian leaders
Season 4	Episode 14	The dialogue about heaven, Walhalla and the existence of God/god	Two opposing religious paradigms and their relativizing encounter

Fig. 1: Selected fragments from Vikings.

Fig. 2: Film still, Vikings, S1:E8 (00:35:07).

Season 1 – Episode 8: Athelstan and Pagan Religion

(Ominous howls)

CULT LEADER: Have you come here of your own free will? *(Wind gusts strongly)*

ATHELSTAN: Yes.

CULT LEADER: At first, I was suspicious of you. I sensed something, so I spoke to lord Ragnar. He told me your story: That you were a priest, that you were a Christian, and worshipped a god called Jesus Christ. Is that true?

ATHELSTAN: Yes.

CULT LEADER: And do you still worship this God? Are you still, in your heart, a Christian?

ATHELSTAN: No.

CULT LEADER: Say again.

ATHELSTAN: No.

CULT LEADER: And a third time… say it.

ATHELSTAN: No. *(whispered)*

CULT LEADER: You know why you're here, don't you? You have been brought here as a sacrifice to the gods.

ATHELSTAN: *(Gasps) (Frightened gasp) (Running footsteps)*

SEER: I have come to tell you that the sacrifice of this man will not please the gods. He is neither willing nor is his faith acceptable to Odin. His heart is corrupt. He has not renounced his false god.

RAGNAR: Looks like your god finally came through for you.

Fig. 3: Film still, Vikings, S1:E8 (00:35:32).

SEER: Instead, one amongst you must agree to take his place tomorrow at the sacrifice. If not, then all shall fail. The gods in their anger will punish everyone, and withdraw their protection from all of us. *(Whispering)* No, not you. *(Hard clap on the back)*
LEIF: Before anyone else can claim this honor, I desire to be sacrificed.[31]

Context

In Vikings, the Vikings travel to Uppsala to bring sacrifices pleasing to the gods, in a section brimming with Christian and pagan amalgamations. Athelstan is to be sacrificed. The leader of the cult questions him about his religious integrity, and it becomes clear that Athelstan has not really given up on his god, even when his god is characterized as false and Athelstan's heart deemed corrupt.

Interpretation

A Christian, even Christological narrative runs through this fragment as one person is to die for the sins of others. In this case, however, Athelstan's sacrifice is not accepted. The scene is deliberately staged: the cult leader's first question asks about Athelstan's allegiance to Christ, with his subsequent questions exploring that allegiance in terms of worship. Here is found a reference to Peter's threefold denial of Jesus in the Gospel

31 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5VoO15xWMY [accessed 27 September 2019].

narrative. Ragnar's comment – "Looks like your god finally came through for you" – is striking, for at this crucial point his god does not abandon Athelstan, which clearly Ragnar interprets as divine intervention by the Christian god. This reversal of the expected is repeated throughout the series. Thus, for example, when Athelstan is taken hostage by King Ecbert of Wessex, he is treated as a Christian apostate and crucified by a local bishop (although in practice few crucifixions took place after the fourth century CE). The parallels with the crucifixion of Christ are emphasized, with the people screaming and shouting. But the camera also zooms in on Athelstan's face, and as he calls out, in Latin, "Into your hands I commend my soul", we see his one black eye, a reference to the one-eyed pagan god Odin. Christian and pagan narratives are thus connected, and boundaries between their rituals and metaphors crossed.

Season 2 – Episode 9: Ragnar's Idea of the Friendship of the Gods

RAGNAR: So have you returned to your faith, renounced ours?
ATHELSTAN: I wish it was so simple. In the gentle fall of rain from heaven I hear my God. But in the thunder I still hear Thor. That is my agony.
RAGNAR: I hope that someday our gods can become friends.[32]

Context

This very short dialogue between Athelstan and Ragnar comes from the episode titled "The Choice". It is indicative of the friendship between the two men and serves as a reminder of how they learn from each other. The fragment recounts Athelstan's confusion and different religious experiences, in this instance in relation to natural phenomena, to rain and thunder. Competing gods occupy the stage throughout the series, but here they are embodied in two main characters.

Interpretation

Athelstan and Ragnar represent different religious worldviews, but their friendship is, for Ragnar, indicative of how the gods might be brought to mutual recognition. This possibility comes out even more strongly after Athelstan's death, when Ragnar reflects on their relationship (see below). The dialogue has strong traces of an

32 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XN05TfmdB4 [accessed 27 September 2019].

Fig. 4: Film still, Vikings, S2:E9 (00:27:49).

ongoing existential encounter between religions and of their interconnected convictions, beliefs and struggles. It ends with Ragnar's hope for a future friendship of the gods, a perspective more commensurate with diverse Viking religion than with contemporary Christian faith. The whole fragment serves as a metaphor for the peaceful coexistence of religions in the world of the viewer.

Season 2 – Episode 10: Ragnar Praying the Lord's Prayer

RAGNAR: I've seen you praying to your God. Will you teach me one of your prayers, so I can learn? *(Both kneel)*

ATHELSTAN: Our Father, who art in Heaven.

RAGNAR: Our Father, who art in Heaven.

ATHELSTAN: Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven… *(Shaky, nervous breaths)*

RAGNAR: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. *(Footsteps splash)*

ATHELSTAN: Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

RAGNAR: And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.[33]

33 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmyAXaOdxJE [accessed 27 September 2019].

Fig. 5: Film still, Vikings, S2:E10 (00:33:50).

Context

This episode bears the title "The Lord's Prayer" and is a striking example of the repeated religious encounters that characterize Hirst's script. Ragnar asks Athelstan to teach him a prayer familiar to him, within a context marked by their deep friendship and mutual recognition. As Athelstan prays the well-known words with Ragnar, the latter's growing interest in his friend's faith and convictions is also expressed. Ragnar's openness to learning of the rituals of another religion runs throughout the first seasons as evidence of his fascination with the unfamiliar.

Interpretation

The encounter with religious paradigms and symbols that are not one's own has a long history, as is revealed by the example of the material culture of the Viking Age. Andersson notes: "For much of the Viking Age, people in Scandinavia [...] had two different religious systems to relate to: the older indigenous Norse religion (Ásatrú) and Christianity."[34] Often the two were blended through a process of acculturation, yielding a hybrid evident in surviving artefacts such as crucifixes, icons, shrines and pendants. Expeditions created contacts between Viking homelands in Scandinavia and Christian Europe, and in the tenth century, several Viking leaders were baptized.

34 Andersson 2016, 82.

Fig. 6: Film still, Vikings, S3:E6 (00:43:38).

Season 3 – Episode 6: Ragnar's Speech after Athelstan's Death

RAGNAR: I never knew what a martyr was. I still don't. You were a brave man, Athelstan. I always respected you for that. You taught me so much. You saw yourself as weak and conflicted, but to me you were fearless because you dared to question. Why did you have to die? We had so much more to talk about. I always believed that death is a fate far better than life, for you will be reunited with lost loved ones. But we will never meet again, my friend, for I have a feeling that your god might object to me visiting you in heaven. What am I to do now, hm? I hate you for leaving me. I ache from your loss. There is nothing that can console me now. I am changed. So are you. Forgive me, my friend, not for what I have done. But for what I am about to do.[35]

Context

In a touching scene, Ragnar speaks these words after Floki the boatbuilder has killed Athelstan, but they serve also as evidence of his internal dialogue. Grieving deeply, Ragnar speaks of learning from Athelstan and responds to his death as a personal loss. He is convinced that their different religious backgrounds will mean they cannot be reunited in death. His earlier hope that his god and Athelstan's God could replicate

35 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iZLoRObShM [accessed 27 September 2019].

their own friendship now seems unrealistic. Ragnar and Athelstan may have learned from one another, but their gods will not come together as had the two men.

Interpretation

Ragnar expresses a longing to be with Athelstan in heaven but is aware of the objections to his presence. Ragnar's ambivalence in relation to Christianity throughout the series is a deliberate trope, showing the fabled figure torn between two religious realities. From the end of this scene onwards, Ragnar wears Athelstan's necklace, from which hangs a large cross. Death looked like the best option to Ragnar, but at this point he seems to change his convictions. Ragnar exchanges death as a core metaphor of the Viking religion for life as a core metaphor of Christianity. The symbolic, ritual and religious meaning of death has changed.

Season 3 – Episode 9: Ragnar's Baptism

SINRIC: How much treasure do you want to lift the siege and go away? *(speaking French)* 5,760 pounds in gold and silver? He *[the French king]* urges you to accept the offer. Reinforcements are on their way to Paris.

RAGNAR: Tell him I know that no one is coming to save him. *(Sinric speaking French)*

RAGNAR: And the offer is not enough. There is something I also seek that has no tangible worth, but to me is more precious. *(Sinric speaking French)* I want to be baptized. *(Sinric speaking French)*

SINRIC: He doesn't understand.

RAGNAR: I am a dying man. And when I die, I want to be reunited with my Christian friend, who happens to be in your heaven. *(Sinric speaking French)*

SINRIC: He says you will go to hell, not heaven.

RAGNAR: That is not your decision to make. *(Sinric speaking French)*

SINRIC: They will make arrangements for the ceremony.

RAGNAR: This is a man of God, is it not? And this is water, am I wrong? You will do it here, and you will do it now. *(Priest praying in French)*[36]

Context

In the context of the conflict with the French over Paris, we find further evidence of a crossing of religious boundaries and weighty exchange of religious meaning. Here,

36 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX0HPtXzWFk [accessed 27 September 2019].

Fig. 7: Film still, Vikings, S3:E9 (00:40:33).

Fig. 8: Film still, Vikings, S3:E9 (00:42:39).

again in season 3, in the midst of financial negotiations Ragnar, who is ill and dying, expresses his strong desire to be baptized, in order that he might be reunited with his friend Athelstan when they are both in heaven.

Interpretation

As episode 6 of this same season made evident, Ragnar is committed to being in the presence of his friend. His view runs: Athelstan believed in a peaceful afterlife in heaven; Athelstan died; I believe in his truth claims and he must therefore be in heaven; I want to be with him; I need to go to heaven when I die. The Catholic bishop is not willing to perform the baptism and insists that a pagan like Ragnar will go to hell not heaven. The dialogue around this issue, which is in part in medieval French, bears traces of a deep confusion. Ragnar is subsequently baptized, an event tellingly staged: Ragnar and the baptizing priest are positioned centrally, with the French on one side of the water and Ragnar's family watching from the other, in a juxtaposition of religious backgrounds and values. Historically, baptisms of Viking kings did take place, as noted above.

Season 4 – Episode 14 The Dialogue about Heaven, Walhalla and the Existence of God/the gods

RAGNAR: What if your God does not exist?
ECBERT: My dear friend, what are you talking about?
RAGNAR: Your God, my gods, what if they don't exist?
ECBERT: Well, if God or the gods don't exist, then nothing has meaning.
RAGNAR: Or everything has meaning.
ECBERT: What on earth does that mean?
RAGNAR: Why do you need your God?
ECBERT: Well, if there were no gods, then anyone could do anything, and nothing would matter. You could do as you liked and nothing would be real and nothing would have meaning or value. So, even if the gods don't exist, it's still necessary to have them.
RAGNAR: If they don't exist, then they don't exist. We have to live with it.
ECBERT: Ah, yes, but you don't. You don't live with it. You only think of death. You only think of Valhalla. *(Sighs)*
RAGNAR: And all you think about is heaven! Which seems like a ridiculous place, where everybody is always happy.
ECBERT: Valhalla is ridiculous! All the dead warriors get to fight again in the courtyard each morning, and kill each other again. *(Chuckles)* And then they all have supper together! *(Chuckles)*
RAGNAR: Then they are both ridiculous.[37]

37 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3cimQ6yIT8 [accessed 4 October 2019].

Fig. 9: Film still, Vikings, S4:E14 (00:31:48).

Context

With our final fragment, we are at a point near the end of Ragnar's life. Now a prisoner of King Ecbert, Ragnar does not have long to live. The two men admire each other and cannot be described simply as enemies. Each is fascinated by the other, even to the extent that as Ragnar dies in the snake pit, Ecbert is there to watch, disguised as a monk.

Interpretation

This exchange is profound. Having questioned each other's perspective on the existence of the gods or God, the two men make light of their related beliefs about an afterlife. In S3:E9, Ragnar had been baptized in hopes of joining his friend Athelstan in heaven. Here, with irony and humor, Ecbert and Ragnar relativize each other's core convictions. They address the meaning of religion in general and its benefits for humanity, although their conversation does not reach a conclusive end. Ecbert's perspective has a particularly striking historical-theological angle, for in an age in which the existence and presence of God were not theologically disputed, Ecbert speaks of God/gods as not existing but required for meaning-making – here something of postmodern philosophy seeps into the script.

Practical Theology, Film and Religion

The fragments discussed here are drawn from larger patterns across the series that form from the exchange and sharing of religious meaning. They are not simply entertaining, but indicative of a serious attempt to provide a chain of narrative moments that reflect on existential questions and issues of religion and faith. As noted, scriptwriter Michael Hirst intentionally shaped the series to contain a variety of reflective dialogues of meaning. The idea of liquefaction connects very well to this dynamic within the the VIKINGS series (and probably in many others).

Film and modern media, and art too, have taken on some of the role previously held by institutional providers of religious meaning. The more film (in our case) is a deliberate construct to spread that meaning normatively, the greater the liquefaction. Christopher Deacy, who exegetes this reality, cites Conrad Ostwalt:

> We are uncomfortable with religion, yet we are faced with it at every turn. It is not the case that religion is fading with the secularization of society; rather, religion is being popularized, scattered, and secularized through extra-ecclesiastical institutions. We find ourselves in a contradictory age in which secularity and religious images coexist.[38]

Deacy concludes that religion is located not simply in churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, but also in the middle of popular culture[39]. In such a changing culture, might going to a movie be characterized as a religious activity?[40]

Conclusions

Like film, television series too, as we have seen in the case of VIKINGS, can address vital questions about the current shifting spiritual landscape. They can function as mirrors of a normative religious culture or indicate how popular culture ingests religious value and religious orientation. The audience response to the depiction on screen is part of a dialogue, a conversation as in this article, on religious themes. Film and television hold religious capital and make religious narratives accessible for audiences, even if unplanned by the scriptwriters. The audience will then benefit

38 Deacy 2005, 12.

39 Deacy 2005, 13.

40 Compare Marsh 2004. Marsh writes about film-viewing as a religious practice. See also Loughlin 2004.

from a guide to what it is seeing and hearing. The series VIKINGS is, as we have seen here, a rich source for reflection on religious themes, symbols and rituals and for understanding the complex interactions of historically intertwined religions, in this instance Christian and pagan. That interaction is nuanced. Strong and often accurate historical references create a liquefaction of meaning at so many points in the series, providing, for example, rich teaching moments for religious education and historical study that highlight the complexities of lived religion.

Suggestions for Further Research

Further research could include an in-depth qualitative project that addresses how audiences digest and interpret what they see in a series of this kind. Are audience responses in line with the initial motives of directors and scriptwriters? The tensions between intention and reception certainly merit further research, particularly in terms of identity construction, education and interreligious dialogue. What is the impact of the liquefaction of meaning through film and modern media on everyday religious practice? How might the popularization of religion affect religious experience?

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Filmography

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