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THE HELIAND: "A BEAUTIFUL HAPPINESS"

Presenting Christ to the Early Medieval North

In one of the richest and most remarkable interviews to appear in *Road to Emmaus Journal*, we are pleased to present Rev. Fr. G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., Professor of German at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. One of Fr. Murphy's life-long interests has been the conversion of the Germanic-speaking peoples of northern Europe to Christianity, reflected in three publications: his remarkable translation of the early Saxon epic, *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel*; as well as his own books, *The Saxon Savior: The Germanic Transformation of the Gospel in the Ninth-Century Heliand*; and *Tree of Salvation: Yggdrasil and the Cross in the North.*

Our editor relates, "I arrived at Georgetown forty minutes before I was to meet Fr. Murphy at the Jesuit Residence Hall. Although I had looked at maps of the university, the hall wasn't marked, but I understood that it was at the back of the campus overlooking the Potomac River. When the bus dropped me off at the main gate, I walked to the new library, and then along a brick roadway winding down a hill lined with stately enclaves of university buildings. At the bottom of the long descent, the road intersected with a cross street, continuing on the other side as a narrow walking path that bordered the last few buildings.

"Everything seemed well signposted – except the hall – and just as I thought, 'I don't have much time. I wish there was some kind of sign,' I unexpectedly heard the sound of galloping hooves. I turned and, racing down the hill behind me, swerving in and out of the crowd, was a glistening-coated, wild-eyed deer. As she flew past she was so close that I knew that if I reached out I would touch her. Crossing the road in a single bound, she turned into the shrubbery behind the last building. Those who had stopped to look smiled and walked on, and I turned to a passerby, 'Does this kind of thing happen often?' 'Of course not,' she replied. 'This is the middle of D.C.… It has to have been staged.' We waited a moment until she shrugged and moved on.

Opposite: Christ hanging from the tree of life. Detail of the runic tenth-century Jelling Stone, Denmark.

"As I stood marveling at such an unexpected pleasure, I laughed to myself, 'You are here for an interview on medieval Europe, a little lost, and when a wild deer crosses your path you aren't going to follow it?' So, ignoring the busy cross street, I stepped onto the walkway. As I approached the greenery where the deer had turned, I glanced up at the last building and saw over the entrance: Jesuit Residence Hall.

"Upon meeting Fr. Murphy, I said, 'Father, we are going to have a wonderful interview. We've just had a portent!' When I told him what had happened, he replied, 'Yes, we have a group of deer that congregate in the small grove of trees behind our residence in the early morning, though I'm not sure where they live.' Then seeing my disappointment, he added with a smile: 'But in forty years, I've never heard of one running through campus.' And so began our rich and moving conversation."

From Soviet East Berlin to Ninth-Century Saxony

RTE: Father Murphy, thank you for speaking with us about this marvelous topic, the coming of Christianity to Saxony and Northern Europe. Can you please introduce us to the *Heliand*, the early Christian epic that so few of us have heard of?

FR. MURPHY: The *Heliand* is the Gospel story retold for the ninth-century Saxon people. Some call it a poetic paraphrase of the Gospel and I've described it as the first work attempting to incorporate Christianity into Germanic culture – that of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Holland, and England. It is an attempt to get Scripture out of its original setting and into this medieval northern European world. The *Heliand* is the oldest epic work of German literature, and some say, the most fascinating of all epics. It is an amazing achievement.

RTE: And what does "*Heliand*" mean?

FR. MURPHY: It is Saxon German for "The Savior," but it has only been named this since its publication as a book in 1822. For the entire millennium before that, it was an unsigned manuscript.

RTE: Before we go further, I understand that there is a fascinating story that led up to your translating the *Heliand* into English. May we start there?

FR. MURPHY: Yes. I had planned to write my dissertation on Bertolt Brecht and *Mother Courage and Her Children*, but had trouble with the topic because Harvard wanted to know, "Why do you, as a Catholic priest, want to write a dissertation on that Communist?" I replied, "There's a lot more to Brecht than Communism." In fact, I was interested in the Christian underpinnings that I could see in Brecht's writings. They finally allowed me to study this and I finished up in 1973. However, it was difficult to publish in that era because claiming that there were Christian tendencies in a Marxist author made both sides angry. Christians disliked Brecht's Marxism, and the Marxists hated the thought of religious influence on one of their own. That spirit has gone, but it was very much alive then and I thought, "No one will believe me unless I go to Germany and find his Bible." I knew he had used one because his allusions were too word for word. They weren't just schoolboy memories.

To my eternal surprise, I did find his Bible. It was in Brecht's house in East Berlin, which at that time functioned as both the Brecht museum and an art exhibition space. This was in the bad old days of the Soviet rule of East Berlin, so in 1976, before I crossed the border, I took off my priest's collar and put a cross on my lapel, downplaying my clerical status because I didn't want to be arrested.

Going through customs was unsettling because they took your passport away to stamp it, and then made you buy East German currency. The lady in charge of the Brecht museum, though, was marvelous. She had been Brecht's secretary and could read his difficult handwriting, so when I told her about my dissertation she replied, "This is wonderful," and brought down his Bible for me to see. As I thought, he had made notations in the margins next to many of the verses he had used. I said, "I can't publish this paper about Brecht unless I have proof, so do you mind if I take photographs of his New Testament with the margin comments?" She said, "It's alright with me, but I don't have the authority to allow you to do so. I have to go speak to..." and here she used the German expression, "...the upper powers."

Then she smiled at me and closed the door with a bang. I thought, "Now, that was a signal. She's saying, 'Hurry up and take the photo, because you might get a "No,"' and I could also end up in an East German jail for ten years for spying on their cultural goods." I had borrowed a camera from some Georgetown students, and finally decided, "I'm going to take the risk." I took the photos, and when the secretary finally returned she surprisingly

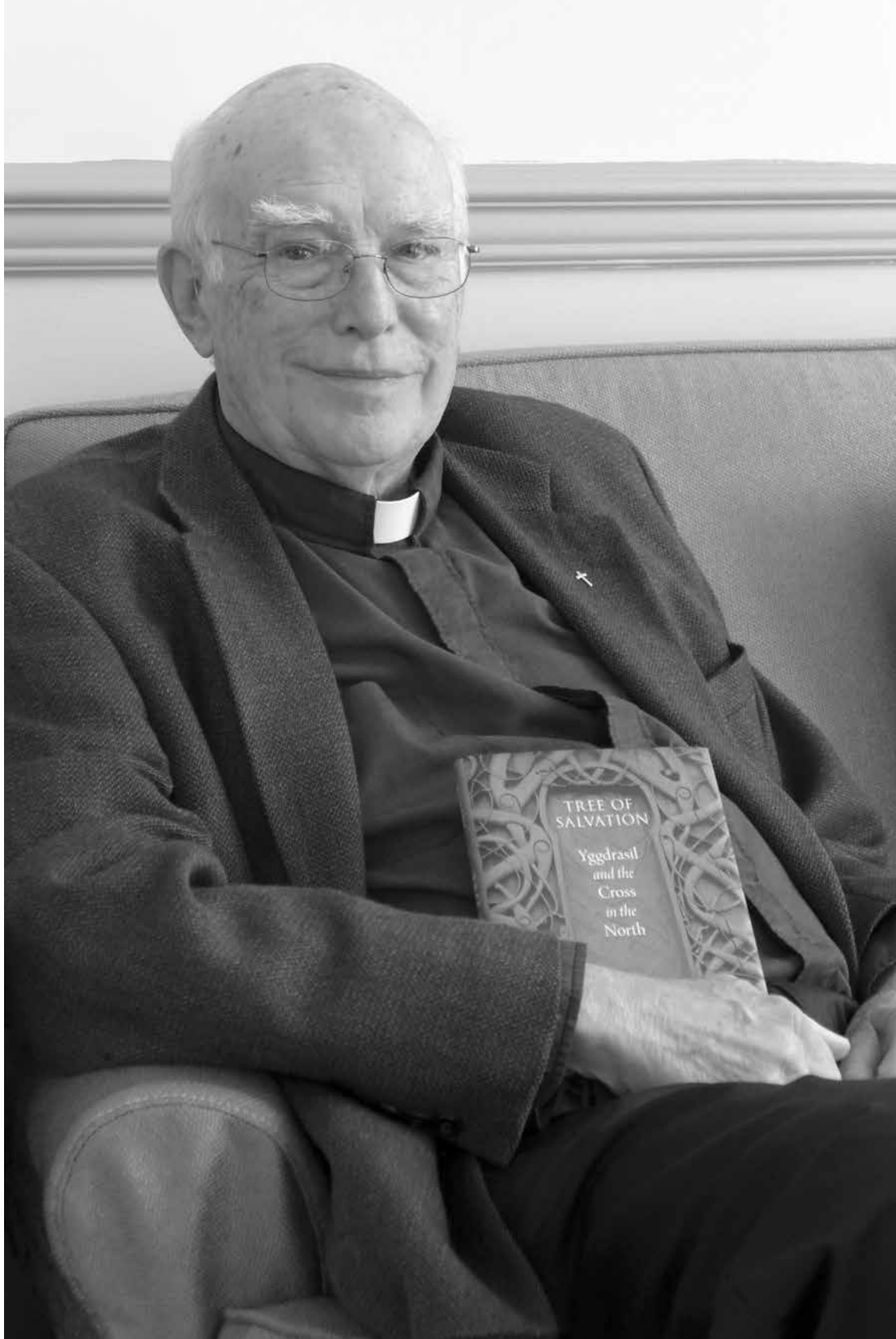
said, “They say it is alright.” So, to make it look credible, I took a few extras. Then I put the camera in my pocket, thanked her, and started back to the train station.

Within a block I discovered that there were two men following me. This was the old Cold War days, remember, so just like in a spy movie, I thought, “Here’s a little watch store. I’m going to stop and look in the window to see what they do.” I turned to look, and immediately they stopped to look into another window.

I walked on towards the train station where there was a restaurant with outdoor tables. I called the waiter over to ask if he would take marks because I had run out of the East German currency. He said, “I will very gladly take anything,” to which I replied, “All I want is soup and half a sandwich.” Meanwhile, the men sat down about five tables away. When the waiter returned, I said, “I’ll pay in advance if that’s alright,” so he wrote it up. The men following me hadn’t ordered yet, so after I paid I got up quickly, leaving the food untouched, and took off.

I was heading for the Friedrichstrasse, the main train station in Berlin that everything comes through on four or five levels of track – both huge international trains and tiny locals that just go to the next neighborhood. Because I was a little panicked, I opened the camera, took out the roll of film and put it in my pocket. If they demanded the camera, I’d have given it to them, but I didn’t want to lose those proofs. I couldn’t see the fellows behind me anymore, but suddenly two guards stepped out from behind a marble pillar with submachine guns. I walked straight over to a newspaper kiosk and half-whispered, “Can you tell me where I can get the next train to the American sector?” The news seller started to speak when, all of a sudden, he looked over my shoulder, saw the guards coming, and said quietly, “I’ll tell you what to do. When you leave the kiosk, turn left and go straight up the stairs you will see there and then down the other side. When you get to the platform, look to your left again. That is the train that goes directly to the American sector.”

I said, “Thank you very much,” and as I started to walk away he said, “Wait a minute. Put this newspaper under your arm.” He wanted it to look as if we had only been talking about newspapers, and this was when things got a little harrowing. I got to the steps he had pointed out, and was just starting down the other side when, like Lot’s wife, I turned around. I wanted to know,



Opposite: Fr. G. Ronald Murphy S.J.

"Am I just paranoid, or are these guys really after me?" They weren't walking anymore, they were moving fast, so I started to run. Now, that is the worst thing you can do; you should never run, but I did, and I'd just made it up the steps of the train when the door shut, "Kablam!"

I ducked into one of the compartments, but I didn't know what to do because the guards with the submachine guns were on the platform going from car to car, looking in the windows. Suddenly, I felt myself pulled down onto the seat by the back of my coat. It was an older woman who told me to sit down. I sat next to her, and was turning to face the center aisle, hoping they wouldn't see me, when she half moved out of her seat and put her back to the window so they couldn't see in. Then she started speaking what sounded like gibberish.

I thought, "Am I so scared now that I can't understand a word of German? This is terrible." I kept repeating over and over to myself, "Please, train start!" "Please, train start!" When it finally jerked forward, she relaxed back into her seat as if nothing had happened. I said, "Thank you very kindly for giving me this seat," and she replied in the most perfectly normal German you can imagine. So, thank you my dear woman, wherever you are.

Then I said, "May I ask you a question? I'm trying to get to Checkpoint Charlie, the American sector. "Can you tell me which stop that is?" She said, "Yes, I can. All you have to do is to watch where I get off. When I get off, don't count that stop, but count the next three – one, two, three – and get off at the third. That's the right one." I said "Thank you very much," and that was the end of our conversation. When she left I noticed that she had a slight limp, and I thought, "Ye gods, just like my grandmother." I went on and, although I'm not a right-winger, I've never felt quite so happy about my country as when I saw the American flag flying over Checkpoint Charlie.

When I got back to the United States, I had the pictures developed and sent them to the publisher, who said, "Of course, we will publish immediately. How rare it is in literary studies to ever get proof, and you have it." So, they published the dissertation as *Brecht and the Bible: A Study of Religious Nihilism and Human Weakness in Brecht's Plays*. Unfortunately, now, almost fifty years later, Brecht's Christian influence is largely unacknowledged because of his Marxism.

Then I said to myself, "That's the latest in German literature, but I wonder where this Christian influence in German literature began. Where did all of this start?" So that was the long route back and how I got to the *Heliand*.

Upper Photo: Bertold Brecht House and Museum in former East Berlin.
Lower Photo: Checkpoint Charlie, Berlin, 1961.

Once I started looking at the *Heliand* I discovered that although there was only one very poor English translation, there was a much better one in modern German, so after I studied it, I wrote *The Saxon Savior*, which explains the context of the *Heliand* and how the conversion came about.

I was surprised when Oxford University Press decided that they wanted to publish *The Saxon Savior*. Once they told me that *The Saxon Savior* was doing well, I said, "Well, then, how would you like a translation of the *Heliand*?" I cast it as the first work to imagine Christianity in Germanic culture (that of Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Holland and England) and when the editor agreed, I started. I wanted to finish in a year, so I set myself the task of doing two pages a day. In the morning, I would translate the two pages from the *Heliand*, and in the afternoon I would come back and insert the commentary at the bottom of each page. Before evening, I would type it up. I'd never been that systematic about anything before.

After the *Heliand* translation, I wrote *Tree of Salvation: Yggdrasil and the Cross in the North*, which is a deeper look at how the Germanic mythology of the tree of life played out in Christian terms, and the remnants of it we have today.

I. The Origins of the *Heliand*

RTE: Thank you for that electrifying and moving account. Can you tell us what makes the *Heliand* unique as epic literature, and why it isn't as familiar to us as *Beowulf* and other early medieval works?

FR. MURPHY: As I said, some call the *Heliand* a poetic paraphrase of the Gospel, and that is accurate. It's not a literal translation, it's a translation that wants you to realize what the original has to say – not just to memorize it and then let it go in one ear and out the other. This required the author to write it as a poetic retelling that would be publicly recited, and in Saxon German the entire epic is in alliterative verse.

As to why we haven't heard of it, scholars usually have a secular view of German literature, so they haven't taken this remarkable Christian work quite seriously. As Harvard graduate students in German in the 1970s, we neither studied it, nor was it on the required reading list. I may have known that it existed, but that was all.

The *Heliand's* Saxon Author

RTE: What do we know about the author and his audience?

FR. MURPHY: We don't know a thing about the author, but I suspect he may have come out of the Monastery of Fulda in south-central Germany, or possibly Corvey in Saxon territory. The *Heliand* is written in Old Saxon, the language of the Saxons who did not migrate to England around AD 450. These were the ones who stayed home. We know the date of the text to be somewhere between 800 and 850, but of the author we have no real knowledge. He must have been a Saxon, he must have been a great poet, and because he knows so much about war, he must have been a warrior. He was probably of the nobility because his writing style is so fine. One document that I have in the book is a letter from Emperor Louis the Pious, ordering a poetic translation of the Gospel in Saxon. If that document is correct, and it probably is, this means that the author is following orders: "Use poetry that is perhaps different than the New Testament, but translate everything so that the Saxons comprehend it."

The scholarly consensus is that the author was following instructions, but that he also did the translation out of personal desire, because this is not the kind of command you hand to an ordinary monk in a monastery. You can only give it to an accomplished poet.

RTE: You feel his love for the Saxon people.

FR. MURPHY: You do, and his love for his own stories. Just because Christianity has come does not mean that the nights get shorter. In the far north, winters are one-tenth daylight and nine-tenths cold night. You sit around a fire and tell stories, as they have done for many generations. And now that Christianity has come, are there to be no more stories, and you are to be bored all evening? The *Heliand* author has to have been one of their poets, and the Latin word they used for him is *vates*, that is, an epic poet.

RTE: What challenges would this translation have presented to the author?

FR. MURPHY: He had to deal with elements that were unfamiliar to these Saxon and other Germanic cultures. For example, you are going to have trouble with your audience based on things like, "Blessed are the peace-makers." What did he do with that? Something very northern: "Blessed are those who

do not like to start fights." Every teenager in the world understands that, boys especially. Then he threw in something for us Americans, though he hadn't heard of us yet: "Blessed are those who do not like to start fights … or court cases." In other words, "Don't love litigation." He was doing what a person writing a sermon does; making the message relevant to the current situation.

The Structure of the *Heliand*

FR. MURPHY: Our New Testament Gospel is unique in that, first, it is a story-form with a sermon inside the story: the parables are short-stories aimed at teaching a moral through the story; the Passion accounts tell you what happened to Christ at the Crucifixion; while the Sermon on the Mount is more of a traditional sermon. Then we have centuries of traditions and legends, like those surrounding Christmas and Easter that take their inspiration from the Gospel. It's a mixed genre.

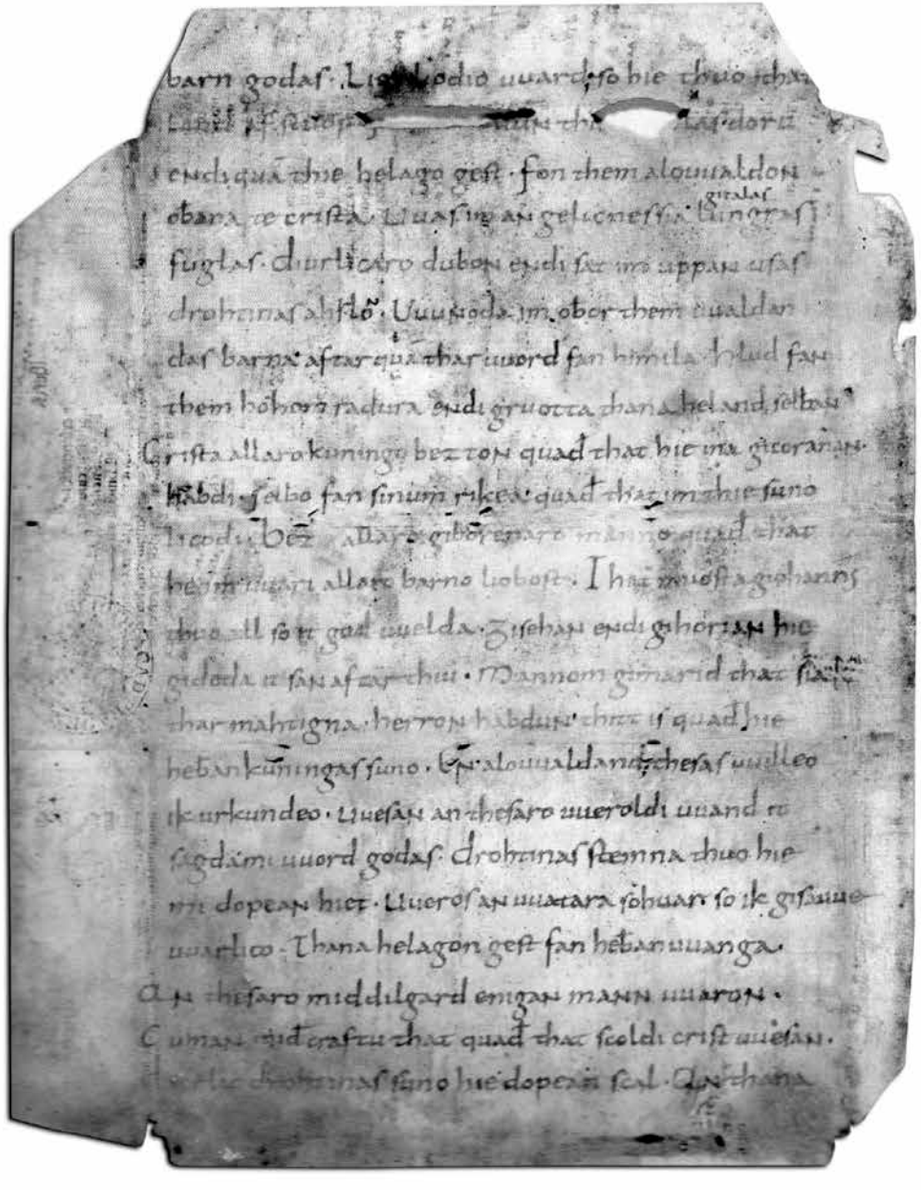
Now, when you come to the *Heliand*, the author wants to put it in the form of an epic: Jesus versus Satan, the enemy. This is taking it out of the New Testament context and casting it as a champion fight. For example, one of the ways they settled legal cases in the north was by oath. In the case of a purloined cow, an accused man might swear by Woden and all of the Fates: "I did not steal his cow," while the owner insists that he did. If you are the judge, how do you tell the truth? One way they settled things was for the accuser and the accused to both pick a champion, and the champions would undergo a test. One test was to put your hands out and hold them out; the first person whose hands drop from sheer tiredness loses. So now for the northern mind, you have Jesus behaving like a champion for the woman taken in adultery.

RTE: And later, with his arms outstretched on the Cross.

FR. MURPHY: Yes. You get all sorts of nice changes and this becomes a beautiful act of devotion and enlightenment for yourself as you try to work this out. The *Heliand's* author captured Northern European psychology at the beginning and it still works today.

Another example of this: If we want to write, "We are saved by faith," how would the *Heliand* translate "faith"? The author had a choice of two words

Opposite: Fulda Monastery, Hesse, Germany, where the Heliand may have been written.



in the original, one is faith, *gilobo*, which means "what you prefer." Do you prefer Woden or do you prefer Christ? What is your *gilobo*, your faith?

The other word is *treuwa* and this means "loyalty" or "faithfulness." It doesn't just mean that something is true, as in the actual state of affairs; the older meaning was to be true *to someone*, and that still exists in our love songs. So, if you want to say, "We are saved by faith," the *Heliand* says, "We are saved by faithfulness." And this is still deep in our own culture. Even the motto of the Marines is *Semper Fidelis* – Always Faithful. Although ours is a culture with a fifty percent divorce rate, fidelity is what this culture really wants. That is us at our best, and the *Heliand* knows all about that.

So how are you saved? In the *Heliand*, instead of being saved by faith in Jesus, you are saved by faithfulness to Jesus. Is it alright to say that? Yes, it will make people think. The Mediterranean desert culture in which Christ was raised is fine, but it is not ours. I first realized this in the passage where Christ spent forty days and forty nights in the desert where He was tempted by Satan. The *Heliand* instead puts him deep in the forest, which is northern Europe's scary supernatural place, even in the fairy tales.

The Slow Passage of Time

RTE: Can you begin to tell us about that supernatural place and the pre-Christian world view of the North?

FR. MURPHY: As you read back in time, you discover the existence of Yggdrasil, the tree of life that upholds the universe, and learn that every morning when the gods awaken, they come down to sit at the base of the tree to have their daily divine consultation. And even when they are not consulting, three women – Past, Present, Future – are there watering the tree.

RTE: Who are these women?

FR. MURPHY: Almost the center of Germanic mythology. The Italians would call them the three fates; in Germanic, Wurd, Verdanti, and Skuld. They are also called the Norns, and their names in English are "What has happened," What is happening," and "What shall happen," and they represent the slow passage of time watering the tree. They sit at the base of the tree of life, and

Opposite: Fragment of the Heliand, German Historical Museum, Berlin.

in one version of this story, the first one takes sheep's wool and twists it into thread. The woman in the middle sits with a ruler measuring how long, and the one at the end has the scissors: "Now!"

To my students this sounds like a funny religion at first, but it's not funny at all, and I often ask them, "You are at Georgetown now, but how did you get here?" "Well, my grandfather settled here, my parents moved there, and I visited three colleges to decide – I was always interested in Foreign Service…." With this explanation, I'm hearing threads being woven together until finally we get a narrative that stretches across time to the present. And this narrative is measured; you will not live forever. At some point the thread will be cut. So Skuld (Shall), the woman who knows the future, was the one the Germans were most concerned about, both before and after Christianity came, "How can we know what shall come to pass?"

Although in the modern world we don't believe there are three women timing us, we have something better. Everyone in the classroom has either a wristwatch or a magic pad that shows you the hour: we are timed creatures. We don't think about this, but the northern peoples did, and they were worried. They had seen those who had come and gone and they had seen death. If you live in a society where warfare is frequent, especially for men, you are aware that you can die easily and quickly. And then what about your wife and children? So before going into battle they would get the pagan priest to toss the runes. "Are we going to win or lose, and if we are going to lose, let's not do this." We have this from Roman authorities such as Terence, who wrote that while the Germanic peoples were very warlike, they also wanted to know what future the past and present were flowing into.

Explaining Divinity

FR. MURPHY: Because of this acute consciousness of time, you have to watch yourself when you try to explain the Gospel. As we said, if you want to write "Jesus is God," what do you mean? Do you mean He is like Woden and Thor and Freya? But they are not immortal; they are going to die at the end of the world. The three women who spin and measure time are not going to die, but their further role is unclear. All we know is that the past, present, and future will keep on happening. Then because Jesus is immortal, do you want to say that He is like one of the three fates? No, because they don't resurrect. In other words, before you start saying that Jesus is God, you have to understand what these words mean to the people you have come to.

RTE: Was there any kind of formulated belief to work from?

FR. MURPHY: No. They had myths, but they didn't bother to philosophize or do systematic theology with this. These were popular things that everyone knew; there was not much of a system. This continually brings you up short as a missionary because before I even attempt to speak, I need to know what the words mean to them.

In another example from the *Heliand*, the author often gets away with simply saying that Jesus is the Chieftain, that is, your personal lord. When he uses words for God, it's often the "Chieftain of heaven." He avoids the word "God," because you cannot control what other people mean by it. At the beginning, he calls God the Father, the Creator: "He who set everything in motion has sent his chieftain, Jesus, to rule your tribe." So, Jesus is there to be your champion, to protect and help you, especially against death, and He also has a Chieftain to whom He is personally loyal.

This is a major difference between the Mediterranean and the North. Even Martin Luther is thinking in these Germanic terms of personal loyalty to Jesus Christ. "If I am loyal to him, He will be loyal to me." Whereas in the Jewish tradition it runs, "O Lord, all my life, I have observed everything You commanded." In other words, "Since I follow the commandments, isn't everything okay?" The Jews even call the Old Testament the Torah, or "the Law." And then we have St. Paul insisting, "It's not by the law you are saved, you are saved because He is good and loves mankind."

Northern Europeans don't have "the Law." If you were to introduce this concept, by asking, "Do you work on the Sabbath?" they would probably answer, "What day is that?" or "Working? We plant, we hunt, and we fish if it's not raining. Is that what you mean by the Law?" This was a problem when Paul began converting Gentiles. Most of the Jewish Christians still thought we should be observing every article of the Law. Saint Paul responded, "Not necessary," and poor John was in the middle protesting, "No, no, love is what it is all about." Then you get this further complication in northern Europe, where everything is about personal loyalty between a chieftain and his men. He will save and protect them, and they will gather round to defend him.

So, the Germanic-speaking peoples use different models for basic human religious thought, always with time and those three women lurking in the

background. And this is curious, because you can't be loyal to these women; you can't even pray to them: "I haven't finished my lecture and there are only two minutes left of class. Change the time for me." You are wasting your breath.

Time is potent. In class, I have an hourglass, and I tell the students, "The whole time we are talking here, that sand is flowing downward, yet it is not going anywhere. If I walk from one side of the class to another, I can measure my steps in terms of paces: one, two, three..., but what does this strange thing measure? Something we can't see, but that we believe is happening in this room. We believe it was happening before breakfast and will continue after we go to sleep. It's like a spiritual entity, isn't it? You can't see it, you can't hear it, and yet you know it is there." That was their religion, and it wasn't so laughable.

So I try to defend paganism because it was human. These people have perceived that there is an invisible entity, "everywhere present and filling all things," and that is very close to the Holy Spirit. I wouldn't mess with that if I was a missionary.

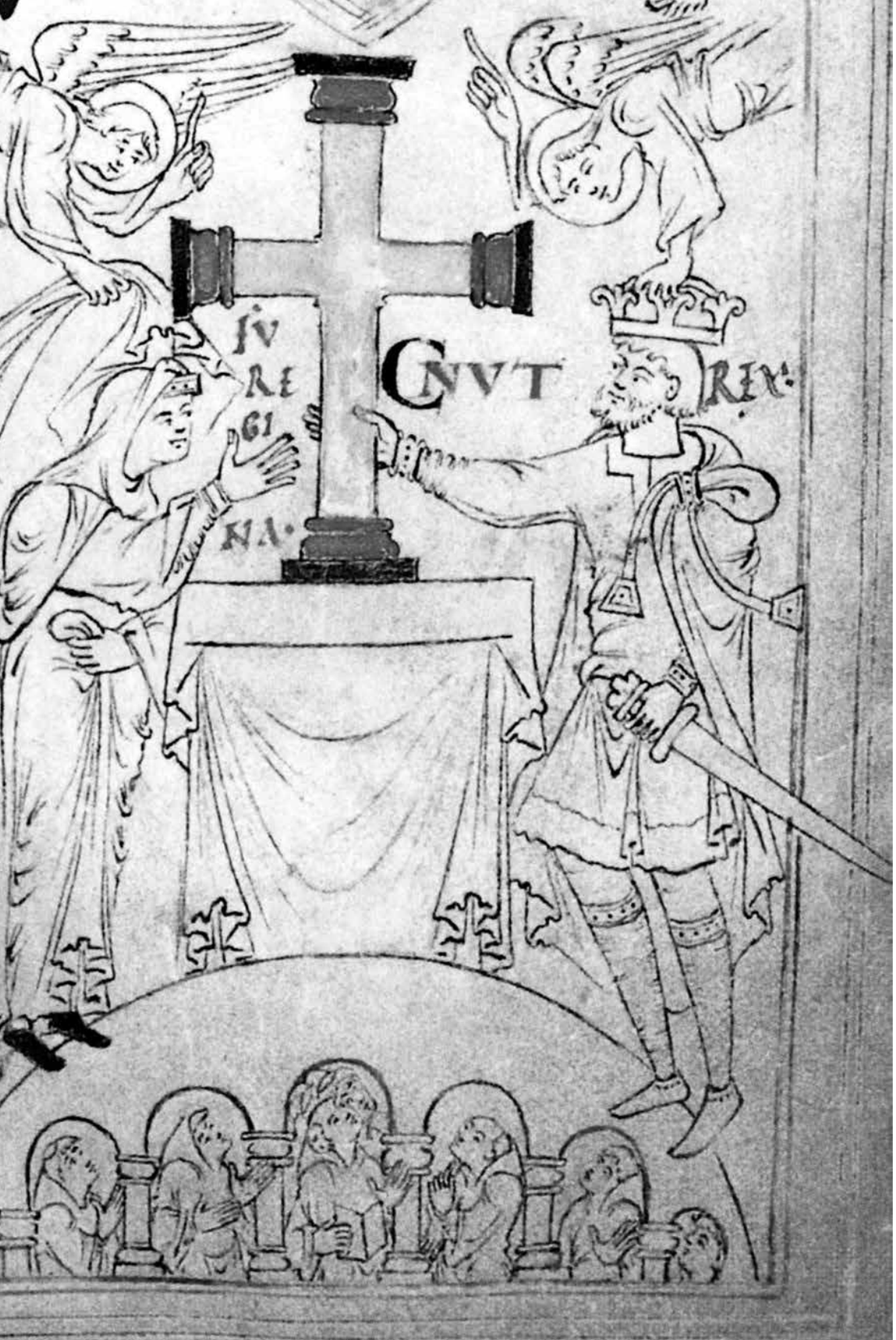
And if they claim that their tree of life is a sign of the cosmos; that this tree always continues to grow; that it is immune to destruction at the end of time and will protect the last boy and girl in the world, you don't have to kick this whole religion out of the window. It has many beautiful images that ring true.

The *Heliand's* Inculturation

RTE: My first impression was that the *Heliand's* author used Tatian's second-century *Diatessaron* as a model to create a single continuous narrative of the life of Christ that would have an epic appeal to the Saxons. Would his method be similar to St. Luke's Hellenized gospel that describes the Hebrew context in terms that his Greek audience can understand?

FR. MURPHY: That's absolutely correct, and it is parallel to Luke's Hellenized gospel. One of my favorite examples of the author's sophisticated approach is from the *Heliand's* Nativity story, where the Wise Men are given a chance to hold the Christ Child. Here the author is very clever. Instead of using the

Opposite: Kaupanger Stave Church built in 1140, Sogn, Norway.



phrase, "the Little Person" which he uses a lot, he switches over to *kind*, which is "child" so that he can use the neutral pronoun "it." This is because he wants to say, "They gave their gifts to Mary, and in return they received It in their hands." The Catholics would have understood what was going on, but not everyone, and perhaps not even a Byzantine listener, if they had already begun receiving Holy Communion from a spoon. "They received It in their hands," is really quite nice.

RTE: So, "It" would have referenced both the Child and the Body of Christ in Holy Communion?

FR. MURPHY: In both senses.

RTE: And he would be telling his Saxon listeners that they too could hold Christ. This is amazing!

FR. MURPHY: Yes. In the early 800s, Catholics still received Holy Communion in the hand. It was not until the tenth or eleventh century that the priests began placing the host in the mouth. In early centuries, the Orthodox also received in the hand, as their priests do now in the altar. I'm not sure when they switched over to the spoon, but Catholics also sometimes used a metal tube to drink from the chalice in the Middle Ages.

RTE: What a mind and heart he had, to use such layered meanings to present the Gospel in a way that could be recognized by a Saxon.

FR. MURPHY: I think so, too. There are also places where the Saxon culture helped him to understand the Gospel better. Every time he had to ask, "How would we say that?" it became richer for himself when the solution came. When I was translating, I'd occasionally come to places that just stopped me. I began asking him for help: "I have no idea of who you are, but give me a hand with this! I can't figure out what you mean. Did you leave a verb out? Tell me." I got through everything, so he must have been helping overtime.

Another problem for him was the crucifixion. They did not crucify up north, so how are you going to portray this? They did hang prisoners from a tree branch, but that was only for special worship connected with Yggdrasil. A normal criminal – for example, someone who betrayed their chieftain –

Opposite: King Canute. The New Minster Liber Vitae, Winchester, 1031, British Library MS. Stowe 944.

would be hoisted up a pole and then hung by the neck. So, when Jesus is crucified, the author uses both images: "They drove the cold nails through his hands and he hung from the tree." He satisfied both traditions yet didn't betray his Christian roots.

Influence of the *Heliand* in the North

RTE: How far did the *Heliand* spread? In one of your books you mention that King Canute, the eleventh-century ruler of Denmark, England and Norway, also had a copy.

FR. MURPHY: We wish we knew how great the influence was. Canute spoke Danish and Anglo-Saxon and he could also read Saxon, so we are certain that he used his copy of the *Heliand*. He was interested in holding his little Scandinavian empire together, and he probably thought that the *Heliand* would help, because then, "we can 'speak Bible' in all three countries." The Old Saxon spoken on the continent in Germany was so close to the Anglo-Saxon of the British that there would have been no problem. The copy of Canute's *Heliand* that I examined in the British Library seems quickly done. The capital letters in the second half are not filled in with color as in the first half, as if the copyist hadn't quite finished before he had to turn it over.

Personally, I think that the *Heliand's* influence was widespread until 1066, when the Normans invaded England and English became the double language it is today. The Viking Normans had intermarried, forgotten their Danish and Norwegian, and now only spoke French. In coming to England, they seized the high ground – the castles, the law courts, the medical services, the Church. The native English people only spoke Anglo-Saxon, while the new ruling class spoke French, but they gradually blended until you get modern English.

RTE: Were there also copies of the *Heliand* in Scandinavia?

FR. MURPHY: It certainly is the same worldview, the same mythology, and they might have had copies, but I can't say anything definite beyond that. You would have needed educated and well-endowed monasteries to copy it. There was also the language problem. They would have gladly copied a Latin text, but they would have had to translate the *Heliand* from the Saxon.

And then you would need a native poet and translator, a gifted monk who understood both Saxon and Norwegian or Swedish. Today there are only two more-or-less full copies of the *Heliand*, one in England at the British Library and the other in Germany at the Bavarian State Library.

II. Converting the Saxons: An Historical Context

RTE: So, what was the historical context of the *Heliand*? The Saxon conversion is not as early as Gaul and Ireland, nor as late as Scandinavia.

FR. MURPHY: The context of the *Heliand* is warfare and forced conversion, and the Saxons were still occasionally raiding against Charlemagne as late as AD 842, around the time the *Heliand* was translated. They were not altogether happy to have been forced into a monarchy, and the Franks, in turn, did not care for chieftain societies. Germanic though he was, Charlemagne was imitating the rule of the Roman Emperor, which the Saxons resisted because their society was based on local loyalties: "I just swore loyalty to my chieftain last week, and how do you, Charlemagne, know the needs of my tribe or my family?" He did attempt to protect them against Viking raids, but not too effectively. Secondly, when Christian missionaries came from the Anglo-Saxons, they were not interested in doing what the *Heliand* did in making the Gospel the Saxons' own. Instead, the message was, "You do exactly what we do."

There were, of course, scattered missionaries to the Germanic-speaking peoples long before Charlemagne, and some of the Germanic tribes who migrated into Gaul and southward toward Rome had already been converted through contact with Christian populations. However, the first missionaries to the Germanic peoples on their own territory were probably sixth- to eighth-century Irish monks. These monks weren't rigid about harmless traditional practices, and when around December 25 they saw the locals carrying green boughs into their homes, the Irish would not have objected. However, the later Anglo-Saxon St. Boniface objected strongly and accused the Irish of permitting paganism. The Irish monks had one way of doing things, while the British monks directed by Rome and those under Charlemagne had another.

The Response of Pope Gregory the Great

Now good Pope Gregory the Great, who died in 604, a century before Boniface appeared, had said, "Let's allow them to keep practices that are not murderous or horrible." When Augustine of Canterbury asked Pope Gregory what to do about the pagan temples in England, he replied, "If in their houses of worship, they practiced human sacrifice, take the altars out and get rid of them, but if the temples themselves are beautiful and well-made, don't destroy them." I've always thought that was fair, because Christians didn't destroy Roman temples either. Often they put altars in them, such as in Rome's famous *Santa Maria Sopra Minerva*: St. Mary's Over Minerva. It's an honest name. "If they are well built, leave them alone. If human sacrifice has taken place in them, take the altars out and destroy them. If there are statues of the gods inside, take them out also, but if the temples are well-built, don't tear them down."

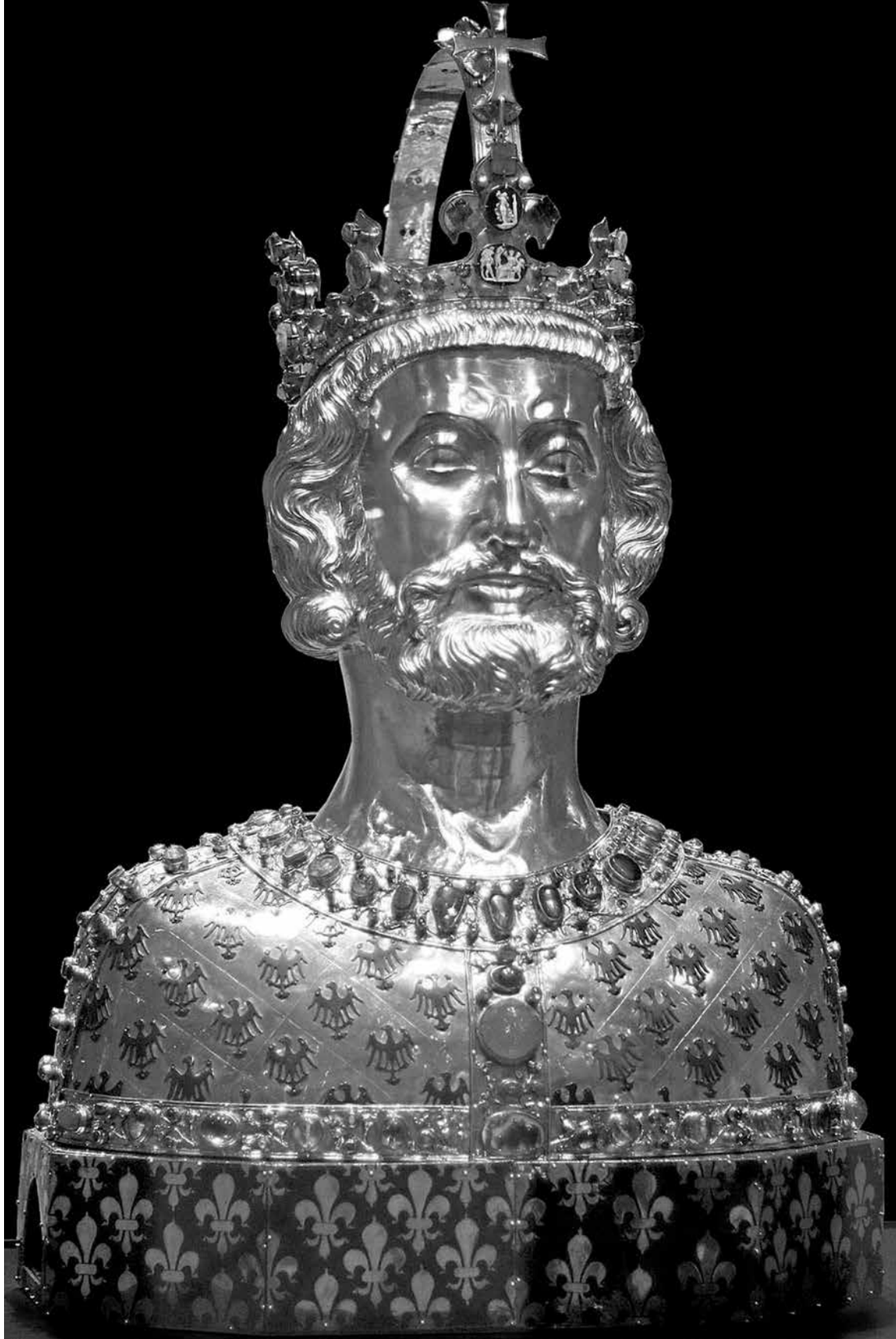
Another interesting note to this is the photo in *Tree of Salvation: Yggdrasil and the Cross in the North*. The face of Woden is on the capitol of one of the big staves, in the Hegge Stave Church in Valdres, Norway, but why would they carve this into a new church? Although now there is a ceiling, in the original church they would have seen it all of the time. I am convinced that about eighty percent of the stave churches of the north were there before we came, even if they have been restored and repaired in later centuries. When Gregory said, "Don't destroy them," he knew that there were wooden temples all over Britain and the North.

Also, Christianity didn't arrive in Britain or the North in one fell swoop, which means that the Romans who were there earlier hadn't torn down these pagan temples either, and at least some of the remaining churches originally could have been pagan temples. Of the Norwegian stave churches that survive today, Urnes is thought to be the earliest, built between 1046 and 1066.[1] At Sutton Hoo in England, historians have discovered that Raedwald, the late sixth-century chieftain of the East Angles, had a wooden temple with a side extension so that he could add Christ to his temple. So, there it would have been Woden, Thor, Freya and Christ.[2]

1 Under one of the postholes of the Urnes Church was a coin minted during the reign of Harald Hardrada, Viking King of Norway (1046-1066) and bearing his name.

2 Raedwald: The first Christian king of the Angles, baptized around 604 at the court of King Aethelbert of Kent. Aethelbert had been converted by St. Augustine of Canterbury, who arrived in 597 and corresponded with Pope Gregory the Great on how to proceed with the new converts to Christianity.

Opposite: Reliquary bust of Charlemagne, circa 1350. Aachen Cathedral Treasury.



There is good reason for thinking that other churches may have been former temples as well. Several have carved images of Woden, others have panthers, which in their mythology pulled the wagon of Freya. Now if these were Christian churches built from scratch, would you have these depictions?

Also, they didn't keep these carvings anywhere near the altar; they put them high up on pillars. It was later spread about in England that Woden was a distant historical ancestor of British royalty who was "made into a god," a reason to continue paying attention to Woden, the ancestor to whom we have to be loyal.

We have to remember that the sagas were great stories. Winters were long and you needed entertainment. You can't tell the bard, "Don't sing that." One Norwegian poet wrote a famous poem asking, "All of these years I've loved Woden and told tales about Freya, and now with this new religion I can't talk about her anymore?" I think that they continued to tell the old tales.

St. Boniface: Eager Faith and Precipitate Zeal

However, in about 724 at Geismar in Hesse, St. Boniface (not following the spirit of the Irish missionaries and St. Gregory) cut down the sacred Germanic tree, called Idsis or Thor's Oak, which the Saxons probably considered to be a living icon of Yggdrasil, the cosmic tree of life supporting the world. Ironically, in an earlier missionary attempt Boniface had tried to convert a group of Saxons and Frisians he found on the shoreline. They refused and pulled out their swords.

Boniface's insistence on chopping down the tree in Geismar was not right or necessary. In the traditional pictures, it is Boniface himself who chops it down, but it certainly could have been the soldiers who did it under his direction. What is recorded is that they had spears and made the Saxons stand in a circle to watch the tree fall: "See, your gods are worth nothing." Then, to rub salt in the wound, they ordered the Saxons to saw the downed tree into planks. All the while, it says in the Latin text, "They devoutly cursed him under their breath." Then they were forced to take the planks, build a small church in honor of St. Peter, and go in and pray. "Welcome to Christianity!" It was just the worst possible way to do this kind of thing.

Opposite: Stained glass depiction of St. Boniface. Church of Sts. Philip and James, Baltimore.

Later German Christians erased that episode from their minds, and now they remember Boniface as "our good holy patron saint," but the story is not that clean. He probably thought he was doing right, but it was a bad decision and it didn't work well with Saxon hearts and minds.

RTE: How did the *Heliand's* author respond to St. Boniface's earlier zeal?

FR. MURPHY: There is a place where he says, "Let the word of God fell evil," that I've sometimes translated as "chop down" to make it clearer. He is saying, "You don't need troops to chop down these old beliefs. The word of God is powerful enough to do it by itself." He would not have been happy with the Crusades, and he was certainly unhappy with Christianity using the sword to cut down Saxon belief. Here he is referring to the northern tree of life, because the Saxons' religion was not separate from their cosmology. That is a modern development. For them the universe is just an enormous tree: "We live in it, the gods live in it, the animals live in it, the three women live at its base, and under it is a horrible snake waiting to suck the blood of the dead." You can't chop that kind of thing down, especially not with hand axes!

So, you have to be very cautious. It's like what Rabbi Gamaliel says in the Acts of the Apostles, "Be careful or you may find yourself trying to cut down God himself. Maybe don't mess with these disciples who run around saying, 'Christ is risen from the dead.'"

RTE: Wasn't there another major desecration close to the time of the *Heliand*?

FR. MURPHY: Yes. In the middle of the Saxon territory was an enormous tree trunk (or some think, a stone pillar) called the *Irminsul*, which the Saxons also venerated as the image of Yggdrasil, the tree of life. I've been to the site and it is the most amazingly weird-looking collection of low mountain stones you've ever seen, the Externsteine, but it seems that on top of those stones or nearby was this *Irminsul*. In about 800, Charlemagne, being a Germanic Frank and perhaps knowing full well the significance of the tree, ordered that it be chopped down. I've often speculated on the tension that must have arisen in him between his loyalty to Christianity and chopping down his grandfathers' beliefs.

Christian Conversion in Medieval Societies

RTE: In these medieval societies, weren't religious loyalties often determined by the ruler, as in St. Vladimir's decision to convert the Kievan Rus' to Christianity? His people probably did not have a clear idea of why they were going to the river to be baptized, but they accepted his decision.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, in a chieftain society you are used to him organizing things for the common welfare, and you expect him to. If there is an impending enemy attack, the chieftain's job is to say, "I want everyone down at the river at sunrise," and you go.

RTE: And that is why missionaries always went first to local rulers.

FR. MURPHY: Definitely. Remember, this is not our society, it is a chieftain society, so if you have anything to say to members of a clan, you go first to the chief who decides if your message is alright or if it is nonsense. It's hard to ask this question in a meaningful way because as soon as you say, "He went to the upper class…" we think, "Oh, like the Republicans." No, there were none of our political parties at all. It was very clear that if you wanted to convert people to Christianity you went to those who were in charge. You did not do any sort of modern, "go to the lowest and the poorest." My students in class sometimes say, "Oh no, look at that – he's ignoring the poor people." We forget that it was the chieftain who was the protector and helper of the poor.

RTE: This reminds me of the later 16th-century Jesuit missionaries to China, who were also quite cautious in their approach.

FR. MURPHY: This is a very good parallel because the Jesuits went so far as to wear the clothes of the Chinese educated class, so as to appear to be educated and not to be in competition with the warriors or the nobility. You have to understand the society you are dealing with, and China was a very vertical society, with an upper class and a noble class. The missionaries tried to take local custom into account and I remember an illustration of an enormous sand bowl in front of the altar with incense sticks in the sand. But why not? You are in the Far East.

RTE: There also must have been a great difference between a converted Christian ruler ordering the destruction of an idol or a temple, and an outsider

doing so. In the *Life of St. Columbanus*, the saint and his disciples had to continually move on as they missionized Gaul because local people were so outraged at their destruction of pagan holy places. It's an odd contrast to St. Paul, who tried to conciliate the Greeks with his speech about the unknown god.

FR. MURPHY: Christians have always been of two minds about conversion. It goes back to Paul saying "Adapt to the Gentiles," and the priestly crowd saying, "No, they adapt to us." Which do you do? Although, when he did try to reference their unknown god, the Athenian gentiles just told St. Paul, "Come back tomorrow."

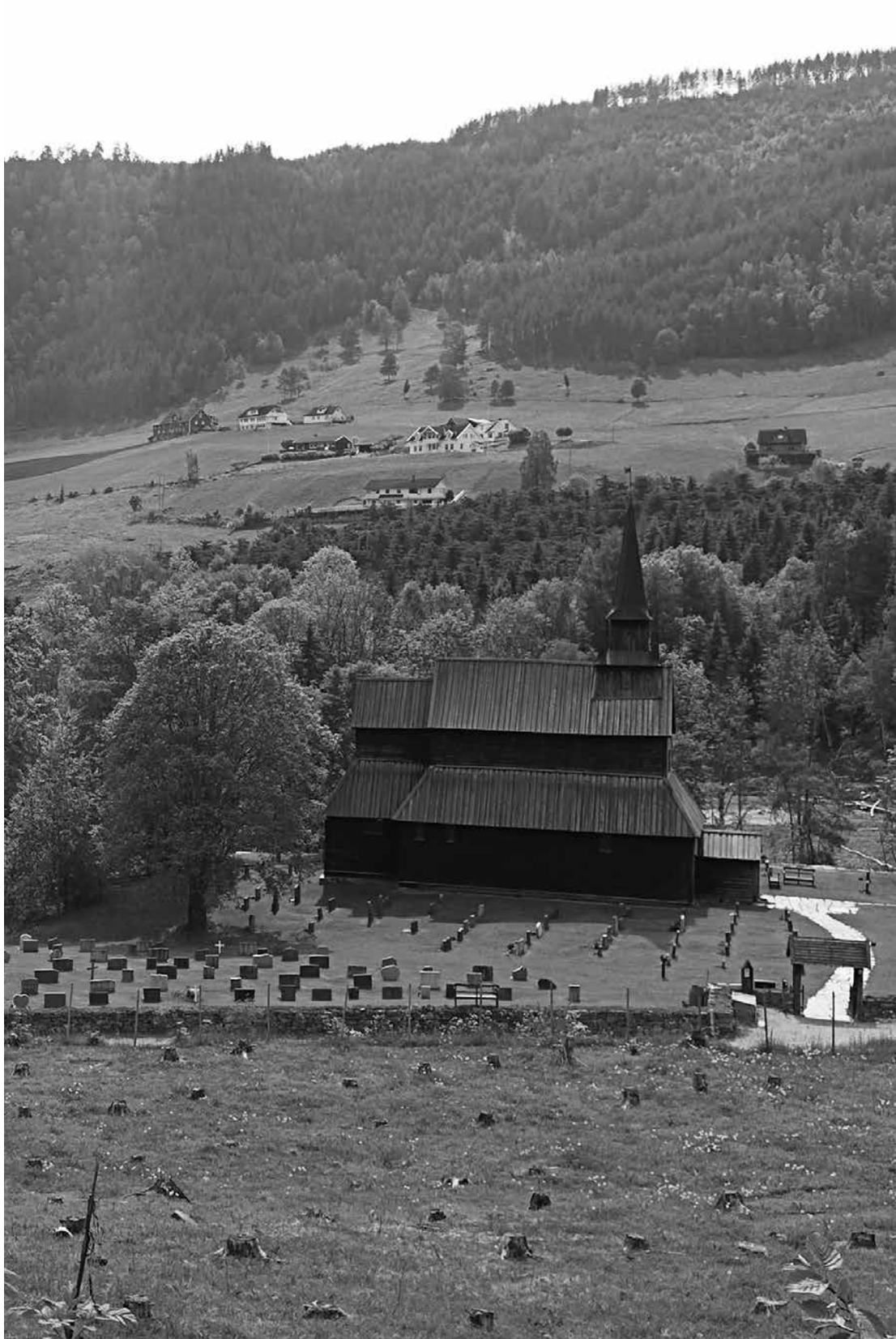
RTE: And he did.

FR. MURPHY: He did, and that's the point. These questions of inculturation take a very broad-minded missionary. It is not an easy task. For instance, what do you say to the Eskimos? "He built his igloo among us?"

RTE: And how do you explain sand? And what are tents?

FR. MURPHY: Yes. You may go to school and learn about the Judean desert and palm trees, but that does absolutely nothing for the heart. It's just information that sits at your lowest level of consciousness. It is only when you finally see something that it becomes a realization. Something has come home to you.

Religion is always about realizing things, and the *Heliand* was written to help northern peoples realize what had happened. Missionaries always have to do that, although we've never figured out how to do it for the United States, so the *Heliand* is also a challenge to us. Our master of novices told us, "Be very careful. Don't think that America has no pagan god; it does have one." We all guessed, "Money?" He said, "No, deeper than that. The American pagan god that we all worship is success." And I think he was right. For an American, there's no word lower than calling someone a "loser" – he can't do what he's supposed to do, and that's pretty poor.



Opposite: Kaupanger Stave Church built in 1140, Sogn, Norway.

Keeping Faith in Northern Europe

RTE: Did the early British and Picts have a similar worldview to the Saxons?

FR. MURPHY: It was brought in by the Saxons. The native mythology of Britain is British, that is to say Celtic, and more based on the natural world of trees, animals, water. They also had things like magic cauldrons that never run out of food – that's the Irish imagination when you're poor and hungry. So, there was a unique mythology in Britain until around 450 when the Germanic myths were brought in by the Angles and Saxons, and finally after 800 by the Scandinavians.

RTE: Although there seem to be similar threads between the Saxon north and Britain and Ireland, such as a love of nature, a willingness for rigorous ascesis, loyalty to their leaders, and a strong resemblance in their monastic life.

FR. MURPHY: Saxon similarities to the monks of Britain and Ireland is probably accurate because, among other things, you also have chieftain societies in these countries. Also, the missionaries were heavily monastic, so in Ireland and Britain they just set up their monasteries and preached from them. Christianity was under Rome, yes, but the practice from region to region wasn't as tight as we imagine it today. And yes – nature, ascesis, loyalty above all. Loyalty, loyalty, loyalty all over the place as the model for faith.

Nor, as I said earlier, did they translate the word "faith" from the Latin *fides*, meaning to opt to believe something, but by *faithfulness*, which is to hold onto someone. You want to follow him through death to whatever happens to him. That's there, too.

RTE: Which must be why these isolated Irish and Anglo-Saxon monks, such as St. Columba of Iona's disciples, were so adamant about keeping the tradition of their fathers and refusing to accept necessary changes, such as complying with the universal Church dating of Easter, or minor things like the shape of the monastic tonsure.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, it isn't about whether it is a big or a little change they are being asked to make. It is about "my loyalty to my father."

Opposite: The eighth-century Oseberg prow. The type of Viking ship that carried the Norse to Normandy. Viking Ship Museum, Oslo.

RTE: You know, western and even eastern Orthodox are generally very sympathetic to this older strain of monasticism in Ireland and the British Isles before the council of Whitby. But when I hear Orthodox Christians talk about the consolidation of political and ecclesiastical power under Charlemagne and the rise of the papacy, I can't help but reflect that today's Orthodox seem to have more filial attachment to their patriarch or archbishop than many Roman Catholics may have for the pope. My European and North American Catholic friends feel rather free to critique or praise the pope's decisions, while Orthodox often have a relationship to their hierarch that is more like these monks – loyal and even a bit feudal. Public criticism, at least among western Orthodox, is more rare.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, and you've got ethnic security in the Orthodox patriarchates. The patriarch is the ethnic head, and that is very close to this chieftain idea.

RTE: What an interesting insight.

FR. MURPHY: Personal loyalty was such a strong characteristic of the Germanic tribes that the later Roman Emperors decided to have Germanic bodyguards instead of Italian. Italian bodyguards understood their duty to protect the emperor as their duty to protect the throne. They might turn a blind eye to plots against the emperor if they thought he was unworthy, and they might even assist in killing him if they thought he was a danger to the throne. The Germans, on the other hand, protected the individual person on the throne.

RTE: And later it was the Norsemen, the Scandinavians, who made up the Varangian Guard.

FR. MURPHY: Being Germanic they meant their oath of allegiance to the Byzantine Emperor. You could trust them. So, Christianity had to adapt to this northern personalist loyalty culture. If there was anything you had to be careful of telling them, it was that when Jesus was finally taken prisoner and marched up to Calvary, his men did what? They deserted him. Are you sure you want to tell this to these people you are trying to convert? "We'd like you to follow Christianity, but we're deserters." "That's just a couple of you." "No, it was the first twelve, his nearest and dearest. They deserted him when he needed them – except for John, who is balanced by Judas, who didn't just

desert, but betrayed him." The *Heliand* makes it even worse. It doesn't say that Judas betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver. It just says, "He sold him."

This was the lowest thing you could do – you'd violated your oath, your integrity, and your manhood. "His own men deserted him? In the face of what, some monstrous dragon?" "No, just some enemy soldiers…" "But it's alright," you add lamely, "He still loved them anyway." You will have to work hard to find a way out of that.

RTE: Even Dante understood this. The lowest hell was reserved for traitors.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, and the author has no trouble explaining Judas and his condemnation. The Saxons would have understood that he was not only disloyal, but had sold his own chieftain to the enemy, and upon learning that the rest of his disciples deserted him, they would have thought, "These Christians are monsters, we'd better stay away from them." So, you have to be cautious. You have to present Christianity in a different way to this personal loyalty group than to an institutional loyalty group. I have a feeling that the Byzantine form of Christianity, Russian included, is closer to this, and that they understand this northern relationship to Christ.

The Viking Norman Invasion: Anglo-Saxon to English

RTE: You briefly mentioned the Normans as Vikings who had moved into northern France in the late ninth century. How did their invasion of England affect this Anglo-Saxon tradition?

FR. MURPHY: The ninth- and tenth-century Norsemen who settled in France were from Norway and Denmark. They had been raiding up and down the French coast and the Seine, and because there wasn't enough money to buy them off, they were finally given Normandy in exchange for protecting the rest of France from northern invasion. They successfully fought off other invaders, and then in 1066 they invaded England. Having forgotten their northern languages, their Norman French was introduced into Anglo-Saxon speech.

RTE: Why had they forgotten their languages so quickly?

FR. MURPHY: *Cherchez la femme*. They didn't bring their women with them; at least not enough. The Vikings intermarried and began speaking French, and

the same thing happened in England and Ireland. They invaded, settled, and within a couple of generations were speaking Anglo-Saxon and Irish Celtic.

This mixture is fascinating because the traditional story is that when the Vikings came, they made their way across the English countryside from east to west, killing, raping, and settling by force. Now historians are saying, "That's only partially true. They didn't marry all that fast, but they did marry in, and people today with Viking or Anglo-Saxon last names probably have a mixed heritage." North of the Umber River, spoken English is different because it is tremendously Viking-influenced. When you get to Scotland they can still pronounce "ach," and they do. The Irish also say "Ach" when they don't like something.

In a talk to honors students about immigration, I once spoke about English as an immigrant language, precisely because it is a mixture of French and German. Because we have two foundational languages you can say, "He's a man but not a gentleman." The interesting thing is that the Anglo-Saxon is generally used for what's for real, and the French for what is a little artificial or sophisticated. You worship "God," but at the university you study "Divinity." When you are drowning, you can call out "Help!" or you can call out "Aid me!" Which are you probably going to shout? And when the official help comes, it will be "First Aid." But that's because it's official; it's not a cry for help.

RTE: Although British clergy were already in close relation to Rome, would the Norman invasion have introduced more continental traditions into church order and monastic practice? Was there now more of a shift from the older "Celtic" and Anglo-Saxon practices, or had that already happened earlier?

FR. MURPHY: Yes, the shift had happened earlier, and now even more uniformity to continental church order was introduced by the Normans. However, this is a big subject in which I am not so knowledgeable.

Fulda Monastery, the Three Wise Men, and the Nativity Cycle

FR. MURPHY: So, in coming full circle with the historical context of the *Heliand*, I have to emphasize that even with all of this background, it is sur-

Opposite: Sigraf's twelfth-century Northern European baptismal font with the Three Magi presenting their gifts. Aakirke, Bornholm, Denmark.

prising how little we really know about where the text came from. We are still not even sure where it was written. As I said, Covey is a possibility, although I believe it was from the Fulda Monastery in southern Germany. Rabanus Maurus, the abbot at the time, was very friendly to non-Christians, respected their religion, and would have certainly welcomed a gospel for the Saxons. Charlemagne's son, Emperor Louis the Pious, also wanted to have it done, and he probably contributed towards it. The project would have been extremely expensive as every few sheets of parchment meant another dead sheep. Three hundred sheets would have been a small flock of sheep, followed by the cost of a translator, copyists, and binding.

Another reason I believe that it came from Fulda is that Rabanus Maurus was devoted to the Three Wise Men, and if you notice in the *Heliand*, so was the author. The reason probably is, "They are like us." They had no Torah, they had no Law, they had no Prophets. "But then, how did they receive grace?" "Well, they had this astrological religion that they followed, and it got them there!"

RTE: What a wonderful piece to the story.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, and in the *Heliand* the author even makes up the business of the Wise Men having an ancestor in the East who could read the speech of God in the stars. He learned that one day a great king, wise and mighty, God's son, will come to rule the world, both earth and heaven, and he tells his family that when the bright star appears, "Make sure you go to do adoration."

Even now, when you bring gifts in Germanic culture, there is an obligation of reciprocation. If someone invites you to dinner, you bring a bottle of wine or a dessert. As the Irish say, "If you are invited, don't go with one arm as long as the other." One arm should be shorter because it is holding your gift.

RTE: What is the reciprocal gift at the Nativity?

FR. MURPHY: When the Wise Men go, they present their gifts, kneel down, and greet Christ in a royal manner. Then, in the *Heliand*, Mary gives them the child to hold. Why don't we have that in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? It's not as necessary, I suppose. Perhaps the Jewish people liked to fill in the details themselves, but in the North they want to see that you behave as human beings to one another.

Opposite: Ninth-century Anglo-Saxon standing cross portraying dead warrior buried with grave goods, sword, and armor. St. Andrew's Church, Middleton, North Yorkshire.

All we have in the four gospels is, "When Jesus was born… she laid him in a manger." But what the *Heliand* adds is, "…and she kept looking at him." "That isn't necessary," you might say. No, it's not in the original Gospel, but what do you think she would do? The *Heliand* is worthwhile because it is so human, and the author fills in all of these empty human places. He even occasionally uses the word "magic," but that's all right, they liked that. We'd say, "No, it should be 'supernatural.'" But is it really such a bad word? How did Jesus turn water into wine? By "supernatural" means, or by "magic." It was their word for supernatural action on the material world, so why not say that?

RTE: My other favorite part of the Nativity narrative in the *Heliand* is when the author would not translate the statement that there was no room at the inn, because it was unimaginable that anyone would have turned away a pregnant woman or a kinsman.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, and it says a lot of good about the Saxons, that he couldn't say this. It was unthinkable partly because each clan group of a chieftain society had its hill fort, where you went for gatherings and family reunions. There were no cities yet, and it was unthinkable that in a society based on the glue of loyalty, fidelity, and faithfulness, they would say, "There is no room for you." The family clan had no room for a pregnant woman in her ninth month? Tell her to go sleep in the barn? Come on. So, the *Heliand* says nothing about where they stayed, only that, "His mother, that most beautiful woman, took him, and wrapped him in cloths and precious jewels…."

III. Foreshadowings of Christ in the Saxon Worldview

RTE: Although mythological, can this pre-Christian worldview be compared to the foreshadowing of the Old Testament in prophesying the Messiah?

FR. MURPHY: Yes. the *Heliand* makes it clear that you can have foreshadowing from the Germanic religion, too. Foreshadowing doesn't only have to come from the Hebrew prophets. There are two crosses in England, the Ruthwell Cross and the Gosforth Cross, both of which portray pagan foreshadowings of Christ from mythology – the son of the god Woden rips apart the jaws of the wolf that ate his father. So here is a prediction: the cosmic wolf may kill the conscious God, but his son will come and tear the wolf apart.

RTE: Destroying the jaws of hell that has swallowed humankind and our forefathers.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, so you are very close. By the way, our word "hell" comes from this northern mythology, in which *hel* is both the underworld, which exists under the tree of life, and also the name of a dark goddess. The northern peoples believed that there was a horrible serpent in *hel* that first sucked the blood and then devoured the bodies of the dead. If you look at a stone cross that still stands in Middleton, England, north of York in Viking territory, it shows the dead warrior as he lies in his wooden coffin, buried with all of his grave goods, swords, and armor. Above him the cross takes on the form of a Greek cross with a solar disk in the middle – the sunrise of the resurrection – so, he is physically in Jesus' cross, in both death and resurrection. And this is also the reason for splitting these cross depictions front to back or up and down – to be able to say death and resurrection.

That is the front, so next you go around the back and see that the horrible underworld serpent, the Nidhogg that reduces the corpse to nothing, is all tied up in knots. There is a lot of German mythology about bindings that cannot be broken, and here it appears that because Christ is present the Nidhogg is bound. Not only is he bound with unbreakable bonds, but as the snake gazes straight at you, you realize that one of the ropes goes through the holes in his fangs so he can no longer spit venom at you. Who did this? Christ did this! So, the serpent of death has been bound by Christ using his own cross. Not one of the gods who bound the mischief-making god Loki would dream of trying to bind this monster, death itself, whereas for Christ it is exactly the one He does bind.

So, Christ does two things for you. He first takes care of the warrior, and then the dragon-snake who wants to devour him. This is interesting, very old and very wise, because the cross's sculptor doesn't say the underground serpent has been killed, he only says, "He has been tied fast and cannot move."

RTE: And do we know who the Viking represents?

FR. MURPHY: This dead Viking is everyman. It means that you are in Christ's death, in Christ's cross. And if you are in his tree, you will be saved. There is no worry. In the *Heliand*, Christ is not just described as the Word, but also as the Light, and this is all over the place. It refers to the earth as, "This world, the Middle Light." And we will all one day go to the Next Light.

The Passing of the Gods

RTE: Did the Germanic and Scandinavian peoples believe in their gods as living beings, or were they symbols of an unknown heavenly realm?

FR. MURPHY: Modern people like to say that these folks were too sophisticated to believe in all of this, but I think they did believe it. Look at the way they fought to keep Christianity out. Look at how they cursed when we cut down the Oak of Thor at Geismar. That wasn't just a vague symbol.

Modern people think: "Your religion? Just change it." No, religion is not a computer. It's like saying, "I'd like to change my grandmother." That's not happening. The Germanic peoples spoke of the gods in a personal and familiar way: "Thor is my strength, Woden is my consciousness…." You really can't dismiss these things so easily, and that is why Pope Gregory was right.

RTE: So, the three major gods, Woden, Thor, and Freya, were thought to be divine?

FR. MURPHY: Woden, Thor, and Freya were divine, yes, but they were also mortal, and this was totally different from Mediterranean-type Roman-Greek mythology where the gods are immortal. Also, the Norse gods were divine, but not human. They could take on human appearance, but they were not truly human, although they shared human mortality and would perish at the end of time. Woden and Thor were doomed to die, while Christ is both divine and human and overcame "death by death."

RTE: What can you say about the *Heliand's* description of the Lord's baptism? That is one of my favorites.

FR. MURPHY: It's one of my favorites also. Well, the original is already intended to make a Jewish audience realize that the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus, and the New Testament uses that vague expression in Latin, *super eum*, "upon him." The Jewish listeners don't ask, "Where, on his head? On his shoulder?" For them, that would be irreverent, but the *Heliand's* author says, "This is an image I already have from Woden." Woden has two birds, one of consciousness and one of memory on either shoulder, and for the Saxons the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the same way –

Opposite: Hopperstad Stave Church, Vikøyri, Sogn, Norway.

as memory and consciousness. This makes Jesus familiar; he doesn't seem foreign anymore. "We've already had a foreshadowing image of a god with a bird on his shoulder, and now here is the real one."

To me this is just beautiful because he did it with such minimal language. Instead of saying "*super eum*," he said, *uppan uses drohtines ahslu,*" that is, "on his shoulder." He is not making something up. Just like the New Testament, he says, "The Holy Spirit descended upon him," and then he throws in, "upon our Chieftain's shoulder." This is fine, because he realized that, by adding this, he could use their old image of Woden to present Christ.

RTE: How did the Saxons explain the conversion to themselves? Do you think they suddenly rejected the Germanic gods as demons, or did they slowly let them go as symbolic figures that they now saw fulfilled in Christ?

FR. MURPHY: I think the Irish would answer that by saying of the old gods, "They just walked down the road." Only modern people would say, "Exist/Don't exist – Fantasy/Real." The Irish have a better answer: "We won't ask how real they were; that's none of our business. They just walked down the road." That is actually portrayed on a twelfth-century altar tapestry from a church in Skog, Sweden.

RTE: It is fascinating that you would mention this. For our readers, the Skog Church tapestry is an embroidery in Stockholm's Museum of National Antiquities, portraying stick figures of people and a priest in church, with bells ringing inside and out. Next to the church are three mysterious figures of the same size. We stood in front of this tapestry for a long time, unable to guess at who they were, but they did not seem to be the Three Magi as the guide suggested.

FR. MURPHY: Scholarship hasn't understood it. Not a single person has said, "These are the three major gods," because everyone is being too rigid and modern. "They are in a church and therefore…." Be careful of the word, "therefore" because these people didn't think exactly like we do today.

If you look closely at those three figures, you will see that their feet are turned to the side. They are walking away from the stave church. In the meantime, the priest is pointing to the chalice and the bells are all being

Opposite: Twelfth-century Skog Church tapestry. The three figures of Woden, Thor, and Freya walking away as the Christian era commences. Museum of National Antiquities, Stockholm.

rung... They are depicting the consecration! Woden, Thor and Freya are walking away. How do you think they feel about this?

RTE: "We've done our job."

FR. MURPHY: Exactly! And since we've done our job we can walk away peacefully and say, "Well done." It's the end of the chapter, and they can say, "We did a good job preparing the way." They didn't have John the Baptist there, but Woden can say, "I prepared them for wisdom," Thor can say, "I prepared them for strength," and Freya can say, "I prepared them for a beautiful happiness." In the tapestry the gods are walking away because the stave churches may have belonged to them originally and, perhaps, were even their own temples. Although there are no crosses on top of the churches in the embroidery (just one on the bell tower), they are leaving their stave temples to Him. And again, the Irish would say, "Of course, they're walking down the road."

And the good people who embroidered the tapestry have no problem with Christ or the gods. The three gods just peacefully walk away with the little dogs under their feet, while the priest in the church points to the chalice as the church bells ring. It is so much more accommodating, so much more gracious and kind than our notions of religions fighting one another.

So, the comparison with Luke's Hellenizing is accurate, and the tiny deviations in both his gospel and in the *Heliand* are some of the most beautiful changes. One of my students pointed out that in the Lord's prayer, "Our Father, Who art in heaven...," is: "Father of us, the sons of men...." Heaven is mentioned in the prayer, but for the Saxons, loyalty, personal connection, and relationships matter first. It's early feudalism in some ways.

Fate, Time, and Providence in the *Heliand*

RTE: You spoke earlier of the three mysterious women at the foot of Yggdrasil who are bound up with time. Can you relate the *Heliand's* use of the Saxon idea of *wurd* (fate) and time to our Christian conception of the fallen world, and can we also think of fate as heredity? Also, how might Christians balance *wurd* with Providence?

FR. MURPHY: We know a lot about that. The word *wurd* become "weird" in English, and even in Macbeth, Shakespeare has the three "weird" sisters stirring the pot. They are also the Fates. The Germanic word for fate was *Wurd*. This was the German form, but the English form was *Wyrd*, and that is the name of the first woman of the three, the one who knows the past. I'm not sure it's a matter of aligning fate with heredity, but I would first align it with time, and with what happens in time. This is how it becomes fate.

In Christianity it may become Providence, but this is a more secular view. If you have brown eyes or green eyes, that's heredity, that's fate. This is their way of saying genes and chromosomes, but this is also their way of saying other things. Why did you come to Georgetown? Because your great-grandfather immigrated, your grandmother settled somewhere else, then your grandfather said, "No secular school," and when you came here to visit, some students were really nice to you and you said, "I want to visit again." So, it's not just the genes and chromosomes, but the happenings that create present events.

Why would you ever doubt it if someone says, "The past becomes the present, becomes the future." Do I have to doubt that because I am Catholic or Orthodox? We can carry this religious correctness too far, and then you get into deep trouble. Think of all of the things in biology that we could start denying, but why would you do that? There will be many experiments and if the hypothesis is wrong we will find out.

Should I deny what my eyes tell me? "Look at the fig tree, you know that when it blossoms, summer is near." He's telling us: "Use your eyes, use your ears." Don't just use Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They haven't seen or heard everything, and they aren't interested in questions like the age of our galaxy. So, seeing northern mythology as foreshadowing or being an alternate view is fine. The *Heliand* thinks so.

RTE: So, in regard to the working out of cause, effect and time, this view is not so much God's Providence in the sense that we Christians think of God watching every detail – numbering the hairs of your head and so on.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, rather, these people looked at the events themselves. Every hair that falls from your head, every accident that befalls you, makes it more possible for this or that kind of illness to attack. It's more of a causal system, weaving events together so that you end up in the hospital or something, and I don't think you want to call that Providence.

I had a secretary whose son was killed by a young woman from one of the embassies coming around the corner in a brand-new car. She was going too fast and didn't know how to turn and brake at the same time. She hit the kid

so hard that he spun in the air, hit his head on the curb and died on the spot. My secretary's husband refused to accept it, and when she told me that she couldn't talk to him, I asked, "What is he doing?" "He's walking around the house singing "Three Blind Mice," over and over. I said, "I know what he is referring to: Non-providence. He's thinking, 'What are the Three of them doing up there?' This isn't blasphemy, he's complaining. Job complained, he can complain." She asked me, "Did God arrange that?" I said, "I don't think so. He may be aware of it all, He may try to turn it to good, but this does not mean that He revokes the laws of nature or the laws of motion every time something bad like this happens." "Well, then, who runs that?" "The laws of physics, the laws of nature, the three women at the base of Yggdrasil. You have to give God's creation a certain degree of independence, at least in the Western world." If you talk to old Middle-Eastern ladies, no. It's either His fault or He gets the credit.

RTE: And we believe that free will is a part of creation.

FR. MURPHY: That is so, especially in our cultures. But when you get to Middle Eastern cultures, it's another matter. I once saw a Turkish lady who had just survived an earthquake. She was crying and shouting because two of her sons had gotten out, but the third was still under the rubble. Along came a kind, good-souled Westerner who said to her, "Oh, that's all right ma'am. This isn't something that God did. There's a fault that runs under your village and when the continent shifts, the fault shifts." She looked at him as if he was out of his mind. "I don't care about the faults, He could have arranged for the fault to slip tomorrow when we were not in the house." Or if there is no rain: "Tell Him to make it rain, we're having a drought." And what does the West say? "But Ma'am, you are just having a high-pressure front. You need a low-pressure zone." Who is right? They're both right. How do they fit together? Not always easily.

RTE: At one point in the *Heliand*, fate admonishes Mary to bring forth the Infant Christ. Would fate have been a synonym for the process of labor that would come upon her in time, or does it infer that the conception and birth were so spiritual that she had to be reminded of them?

Opposite: The Passage of Time. "The Virgin Weaving," by the Master of Erfurt, c. 1400, Upper Rhine.

FR. MURPHY: Look, there's a middle-of-the-road answer. *(Laughter)* In my view, since fate represents the passage of time, when Mary comes near Bethlehem she has to be reminded. I think what he is telling you is, "When you say in your Creed, 'God became Man and dwelt among us,' it wasn't that easy." What the *Heliand* tells you is "Nine months." "What told her?" "Nine months told her." "But nine months can't speak." "But women know the passage of time, they know Wurd, Verdendi and Skuld – what happened, what is happening to me now on this donkey, and what will happen as a result of that. 'We need to get somewhere soon, Joseph!'" Because of Skuld.

Because the Gospel writers are thinking in Jewish terms, even though they are writing in Greek, they aren't worried about things like reciprocating presents or how long it takes for Jesus to be born. And we are not yet in the high Middle Ages, where they are beginning to ask if she felt pain. We are still in the era where time told her – whether it was through labor pains, or if they had a calendar or an hour-glass, or if she had just counted the days and weeks in her mind. So, this is bringing time and the three women at the base of Yggdrasil into the Christian Gospel. I think it is beautiful, and it also avoids that more modern spiritualized attitude of, "She didn't know what was happening, she didn't feel anything…." In other words, fate was there.

RTE: "And when her time drew near…"

FR. MURPHY: Yes, the author loved that. "When her time drew near…" Fate, fate, fate. The word "Fate" is never used. That sounds a little too pagan for them, but "time" is what fate really is. So we have, "Time admonished her strongly." That means labor pains. The main thing the poet wants to be clear about is that the birth didn't happen immediately after the Annunciation. He wants room for time. And all the while, for the Saxons, the tree is lurking in the background with the three women working away with their water and their thread. The middle one measures – "One, two, three, … nine months. Now." The author refers to God as "The Great Measurer."

In other places in the *Heliand*, Christ is sovereign to fate, but just barely. When John the Baptist is born, God sends the angel to ask Zechariah, "Do you want a child?" Then a lot of space is given to, "How can this happen? We are too old!" Zechariah goes on and on: "Our skin is now loose, we don't look

Opposite: Christ as the Great Measurer. Frontispiece of the Bible Moralisee, French illumination circa 1220, Austrian National Library.

nice as we once did, we find no pleasure…." This is northern Europe. They have respect for logical scientific thought. And then when John is born, fate comes in and says, "Blue eyes, I think," and you can see that the genes and chromosomes are all being given their sway. The *Heliand* is way ahead of its time in giving the causality of this world plenty of rights that are only interfered with rarely, as if to say, "This or that natural law may not work," such as in Christ's calming the storm.

RTE: How does this idea of fate fit with the events of Christ's Passion and Crucifixion?

FR. MURPHY: They wouldn't push fate that far. This northern worldview is not systematic. It's not such an organized theology or religion that they make everything agree with everything else. Because of this, the Greek fathers would be upset because the poetry isn't absolutely coordinated with other insights of the book. Americans who believe in an ideology would be upset because it's not consistent ideology all the way through.

But what the *Heliand's* author does do is that he never denies the presence of time, which, as we are saying, is where the fates lie: past, present, and future. So, you sometimes have to present events as a surprise in the *Heliand*. For instance, when Jesus doesn't die in the slaughter of the innocents, it is because God decided, "No, it is too early."

This is already handled in the Gospel in a way. Some people die in the Gospel and Christ doesn't do anything about it; other people die and He does. Do you remember the woman coming out of the city of Nain with her dead son? The author puts in his own comment, "She was a widow, and her son was her greatest and last joy." This is God, but it's not exactly our God. This is God conceived of as the Working of the Great Measurer, God colored with the workings of fate-time. So, you are getting mixed signals in a way. It reflects the old religion, but in the *Heliand* Christ is never held responsible for anything bad.

RTE: So, in introducing God as the Great Measurer, the *Heliand's* author was trying to bring time and the present under God's omnipotence.

FR. MURPHY: In the form of Christ. Christ either works for time and causality or against it, as when an event is not to happen now – for instance, the Flight into Egypt or the Raising of Lazarus.

In the *Heliand*, fate and time are just a little too close to God to perfectly conform to traditional Jewish influence where these events are above any physical law, but with the northern Europeans you can't push that too far. East versus West. We take secondary causality seriously, while the Middle East is serious about first causality. First causality: "Why is the weather rotten?" "God is unhappy with us." Secondary causality: "No, there's a low-pressure front off the coast, and it's not moving fast enough." First causality again: "No, that's not good enough; God could have moved that hurricane." That's a debate that will never be resolved. It's been going on for a few thousand years.

RTE: As a westerner living or working in the East, you sometimes wonder what is wrong with you. Your reliance on secondary causality makes you feel that you have no faith at all in comparison with Eastern peoples.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, we don't say, "*Inshallah*," although my Donegal grandmother said, "See you tomorrow, God willing." It's the old country, and so much a part of every sentence that you don't even hear it. They think we are sort of atheistic, secularistic, and materialistic, and we are – but we also believe. They just have to learn to live with us and our respect for secondary causality, even though we are a pain.

Faith and Fondness in the Saxon Gospel

RTE: What are some of your other favorite passages in the *Heliand*?

FR. MURPHY: One I like very much is when the crippled man cannot get into the house because there is such a crowd, so his friends carry him up to the roof. They strip the roof, take four ropes and lower him into Christ's presence. I like this because I can see the scene. Everyone is sitting on the floor, it's murky, a little dark, and then this beam of light dazzles the room because they've torn the roof off. Then they lower him down. That is so wonderful, and the *Heliand's* author must have really liked it, especially when the Gospel then says, "And seeing their faith…." This man is their friend and they are practicing faithfulness. It takes four of them to lower him. So, this is Christ rewarding faithfulness.

I also like the *Heliand's* Annunciation, and the part I like most is when he translates "full of grace" as "Your Lord is very fond of you." The metaphor that is used in the more usual "Hail" is like addressing royalty: "You are in great favor." But in the *Heliand*, you aren't "in favor" with your Father; He is fond of you. To those who object, I say, "When we say we are saved by grace, what are we saying?" Some theologians say we are saved *gratis*, freely, we paid nothing. But that's not what is going on here: "Your Father is very fond of you!" So, we are not saved by sanctifying grace, we are saved by sanctifying fondness. Why are we saved? Because He is fond of us. Did we earn it? No! It's a family word. And just think, with this, all of the Catholic-Protestant debates just melt away. "But fondness is not a theological word!" "I know. Too bad. You should think about using it."

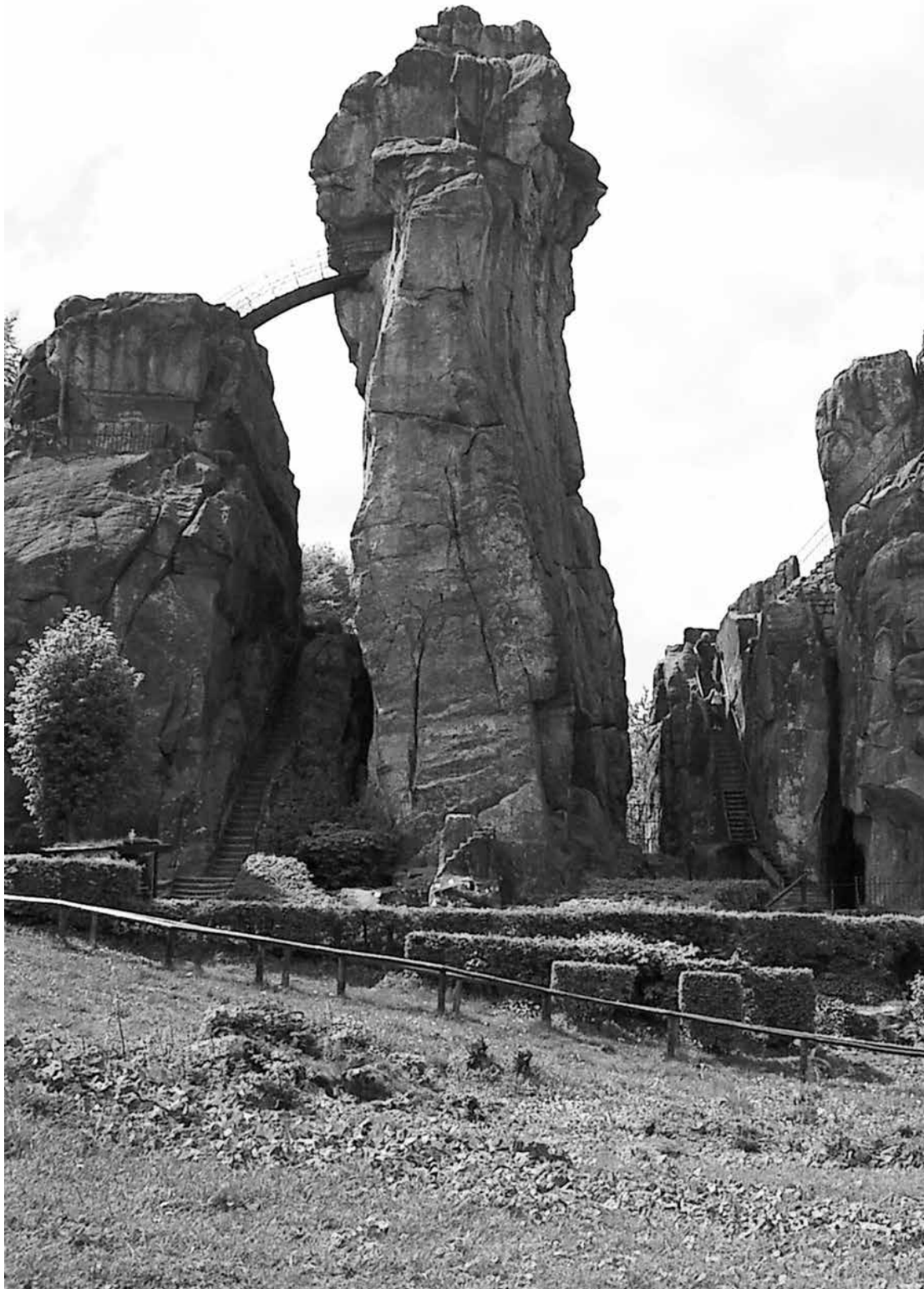
The East has a feeling for this, thank God, but the Catholic and Protestant fighting over salvation by faith or good works always annoyed me until I read the *Heliand*. When I saw "fondness" I thought, "Problem solved." Not that they'll accept it, but it is solved. Salvation by fondness.

There are other small passages that are also nice – some very human parts that weren't as detailed in the Four Gospels, which assume that the reader will fill in detail and feeling. For instance, the relationship between Peter and Christ when Peter fails to walk on water. The Gospel says that Jesus reached out His hand and took hold of Peter… "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" The *Heliand* adds that Jesus then "takes his hand and leads him back to the boat."

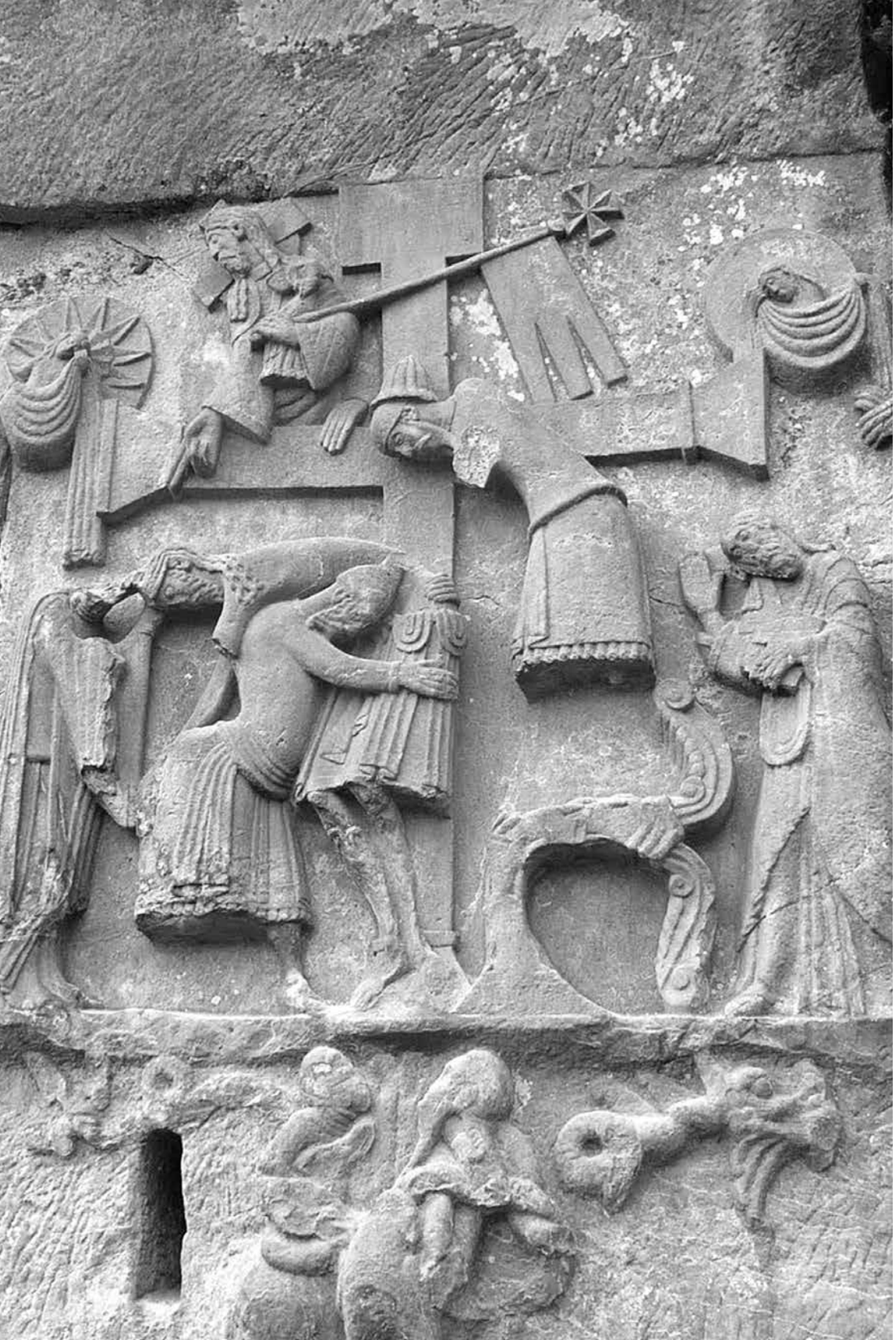
Another example is: "If the salt loses its taste, what is it good for?" Here the author makes it local: "If salt loses its taste, what is it good for but to be thrown on the seashore and kicked by people's shoes." These were people who lived near the North Sea. At the end of the Resurrection narrative, the *Heliand* has another dandy: "He arose, and the roadway to heaven was unlocked."

RTE: In northern mythology wasn't the Milky Way also the way to heaven?

FR. MURPHY: Especially the Milky Way – all through those long Scandinavian nights. This shows you that the author probably is local because he does things like that. It's a springboard that allows the reader to see things from the northern way of thinking. Also, for Catholics it explains Protestantism's



Opposite: The Externsteine outcropping in the heart of Germanic Saxon territory, one of the proposed sites for the Irminsul.



good side. Christ gives access to the soul-road, whether it is a rainbow or the Milky Way, out of fondness.

RTE: And how would you explain this in an Orthodox context?

FR. MURPHY: Ah, the Orthodox always think they don't need saving because they are St. John's people. They believe in the love Gospel, they believe in a liturgy that is absolutely dominated by beauty. I agree with those barbarians who went back and reported to Vladimir, "We were in Holy Wisdom, and we didn't know if we were in heaven or on earth." I love the Eastern liturgy because of that; with ours, you know you are on earth.

Evil and Free Will in the *Heliand*

RTE: Father, may we speak now about evil and free will in the *Heliand*?

FR. MURPHY: For me, the meaning of "evil" or "bad" in the *Heliand* is unique. The usual philosophical definition of evil is something like, "The absence of a good that ought to be there," and my standard example to the students is, "If a doughnut has a hole in the middle, that's not evil, because they are supposed to have holes, but if a jelly bun has a hole in the middle, that's bad." That's what they came up with in the Middle Ages, that evil is not an entity but an absence of something good that ought to be there.

The *Heliand* doesn't do that, however. In the *Heliand*, evil is being forced against your will to do something you don't want to do. So, Pontius Pilate is forced against his will to hand Christ over, "...or you won't be a friend of Caesar." It's an evil action against Pilate that he is forced to do the High Priest's will.

In another *Heliand* example, the Our Father ends with, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil creatures who want to force us to do their will, as we deserve. God help us against them." It's such a nice definition of evil: being involuntarily forced to do what someone else wants you to do.

Opposite: Twelfth-century Externsteine sandstone relief of the "Taking Down from the Cross." Externsteine, North Rhine-Westphalia (Duchy of Saxony). Note that Christ, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea are all wearing Saxon kilts.

So, why didn't the author of the *Heliand* just translate Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John word for word? In his mind, the Saxons' forced conversion to worship Christ is evil, so he wrote the *Heliand* in Saxon terms, that their conversion to Christ wouldn't be against their will. He paints Christ as a Saxon half the time to make it clear that Christ was not behind Charlemagne's violence. Everything except the kilt; Saxons wore kilts. *(Laughter)*

In regard to evil, in the middle of Saxony is the Externsteine Relief, a sculpture of Christ's descent from the Cross. Although this sandstone relief is inscribed, "The Descent from the Cross," in German the scene is called the "Taking Down from the Cross," and when you look at it, it is very touching. Mary is reaching out to hold the head of Christ, who has been slung over the shoulder of Joseph of Arimathea, and those around have lowered their heads in mourning. I wondered where this came from, because it isn't quite the tradition, but in the *Heliand* it says, "Of course, you should take your Chieftain down. You should remain loyal to him, and you should carry him to his burial, as any thane would do for his Lord and Master." And, in fact, twenty yards away is a rock-hewn sepulcher into which a wooden statue of Christ could be lowered on Good Friday, not unlike the Orthodox procession with the epitaphion or plashchanitsa. I thought, "I bet that the *Heliand* was in the hands of the people who sculpted this. That is why Christ has to say yes to the Passion. He has to will it or it becomes the evil that it looks like, something against his will."

The New Testament curing miracles are always retold in the *Heliand* as, "I really want to see to it that this child rises again. Look at the mother, she's crying. She's a widow, she's got no one else." There are long explanations of emotions, meaning that you are free to feel in ways that we don't always see in the four Gospels. The freedom to have your real natural emotions, above all sympathy, empathy, and compassion, is all over the *Heliand*. The problem of evil in the *Heliand* is one you don't detect at first, but once you alert people, they pick it up. As for the idea of being forced against your will, Jesus forces no one.

RTE: So many of us with this northern European background do want our independence, while other cultures find this strange. We are not nearly as communal a society as Asian cultures, or even as Eastern Europeans.

FR. MURPHY: Even the Declaration of Independence reflects this; we did not want to do the British king's will if it interfered with our own. In the *Heliand's* view, a nation should not force another nation, people shouldn't force other people, the High Priest should not be forcing Pontius Pilate.

IV. Yggdrasil as the Tree of Life and the Christianization of Northern Mythology

RTE: Father Murphy, can you more fully describe the great tree Yggdrasil as the cosmic center-point in this Northern worldview, and how the image fared under Christianity.

FR. MURPHY: Here's the outline: The tree is made of the branches at the top, the trunk, and then three roots. It represents the entire world, the universe, in a living organic model. This world functions in a way that mystified the Germanic-speaking peoples and it still mystifies us. Like the law of the conservation of matter and energy, nothing is destroyed. The tree continually grows leaves and there are four deer constantly nibbling at the bark and twigs, yet the tree grows enough to replace what the deer eat. The branches are filled with animals and birds and there is even a little squirrel that runs up and down. There is also an eagle at the very top which sees everything. That image will be useful for Christianity later on in the *Heliand* with Christ on high, watching over everything. That is right out of Yggdrasil.

There are actually nine worlds, three in each level with other creatures as well, but the northern peoples never integrated all of this. In the simpler version, the gods live at the top of Yggdrasil in Asgard, and Woden is the great god who rules over Valhalla, the hall of the fallen, where brave soldiers go when they die.

I often wonder what they thought happened to a man who died at home from an illness? They don't talk about this, because poets don't write about everyday things that would bore you. They write about heroism, epic battles, and what happens to brave warriors who die facing the enemy. They tell you that they go to Asgard, which is heaven, and into the hall of the fallen, where Woden, the god of the dead, the "hanged god," welcomes them all.

According to the mythology, the dead warriors stay there battling each other all day on the "green meadows" – a term the *Heliand* also uses for heaven – and they have a great time fighting, killing, lopping off arms and legs. Then they go into the hall full of music and stories and drink them-

selves half silly with mead. During the night all is supernaturally healed, renewed, and replenished. That's Valhalla. The other gods also have their halls up there. Asgard is basically an image of home, the chieftain's great hall in the hill fort, with the lesser folk, whether free or slave, housed below in small thatched houses. It's an image not too far from what you can see today in rural Ireland, England, and Denmark.

Midgard

Then there is Midgard, the trunk and crown of the tree, which represents the world where we humans live, and on which the deer nibble. The universe is so made that you can keep eating, the tree will keep growing, and the grass will always come back.

The tree is held fast by mysterious roots, but the poets tell you, "No man knows in what they are rooted." It is not in earth or water, so it is unknown how the tree of the universe holds itself steady and upright. There is no problem for the Yggdrasil mythology to say, "No man knows." (Unlike Christianity where, "Oh, we have three doctors of the Church who have written about this.") No, no man knows. We may try for an answer, but we don't really have one. In *Beowulf* when the ship with the dead warrior is going off to Valhalla and set on fire, the poet throws in the comment, "There is the boat and there is the cargo. Who receives this cargo? No warrior outside in the field, no wise man inside the hall can tell you." I like that. So, this religion is not pretending to be theology or philosophy. It is a set of traditional images and stories, handed on, that teach things that the poet realized.

Woden and Yggdrasil

RTE: What can you tell us about the mythological god Woden and his relationship to Yggdrasil?

FR. MURPHY: The most important thing is that, at one point, Woden decides that he wants to know his future and that of the whole world. He is not omni-

Opposite: Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life, with a deer biting the snake entwined in its branches. Circa 1130. Detail of sculpted door-frame of Urnes Church, Norway.

scient, as we say God is omniscient, for he is desperately trying to learn what things are about. In other words, he is just like us, an image of us. All European cultures seem to have had this desire to forecast the future.

Now, when Woden wants to know what can be known from memory, he goes to the well of wisdom, and is told, "It will cost you an eye. We will preserve it for you, but you must give it up if you wish to know what everything is all about." So, in every image you see of Woden, even those carved in northern churches, he is one-eyed, and that is how you can tell it is him.

In another story, he realizes that the only way to gain such knowledge is to die, so he hangs himself from Yggdrasil. Now the three women at the base are always splashing water on the tree to keep it eternally growing, so Woden hangs himself when they are not looking. When he looks down through the leafy branches and sees the runes they have been carving from twigs, he reaches to grab them and falls from the tree. Those runes were used for divining (what has happened, what is happening, what shall happen). Skuld, the lady of the future, would say, "I take a thread from the past and from the present and learn what those things have to teach me." You see, it's common sense, but it's spookified. You really do need to know the past and the present to attempt to predict what will happen in the future.

But because he is not willing to study, Woden grabs the runes, casts them into the air, and grabs three letters as they fall. This is what the Roman historians tell us that the Germans did – "they read the three," and if, for example, it spells N-O-T, don't even dream of going to war. At some point unknown to mythology, he gave those letters to human beings, which is how they got their soothsayers, wizards, and fortune-tellers – all of whom had to use their heads to cleverly interpret the runes. With runes you could forecast the future and break the laws of distance by sending a letter. You carve the runes and send the stick on the night ship. The shapes of the runes resemble Roman and Greek letters, except for some sounds like "th" and "ach," and that was their first written alphabet.

So, the first function of Yggdrasil was to hold the whole universe together. The second function, communication, was to allow Woden to grab the runes and give them to us. Runes are a rich subject, and we can speak more about them later.

Opposite: Sixth-century gold amulet with face of Woden. National Historical Museum, Copenhagen.

Woden and Christ

RTE: Then it seems natural for early Germanic-Scandinavian Christians to have mused on Christ's hanging on the cross in light of Woden hanging on the tree – particularly Woden's unexpected statement as he hangs from the tree: "I offered myself to myself."

FR. MURPHY: Do you know where that comes from? It's Orthodox. "Thine own of thine own, I offer unto thee, on behalf of all and for all." I don't usually mention this because most people don't know Chrysostom's liturgy, but it's just too close, and it's not a Latin usage. This is such a realm of uncertainty that no one wants to say for sure, but there is a general feeling that the offering part of the Woden story is influenced by Eastern Christianity and is thought to have entered the mythology during the period of contact between the Ostrogoths and Constantinople, the time of the "Barbarian Invasions." This is not from the *Heliand*, but from the traditional story of Woden. "Thine own of thine own…" was already in the Divine Liturgy by the fourth century.

At the very least, the surprising formula of "I offer myself to myself" on Yggdrasil is pretty clear evidence of Eastern church influence. Constantinople was still the head of the empire, not Rome, which was having a bad time with the invasions. Norway seems to have been influenced by Ireland and England, while Sweden and the island of Gotland have more eastern traces. Gotland is where trade from the east met the northwest and there have been many finds there, such as early coins from as far as Arabia.

We find echoes of this eastern Christianity in the legends and even in the stave churches. There is a huge fresco of the tree of life in one or two Gotland churches. It is not quite the cross, but the tree, and it seems to be a universal depiction of the cosmos.

RTE: And did the *Heliand's* author also incorporate familiar Woden images?

FR. MURPHY: The *Heliand* itself doesn't have many pagan references, but it has enough. Because Woden is always portrayed with his great spear, the author emphasizes the crucifixion scene where the Roman centurion thrusts the spear into Christ's side. That he can use, because it is a very familiar scene.

RTE: The dove settling on the Lord's shoulder at his baptism is another. And, like Woden, Christ can control the sea.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, that is very clearly hinting that Jesus is the new Woden, and whatever Woden could do by consciousness and memory, Jesus can do times ten.

RTE: How did the author of the *Heliand* do overall in his portrayal of Christ?

FR. MURPHY: The author's image of Christ is alright, because you have the problem in this pagan Germanic culture of saying that Christ is God. That is, what do you mean by "god" – these three women bound up with time? Or the powerful mortal divine beings who live in Asgard: Woden, Thor, and Freya? It is really difficult at this time to say "Jesus is God," because they have very fixed meanings for gods, each by his individual name. You could say that Jesus is the Chieftain, that He is the Chieftain of heaven. He is the Creator, as well as the Protector and Helper of all people (the two virtues of a chieftain), and He is the Chieftain of all clans.

You had the same problem in China. China has no one word that means "god," so, the Catholics said, "We won't use the name of any one god because that just gets you into more trouble." So, in the 1600s, they decided to use *Tien-chu*, Lord of Heaven, and the Chinese began calling Christianity "The Lord of Heaven religion."

The Underworld

In the deep roots of Yggdrasil lives a serpent called the Nidhogg, which means the "evil striker," and this snake feeds on the corpses of the dead who are not in Valhalla. This is also why a Germanic-Scandinavian warrior on the battlefield would almost never run from the enemy; he wanted to get to Valhalla. According to the myth, once you are buried in the ground, the snake detects it sooner or later, breaks into whatever cover you have, sinks his teeth into you and sucks your blood out.

RTE: Goodness!

FR. MURPHY: Yes. It's bad enough when all of the religions of the world tell you, "Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return," but here you have your guts sucked out and you will be snake dust. It's a horrible thought really, and that is why I wanted to see the Anglo-Saxon Christian crosses in Middleton, England, because they incorporate the image of the Nidhogg.

The Bifrost

Then there are connectors between the northern heaven and earth. There is a rainbow, the Bifrost, that runs from Asgard way up on top, down to Midgard ("earth") where we live, but not down to the underworld. But the little squirrel I mentioned somehow manages all three. The squirrel is on top in Asgard, whispering something to Woden. Woden whispers back, and the squirrel comes charging down the rainbow bridge and says nasty horrible things to the snake in the underworld. Then the squirrel takes an insult or two from the snake up back to Woden. He is able to communicate, but not much more than sharing insults.

RTE: *(Laughing)* I'll never look at a squirrel the same way again.

FR. MURPHY: That's how folklore works. To any kid who doubts the tale I just told you, say, "Go out and look at that tree!" I love it when stories end with things like, "And that is why… the robin has a red breast!" This is a Christian story: when Christ was dying on the cross, creation trembled, and the eagle flew over, circled in great sorrow, and flew away. Then the hawk flew over and was so shocked that he took himself off to the highest place he could find and stayed there. But the little robin flew over and lamented, "No one is singing! They are letting him die!" So, he settled at the foot of the cross, and began chirping with all of his might. (And if you look out on the lawn, you will see that the robins are still doing so, for the story always has to be true.) So, as he is singing away, a great drop of blood falls upon him from Christ's hand. "And from that day until now, as a reward for their act of kindness, the robins have had a red breast." Is the story true? Absolutely true. Why? Because it teaches you that kindness is connected to God. Whoever wrote the *Heliand* and erected these monuments were totally familiar with this kind of folklore.

Ragnarok, the End of the World

RTE: That is refreshing because, after a century of Wagner and *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, most of us think of these old Germanic stories in darker hues.

Opposite: Reverse side of standing cross portraying the Nidhogg bound by Christ. St. Andrew's Church, Middleton, North Yorkshire.

And doesn't northern mythology predict a catastrophic end of the world, not unlike the Book of Revelation?

FR. MURPHY: Yes, and Ragnarok in Norse mythology is only the Germanic form of it. Every culture has some form, and most are catastrophic. In fact, northern accounts of the end of the world are very similar to our biblical ones. Some scholars believe that there could have been a mixing of stories between the Goths, the Visigoths, Christian, and non-Christian tribes. There is something deeply human in the experience.

One of my graduate students took a temporary teaching job in southeast Washington, D.C., which is such a difficult inner-city posting that the schools can't get good teachers to stay. When she wanted to teach *Beowulf*, the principal told her, "Don't teach that, it's too much for them," but it turned out to be a huge success when she told the class, "Now, I'm going to speak about the end of the world...." She closed the books and said, "According to the Germanic barbarians of the north, there will be a time called Ragnarok, and this is what will happen...." There wasn't a sound in the room. No one moved, no one coughed, nothing. These end-of-the-world stories have a universal attraction; we all recognize it.

According to northern mythology we will be able to tell when Ragnarok (the end of the world) comes because there will be no spring for three years. That means three long years of winter. Then volcanoes will begin to erupt, the earth will be covered with fire, brimstone, and lava, and people will scream in terror. Finally, the giants will come. (The giants are far in the background of our own folklore, although the early Hebrew books have them.) Fire giants will mount to Asgard over the rainbow bridge. While the gods use the bridge to come down to Midgard, the giants can also use it to get to the gods, so everyone in Valhalla realizes that this is the great day. The dead are rearmed and this huge army is led by Woden himself, with Thor and Freya, to attack the monsters and giants storming heaven. The armies attack on the Vigrid plain, and there is a terrible battle. Another horrible serpent circles Midgard and makes its way onto land, causing floods and disasters. Meanwhile, the entire earth, shaking and convulsing, will be destroyed.

Then you have the end of the gods. The men and gods battle the giants, and Woden himself charges at the head of this army of the dead to attack Fenrir the Wolf. Fenrir is so large that when he opens his mouth, his jaws reach

Opposite: Christ's descent into hell. Detail of wooden cross from Borre Church, Vestfold, circa 1275. Antiquities Collection, University Museum, Oslo.

from one end of the sky to the other. Woden carries a spear, but he is unable to ward him off, and as he attacks, the wolf swallows him. That means that those two birds on Woden's shoulder, consciousness and memory, are going to be swallowed up by the wildness of the end times. This mythology is very serious in its own way.

Thor, meanwhile, has gone to face the snake that circles the earth, hammer in hand. He gets one chance, and he smashes this huge venomous serpent in the face and it kills him, but before the serpent dies, it spews poison like a spitting cobra. Thor takes nine steps back and dies.

Finally, there is the god or goddess Frey or Freya, who is sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, and sometimes two distinct people, like the Gemini twins. The reason Freya has this double aspect is because she is the goddess of pleasure, of multiplication, of a prosperous harvest, and of happiness. She is Venus/Aphrodite mixed with Eros. She is a tremendous power, but when she faces Surt, the giant of forest fire, he sets her alight and kills her.

So, now the three gods are dead and will never return, which is why this period is called Ragnarok, the judgment or twilight of the gods.

Then when the great cosmic tree Yggdrasil sees the earth shaking loose from its foundations, and that there is only one boy and one girl (or man and woman) left – and this is the most beautiful part of the myth – the universe, that is, the tree becomes so upset (deep feeling, as in the *Heliand*) that it trembles and opens its trunk to receive the last boy and girl, and then shuts it, protecting them through the end of the world. When Ragnarok has ended and there is a new sun, a new moon in the sky, and the eagles are hunting again, Yggdrasil will open up and let the last boy and girl, Lif and Lifthrasir (Life and Life-desiring), out to repopulate the earth, to restart humanity.

RTE: And does the account say that this new world will never end?

FR. MURPHY: No, it doesn't say that. We don't know. The poets don't want to give away too much. But we can ask, why does the tree worry about us? One of the nicest things about northern mythology is that human beings were not made from the clay of the earth, but from plants and wood. Lif was created by Woden out of driftwood on the seashore, while Lifthrasir was created out of ivy. Lif was probably made out of pine wood, because they are both evergreens, and thus the tree is exhibiting family loyalty in saving us.

RTE: Wonderful.

FR. MURPHY: If Darwin had had any poetic sense, he would have said, "I like that." So, we are all related. If the universe goes down, we all go down, but the universe will try to protect us. It's like saying the ocean doesn't want you to drown, nor does it want to drown you. It wants to float you and will even send a few dolphins to keep you up.

Don't think, as we always do, that this is unrelated to us. We are all relatives, family of the same clan and, as our ninth-century ancestors would say, "All clans stick together." This is why everything would have to end with the world trying to keep us from being completely wiped out.

There is a sort of death/resurrection hidden in this tree story, so you would certainly honor the trees that are the image of Yggdrasil. To chop down the earthly image of the great tree, the cosmos, as St. Boniface did, shows ignorance of the tale. I am quite sure that he knew very little of this mythology or of the feelings of St. Gregory the Great.

Yggdrasil and Medieval Church Architecture

RTE: Speaking of St. Gregory, another quote you lift up from his letter is: "Let them return to the places they love," meaning their old places of worship now fulfilled in Christ. Have you ever seen remnants of this rich Yggdrasil mythology in medieval churches?

FR. MURPHY: Church architecture is a work of art, and it's trying to help you realize something. Whatever you realize is always in your own terms; otherwise things can't come home to you. So, when you walk into a stave church, you are performing what is done for you by Christianity. You are saved by entering the cross of Christ. Here in America, you can't often walk into the cross architecturally, at least not physically, not on Sunday morning at nine o'clock. But go to Norway, and you can. You walk through the arched doors and into a building built on the ground and in cross form.

And how do you know this sculpted archway, such as the one at Urnes, has anything to do with Yggdrasil? Look at the intertwining of plants and animals. Plants being eaten by animals, and animals being eaten by plants. That means that I am a part of the tree of life. I am going to enter into it, and there is Christ on the Cross, the heart of Yggdrasil. And when the priest goes in, he takes a step further under a similar arch into the altar. It's a deeper entering into the Cross. The third "entering" is that of the cross into ourselves.

Some of the churches surprisingly had a central pillar that upheld the roof like a giant tree-trunk with decorative branch, vine, and leaf motifs spilling out onto the ceiling. We know that a few originally had a stone baptismal font at the foot of the pillar. Viewed from the door, the huge pillar and font blocked the view of the altar, and you wonder why they were in such an inconvenient place. Well, just think. The three women at the foot of Yggdrasil water the tree of life, and here you are entering into life through the water of baptism. Also, these large central pillars were often surmounted with frescoed scenes of the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, allowing the observer to associate Yggdrasil with the wood of the cross.

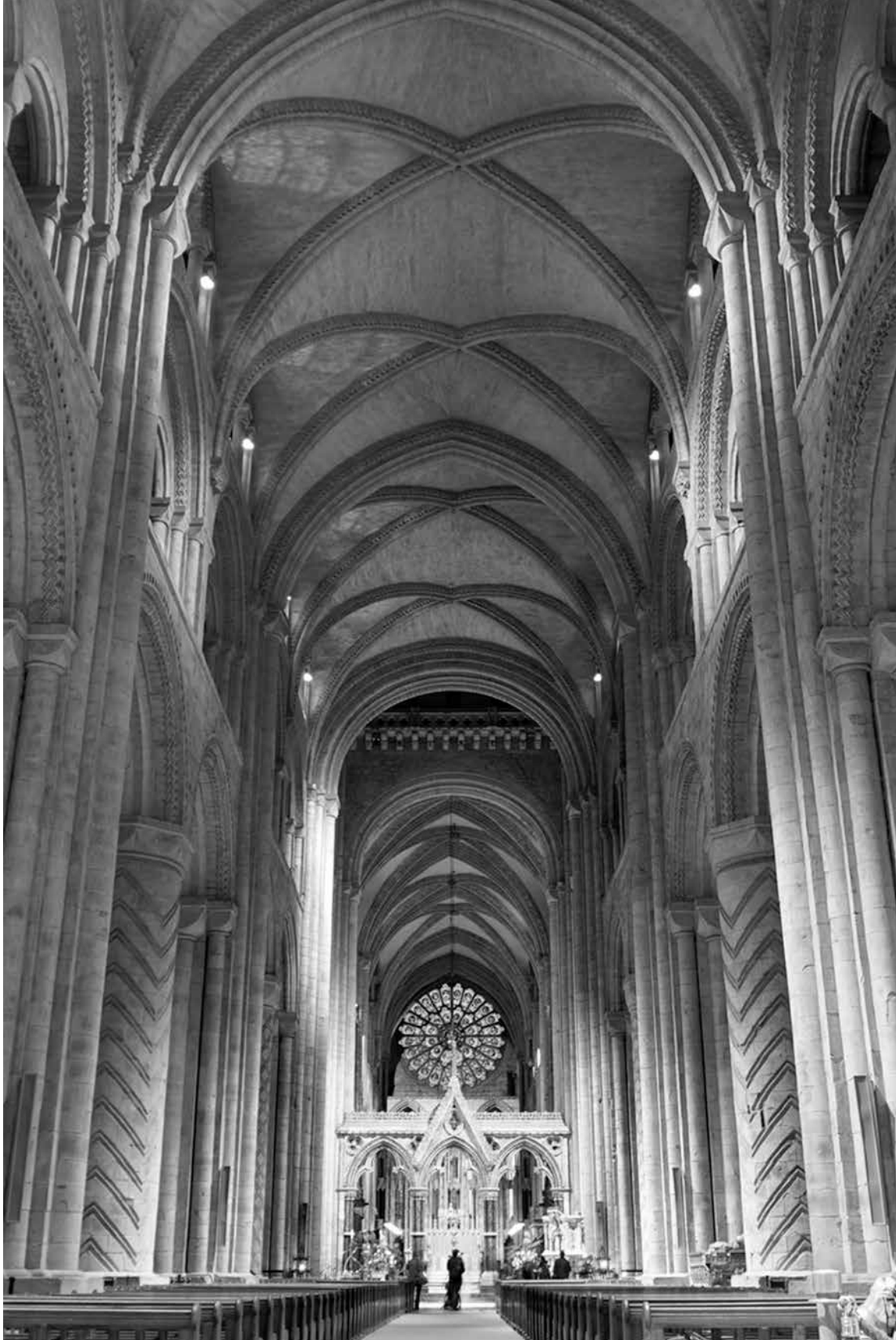
RTE: And why do so many of the stave churches not only have crosses on the roof peaks, but also dragons? Is that a representation of the dragon-snake in the underworld, and, if so, what message does this give about the Cross?

FR. MURPHY: For identity. The crosses on the lower roofs identify the building as a church. The dragon-snakes on the roof are a clear reference to the description of Yggdrasil in the *Elder Edda* where they are described as being not just under but all over the branches of the holy tree "where they will forever bite on the tree's branches." The snakes on the branches/roofs serve to identify the building. Thus, the Christian church is identified as the true holy tree that rescues all human life, as did Yggdrasil for the last man and woman. It's a very realistic view; on earth there is always suffering and yet the Cross saves.

RTE: Wonderful. Did that also play out in later European church architecture?

FR. MURPHY: Murphy theory again. Gothic cathedrals suddenly appear in Europe. Where do they come from? They are all vertical. Many of them have unexplainable little knobs on the sides of the tower, as if they were sawn-off branches. English Gothic, much more than French or German, loved to make branches radiate from the crown of the pillars inside, so that you are very much in a forest.

One of my students from England told me that she liked reading the *Heliand* because when she walked through the vastness of Durham Cathedral as a child she felt as if she was in a forest, with pillars on both sides, that had



Opposite: The tree-like columns and wooden rood screen of Durham Cathedral. Durham, England.

branch-like crowns like great tree trunks. I thought, "This is very good. The *Heliand* is telling us the Gospel in our older culture's words and values, most of which haven't really gone away." It still speaks to us.

As for the origins of Gothic architecture – you would think they could see this because it was so sudden: Roman, Romanesque, then suddenly stave churches in the north, and now Gothic! What? Where did it come from?

Romanesque, I feel sure, did not give birth to Gothic. At least, it is not the only parent. Romanesque has powerful round pillars, with no attempt to be arboreal-style vertical. Instead it is strongly and powerfully horizontal. Now, stave churches are a clear attempt to follow the path of the tree up, up, up, while English churches are incredible because they insist on branching all across the ceiling. I have a feeling that the influence that made Europe turn towards Gothic is from the north: Germany, northern France, England, Denmark, Sweden, all of it. Because the ancient respect and reverence for the tree had not died away, the Gothic is just a multiple-tree architecture. It's a forest, and Tacitus tells us that all Germanic tribes worshipped in the forest. They didn't build temples in Germany.

Even in the Episcopal cathedral here in Washington, D.C., you have a vague feeling that you are in a forest of some kind. One thing I do with my class is to take them up to the cathedral. We walk in and I say, "Do you recognize any influence of tree and forest?" It's obvious, and they do. Then I bring them to the middle, to where the nave meets the transept, and ask, "Do you know where you are standing right now?" Finally, someone will say, "We are inside a cross." "Yes, and made out of stone trees too. You are inside the cross. Does that sound like any boy and girl you know from mythology?"

So, you don't have to go to Norway to walk into the tree, to walk into Yggdrasil. Walk into almost any Roman Catholic church. Most of the Orthodox churches use a Greek cross form, but it doesn't matter. Walk in there and stand in front of the royal doors. These are the gates of heaven! How do you get to heaven? Just look around.

The Great Tree and the Human Heart

FR. MURPHY: Even now, old customs from these times survive – Christian church feasts with trees attached to the top of processional poles, and so

Opposite: Borgund Stave Church, Norway. Photo courtesy Fr. G. R. Murphy.

on. But the best liturgical survival, apart from the trees erected in Russian churches at Pentecost, is the Christmas tree.

RTE: Most of us couldn't imagine Christmas without a tree. The Russian Pentecost tradition you mention is very interesting because they tie birches to the pillars, as if the pillars become trees themselves, upholding the church roof.

FR. MURPHY: When I saw this for the first time I was taken aback because it was so beautiful. This was a Byzantine-rite church that didn't have pillars, so they tied the trees to the end of the pews. I thought, "This is like a Russian forest." It says that we still respect our fathers and we aren't ashamed of them or their religious feelings through nature.

I try to tell conservative Catholics that it is a miracle that people who did not have the Old Testament arrived at the idea of divinity, religion, and an afterlife on their hands and knees. It is more joyful and fascinating to see a small child crawl across the room than to watch me walking upright, and these Germanic peoples came to all of these wonderful notions with no prophets, no scripture, no Torah. Have you seen this small passage in the *Heliand*? Religion comes not from prophets, not from myths; "it comes out of the goodness of the human heart." That could have gotten the author into doctrinal trouble if there were people trying to make mischief. That's why we think of trees and robins that sing. It's not just an act of poetry, it's an act of goodness.

With the *Heliand's* author, I believe that this kind of thing does not come out of a logic machine; we use that for other things. Religion comes out of the goodness of the human heart.

And part of that goodness is loyalty. The Saxons would have said, "How am I going to be disloyal to the gods I've worshipped all of my life?" It is asking me to sin to become a Christian. I can't do it." "But these gods do not exist!" "Does that mean that the sky doesn't exist, the tree Yggdrasil doesn't exist? I don't believe that." In fact, even today there are British families that meet under the house tree. This is an old farmers' custom: a family tree near the front door where the family meets and picnics.

So, Yggdrasil is complicated because the great tree has its own structure. It has Woden grabbing the runes for mankind, and it has the salvational aspect of saving Lif and Lifthrasir at the end of the world. Typically for northern Europe, it's not just a spatial arrangement, a map of the universe, it is also a time arrangement. It tells you about both.

RTE: Did this reverence for Yggdrasil spread both east and west?

FR. MURPHY: We know that tree worship was practiced as far west as Britain and Ireland, and deep into the Slavic countries. You have a connection that shows up today in southern Russia where you have wooden churches from between the 13th and 15th centuries that are very close in appearance to the northern stave churches. The Russian government has tried to keep them intact, and some of them sit on top of earlier church sites that may have originally been temples. Kievan stone churches date from even earlier. But it works both ways. In the earliest northern European stave church that I've seen, the rood screen is not just decorative, but as in eastern churches it fully blocks the view except for an entrance for the priest. This entrance is not yet the royal doors, but something close. Although it wasn't a real iconostasis as there were no icons on it, it was something similar.

RTE: Could the icons (or possibly painted western images) have disappeared at the Reformation, or did rood screens simply not have images?

FR. MURPHY: Probably some had images; they always had a huge carved crucifix (rood) above the doorway to the altar.

RTE: Would this reverence for Yggdrasil have been worship or veneration?

FR. MURPHY: Veneration. The same confusion over worship and veneration arose in China, when the Jesuit missionaries allowed the Chinese converts to continue venerating their ancestors. The Franciscans came in and reported to Rome that it was ancestor worship, but it wasn't. They were only remembering and appreciating their forefathers with great honor.

A culture that has reverence for its ancestors is on solid ground because they acknowledge the past and look to the future. It's a relatively good and safe religion because the grandchildren will benefit from the fact that the parents and grandparents know that they are to be taught their past, learn to negotiate the present, and look forward to the future. You can predict, "The Jews and the Chinese will do well. They are very aware of all three, as are the Catholics and Orthodox. Anyone who has a strong diachronic sense of family will be fine."

People who come from an enthusiastic culture without a sense of obligation to the past and future will have trouble. If you are from one of these cultures and you immigrate to Germany or the North, but don't want to work

to take care of the future, you are not going to last long. Their Saxon Christianity did not throw away the good things of the old religion.

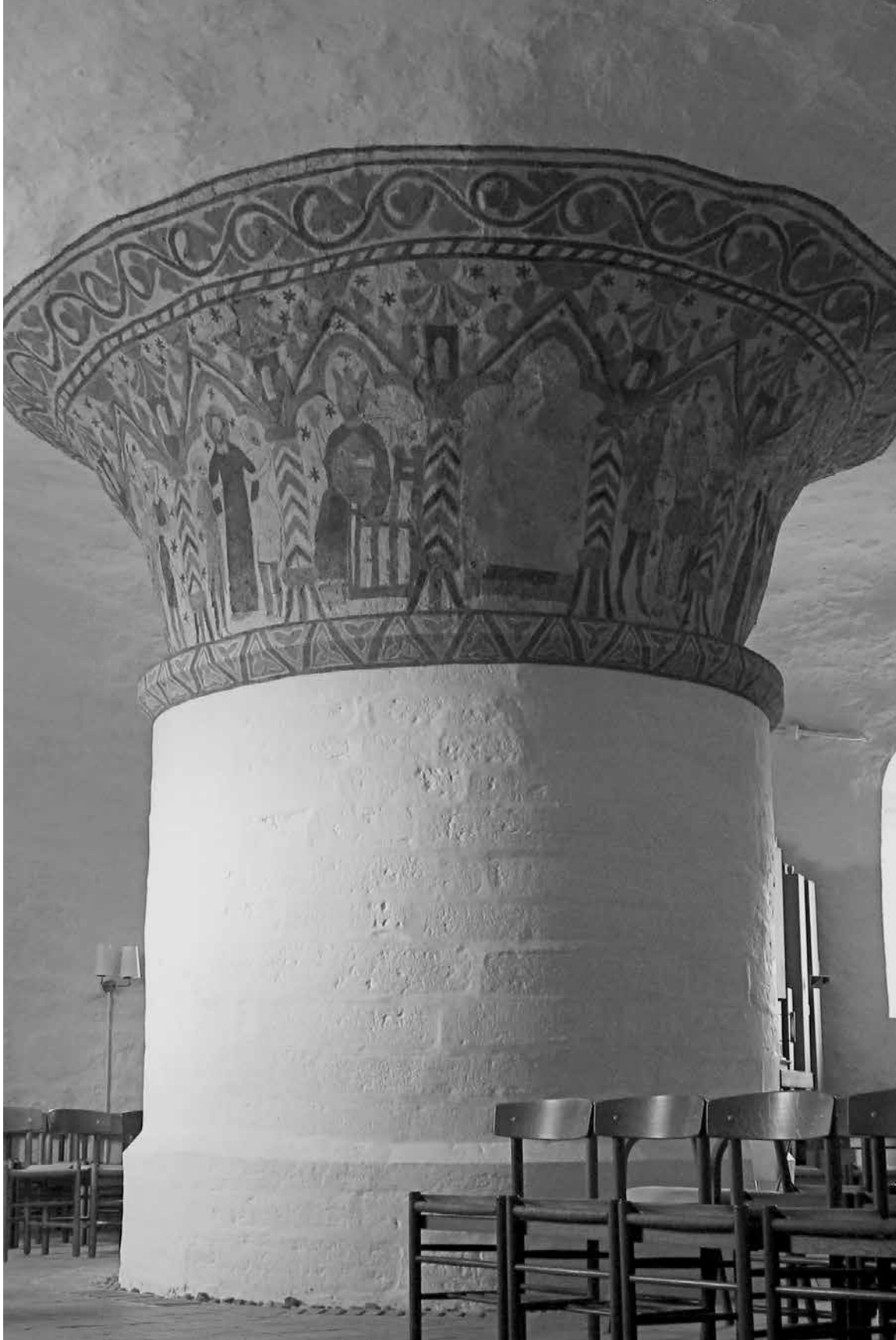
Tree Trunk Burials and East Anglian Graves

RTE: To continue with the influence of Yggdrasil, in ancient Scandinavian graves you find high-ranking people buried in boats with grave goods, while other coffins are simply hollowed-out tree trunks. Would such a coffin be an image of Yggdrasil, as if the dead person represents the young man and woman at the end of time?

FR. MURPHY: Yes, that is my belief. Both men and women were buried in hollowed-out trees from as long ago as the Bronze Age. Of course, the women didn't die on the battlefield, so perhaps they weren't imagined to go to Valhalla, but they were buried in the log, so they repeat the myth of being rescued at the end.

One of the ways you can tell about their belief is by determining the age of the coffin. Some are far older than Christianity, and a few of these hollowed-out tree coffins have women inside of them, fully dressed and buried with grave goods. They don't have axes, spears and shields, but they have things like a change of jacket. One also has a second skirt, while yet another has a weaving weight so she can be useful in the next life. It's nice. That means they had plenty of room for belief in an after-life for women before Christianity.

One of the latest discoveries to shed light on early Christian communities was announced in 2015 at a site not far from Norwich in East Anglia, on the eastern side of England. It was a well-preserved semi-waterlogged graveyard from Anglo-Saxon times. The most surprising thing about this find was that the graveyard was not pagan, it was Christian. How do they know? Because the graves face east-west or east-southwest. Pagan graves in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark generally face north because they want to circle around the North Pole, possibly to emulate Woden. But these face east-west and they have no grave goods in them, that is, nothing to bring to the next life so that they can fight in Valhalla.



Opposite: Interior of Nykirk Church, Bornholm. Tree of life-type pillar surmounted with frescoes of the passion and resurrection of Christ, allowing the observer to associate Yggdrasil with the wood of the cross. Photo courtesy Fr. G. R. Murphy.

English academics say that this is a Christian village dating to the 500s or 600s, but that raises a number of questions: The Anglo-Saxons began arriving in 450, but if these are Anglo-Saxons from northern Germany how could they have become Christian in such a short time? And if they are Christians how do you explain that they are buried in hollowed-out tree trunks like the pagan Norse? You can explain tree-trunk burials in the north of England as Viking Christian, but these are in the Anglo-Saxon southeast, not in Viking territory.

I am waiting for archeologists to ask me, and when they do, I will say, "Because they are speaking the language of their ancestors. They believe the tree will get them to life. They believe they are safe inside the tree." And isn't it a beautiful thing that this entire village of Anglo-Saxon Christians are buried in these hollowed-out logs, along with a few well-off people who had caskets made out of tongue and groove wood slats, very much like the tongue and groove stave churches. I like that because my theory is the tree trunk is the ancestor of our pine box: burying people in wood.

Somehow, soon after they landed, these Anglo-Saxons converted and said, "Well, we are Christians now, but when it comes to burying grandpa, we will do what we have always done." And what else would you do? Our funeral rites are still very much like this today; we don't change those things.

So, if people ask you where the casket is from, it is a distant descendant of the belief in the tree Yggdrasil. Otherwise we have no explanation as to why we bury people in caskets. When the Christians make a wooden casket, usually the cross is sculpted right into the top, but no one now remembers why. It is to identify the Christian casket as tree, and to identify the Cross as tree. It's an interrelationship. It also shows you that Christians did not stop the custom of burying people in tree trunks.

The story of Yggdrasil was the foreshadowing of what was to come. When we walk into the cruciform church, we are walking into the tree that will then close around us, protect us, and save us.

Heaven and Hel

RTE: Did the Yggdrasil mythology have any direct influence on western spirituality? For example, you mentioned that the word *hel* was adopted in

Opposite: Sixth-century gilded bronze brooch-cross from East Anglia. Walters Museum, Baltimore.

English; in what other ways did this Yggdrasil mythology influence our western Christian images of hell? Even the Hebrew Gehenna and Sheol seem far from our Christian ideas of hell.

FR. MURPHY: The Yggdrasil image of *hel* is closer to the macabre children's song, "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out…." The northern *hel* is cold and damp. In the *Heliand* it is mentioned as being "hot and fiery," but that is a rare Christian usage. Saxon hel is just an image of the grave: cold, damp, and dark, and you are abandoned in the grave until the snake comes. It is more frightening than the fire image.

Also, Hel is a goddess as well as a place. Hel is a daughter of the trouble-making god Loki, and she is half-corpse/half-human. When the gods sent a message asking Hel to release Balder, the sun god who had died, she replies that she will only release him if, "the whole world weeps for his death." Loki refuses to weep, so Balder – the wonderful sun god, the bright light beloved by everyone – must wait until the end of time to be released from *hel*.

This story gave a natural advantage to the sculptor of the Ruthwell Cross that I mentioned earlier, because there is a small engraving at the top: "Creation wept." In our own Christian story, the sun and moon darkened their faces, rocks split, graves opened up, and creation wept when Christ died. But then, unlike Balder, *He resurrected*. In the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood*, Christ marches the dead back to his home plantation.[3]

RTE: And have any of the images of Asgard, Valhalla and the place of the gods, influenced our later ideas of heaven?

FR. MURPHY: A little bit. The idea of a great big drinking hall, I don't think so – all-night drinking is straight out of college. *(Laughter)* Nor do we have the idea of the joy of fighting all day. The beautiful image of heaven as a green meadow, perhaps. At least it has always influenced me. An enormous green meadow with the sun overhead in the blue sky and all of the people you've always wanted to speak to right there.

3 He redeemed us, and gave us life / a heavenly home. Hope was renewed / with dignity and with joy for those who suffered burning there. / The Son was victorious in that undertaking, / powerful and successful, when he came with the multitudes / a troop of souls, into God's kingdom, / the one Ruler almighty, to the delight of angels / and all the saints who were in heaven before, / who dwelled in glory, when their Ruler came, / almighty God, to where his native land was. (Translated by Elaine Trehane, "The Dream of the Rood," *Old and Middle English: An Anthology*, Blackwell Pub., Oxford, 2000.)

The Danish Jelling Stone

RTE: Besides the *Heliand*, another place we can see this early grafting of Christianity onto a northern pagan root is on the Danish Christian Jelling Stone. Can you describe this?

FR. MURPHY: That image is beautiful, and the Danes now call it, half-jokingly, Denmark's baptismal certificate. And I think that isn't bad at all. The Jelling Stone was erected as a memorial by King Harald Bluetooth to his parents and the conversion of Denmark to Christianity. There is also a smaller stone next to it, erected by Harald's father in honor of his wife.

The Jelling Stone is a large three-cornered boulder, of which one side depicts Christ crucified, yet not crucified. On the first side of this pyramidal shape is the inscription: *King Harald ordered this monument made in memory of Gorm, his father, and in memory of Thyra, his mother; that Harald who won for himself all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christian.*

On the second side is a winged griffin, a noble creature from Greek mythology that guarded jewels and treasure. With its beak-like face and the winged body of a lion, it was king of the earth and sky. The griffin is portrayed in deadly battle with a huge serpent. The serpent is coiled around the griffin's neck, around his body, and around his tail, and this beloved mythological animal seems doomed to die in the coils of the serpent.

On the third side of the stone, the portrayal of the griffin and the serpent seems to refer to, and give way to, Christ. Just as the eagle-lion is held in the coils of the snake, Christ is held in the branches of the tree. His hands are outstretched, but there are no nails. He has voluntarily let himself be arrested because the way the vines entwine around Christ is the way you bind a prisoner to march him home. He has a white garment on, and, indeed, they called the Lord *hvite Krist,* the White Christ. He is dying, just as the griffin is dying.

RTE: Although with Christ clothed in white, would the resurrection be implicit?

FR. MURPHY: Yes, like a baptismal garment, the white guarantees us that He and we are going to rise. You don't want to be crucified into crucifixion alone. You are baptized into death and resurrection, not only into death.

The important thing here is that, in Christ, God entered the tree of his own free will and let himself be killed, which the griffin of myth may not have done. That tree could be called the cross, because that was what he died on, or it could be called Yggdrasil because he entered the human condition like all of us and consented to be timed by the three women. He consented to have a last day, and that is why he is bound to the tree. He agreed to the dominion of time on earth by the three women in the pond. So, the Jelling Stone expresses the crucifixion in a totally northern way.

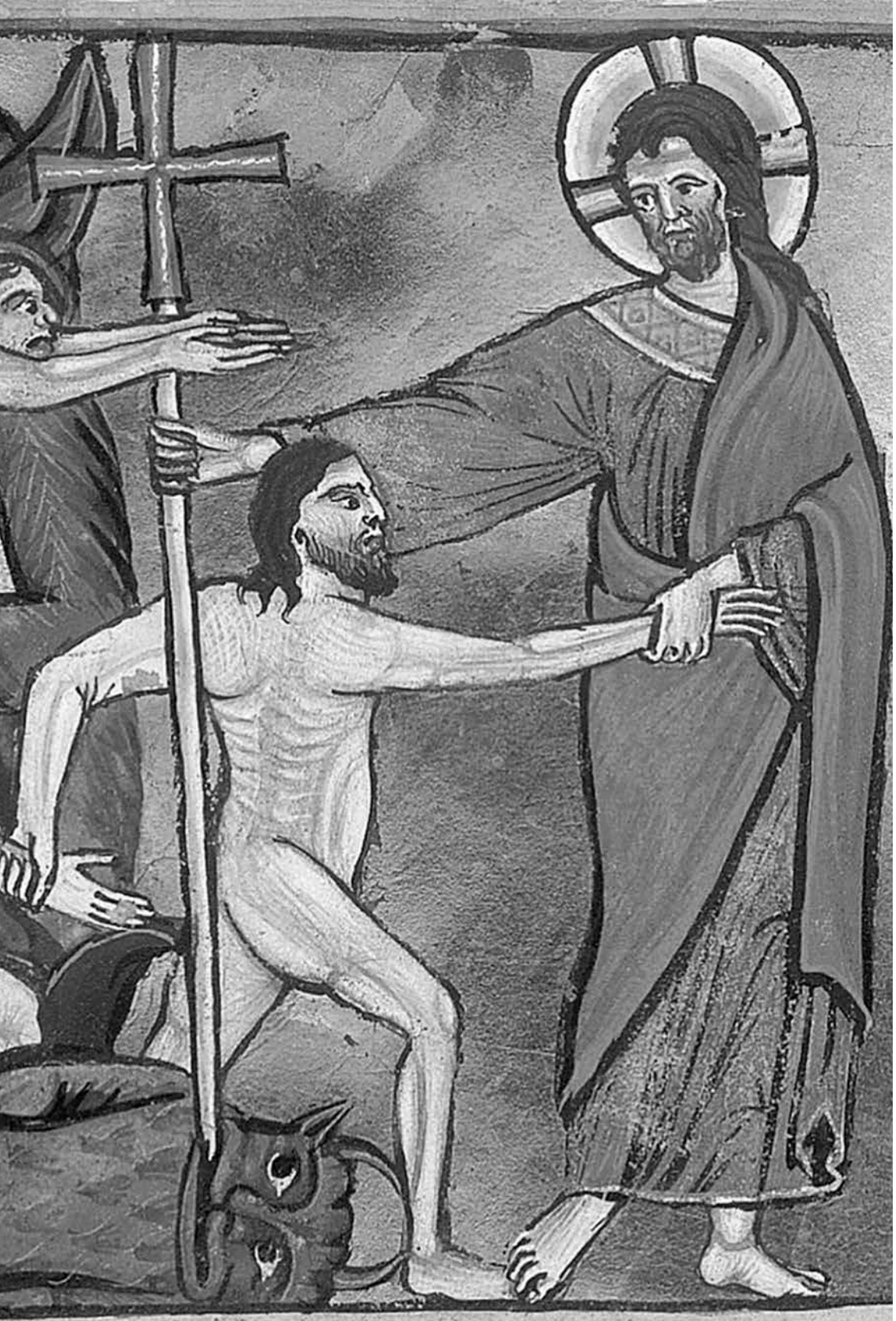
You first have to become incarnate as a human and that means you consent to live in the human condition, in the cosmic tree Yggdrasil, with the women down below counting your hours. "If you don't consent, don't come near us!" This makes Christ one of us, who died just like we do. He allowed himself to be wrapped and crushed by that tree, as was the griffin by the snake. This stone monument is a very beautiful thing and it is placed right between the two burial mounds.

The stone was colored in ancient days, but almost all of the paint has worn off, and the colors of the modern reproductions seem too gaudy and limited with their use of bright red, yellow and black. It seems to me that Yggdrasil stands so much for life, and for life continuing, that, even if Harald has become a Christian, some green ought to be there to acknowledge both the influence of Yggdrasil and the enlivening of creation at Pentecost. Green would be the proper analogue, just as the white of Christ's robe promises resurrection. In the language of Yggdrasil, it promises that, like Lif and Lifthrasir, Christ will walk out of this tree alive. Here you are not using biblical speech, you are speaking northern and that is quite fine. This is the Jelling Stone.

V. From Woden's Runes to Northern Christian Literature

RTE: You promised to return to the rich topic of runic writing, which Woden stole when he hanged himself from Yggdrasil. I don't remember any other mythology where written characters appear as a gift from a god, so can you tell us about the origin of runes and how such writing fared with the coming of Christianity?

Opposite: Portrait of Christ crucified on Denmark's Jelling Stone.



FR. MURPHY: This is a wonderful whole field to explore. It somehow implies that, in an earthly sense, written communication is a miracle, too. Dogs can't do it, nor can other animals. We talk about Christ as the Word: The runes can say, "We are the letters," but only Christ can say, "I am the Word." We are not enemies to one another. "I am the Vine, you are branches; I am the Word, you are letters."

The runes were magic because they were a gift of Woden, but you can demythologize that quickly. What was Woden? He was the personification of consciousness and memory. And what gives us the ability to write to people far away? Our consciousness and memory. "If I can write or carve this, then this paper or stick will hold the memory of what I've said until it arrives at its destination." So, for the northerners, Woden was perfect as the god of writing.

Now, you needed pen and ink to write Roman letters, but runes had to be carved. (Even if you were brilliant at carving runes, the Romans only considered you literate if you could write with ink.) The letters that the Germanic-speaking peoples used were variations on straight lines that you can carve into a hunk of wood, and the original word for that in English was, "to write." The Latin word for writing with pen and ink is always some form of "scribe," while the Germanic "write" implies cutting the letters with the "wrist" into a stick or in stone.

The earliest example of writing in any Germanic language is not a runic text, but the Gothic Bible, translated by a bishop-missionary named Wulfila sometime before 380. He was a Goth of Cappadocian Greek descent, who translated the Bible from Greek into Gothic German for the Goths he was converting in present day Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Romania.

It's a bit of a mystery why Wulfila struggled to translate with Greek letters, instead of using runes. He had twenty-four runes to work with, and he could have used them all, but he didn't. He only used about three runes for extra sounds from the Greek; everything else is an adapted Greek letter. Why do that? The answer, I think, is that Woden's people were still around, and Woden's worship was everywhere among the Germanic people. Christianity is just introducing itself, and you come in with Woden's letters? I think he was afraid. Greek script, yes, Hebrew, yes, Latin maybe. But no – we can't be using Woden's script. It's not a sacred script of Christianity.

Opposite: Christ freeing souls in hell from the jaws of death and leading them back to his homeland. 13th century. Arundel 157. f. 110, British Museum.

Also, runes could be used for magic and that was a problem. How could you write the Gospel with Woden's letters? These early Christians were very aware that the runic alphabet was magic, that it was powerful, and that it was the gift of a god. They used the word *godkundo*, which means "related to the god" – divine not in an absolute sense, but as related to this particular god, Woden. So, he was scared.

RTE: If Wulfila's Gothic scripture translation was before 380, it was indeed early. Saint Jerome hadn't yet translated the Latin Vulgate.

FR. MURPHY: The Vulgate was in 405, so that was not yet available, but in doing the Gothic version, Wulfila could still have used the Latin-type letters, which had been around forever, but he was using a Greek bible.

As I said earlier, the runes were used both for communication and for magic. Not long ago, some ancient markers for sacks of fruit and grains were found at a Norwegian port. There is a runic marker for each sack as to what it contained, such as "Oats." The fact that there was no red coloring in the letters meant that it was just a label with no magic involved, such as a runic memorial stone which might say something like: "Here lies Hans, who went to fight with the Varangian Guard in Constantinople."

To produce a magic effect, the runes had to have life in them. Runes of power could only be carved on wood from a fruit-bearing tree, and that tree had to be alive. If you wanted to put a spell or a curse on someone, you might carve on such wood, "May you get sick." You then take red paint, or I'm sure the ideal thing was blood from a sacrificed animal (blood always being the most effective filler) and color the runes. Then you put the carved stick under the sick person's bed, or under the fellow's favorite chair and it would affect him. They did believe that for a rune to have magic potency it needed to be red. In one of the sagas, a Norseman tries to curse someone by carving, "May you be sick" on a board and shoving it under the bed, but there are mice in the house and when they nibble off one of the letters, it doesn't work anymore. The magic is all gone.

When I presented this in class, one of my students made the remarkable comment: "He put his hands out and was carved, wounds with nails; they became effective, magic, they bled, and He colored all of his wounds to save us." When you have students who are English, German, Norwegian or Swedish, and have that background, these concepts are deep. All you have to do is to scratch the surface for old connections to arise.

The *Heliand's* author also writes, "His wounds were *written* into him." Because Christ's wounds were written into him, they bled and became a runic mystery. There are so many things like that in the *Heliand* that you think, "This is worth retelling."

RTE: I remember as a child becoming "blood brothers" with friends by pricking our fingers and touching them together to "mix" the blood. We told each other that we were now, not family, but of the same tribe.

FR. MURPHY: We did the same and I wonder how kids learn this? It's so deep and we all know it. But that would be a good answer for the question, "Why do we drink Christ's Blood?" "Because we are all now of the same blood. He is divine and human, so from now on, we are also. He is the only one who can share Divinity with us, but it's on our heads to make ourselves human."

RTE: A Russian priest once said in a sermon on the Dormition of the Mother of God, that because His flesh was from the Virgin, when we partake of Christ's Body and Blood, we also partake of her.

FR. MURPHY: That is lovely and another call to us to become human, because you are from her.

The Northern Eddas and Sagas

RTE: Can you say something now about the Icelandic and Norwegian tales, both the eddas and the sagas? *The Prose Edda*, of course, was written down by the Icelandic Christian lawspeaker, Snorri Sturluson, to preserve the old stories. Would his hearers have seen them as shadowy symbols of what is now fulfilled in Christ, or would they have just been traditional after-dinner stories?

FR. MURPHY: They are not deliberate Christian tales, no. When you read the eddas you get no impression of Christianity having interfered in this world of mythic entertainment. These were for after the meal, when the wooden tables and trestles are folded up and moved to the side of the hall in preparation for the poet, who comes in with his lyre and begins to play. He has to play loud enough and be interesting enough for them to want to listen to his tale. Now, stories of Jesus going about giving bread to the hungry, and so on,

won't work. That isn't what your entertainment is about. Christians played the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* songs for centuries after Homer was dead. We love that stuff. In the West, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had to yield once in a while to the *Aeneid*, but none of these things are Christian, so why do we love them and why do Christian schools keep teaching them? "To preserve the language," they say, but that's only about half right. To preserve that whole world of human feelings, might be better.

RTE: The Greeks still have a double layer: their very conscious Christian history and belief, and their rich classical mythology that is still so close that they can point out sites where those events were supposed to have occurred, such as where the highway crosses the River Styx in Epirus and Persephone entered the underworld.

FR. MURPHY: The Irish do it, too. It's ordinary people's knowledge. The scientists have enough sense to say, "Don't stop that," and the priests have enough sense not to say, "That can't be true." We're not dealing here with true or false facts. *We are dealing with whether it's true about human nature*. And that's where the poets have the last word. Don't mess with that. If you think of it as story and entertainment, entertainment runs on its own wheels. A movie that has no action and no plot is not going to do well.

RTE: You've written that *Edda* is the word in Norse for "great-grandmother," and that the tales have a certain family innocence and a fairy-tale aura. You also say that the idea of *Edda* as great-grandmother gives the stories a rootedness in the olden days, along with the "tranquil assurance that the continuity of their ancestral pagan content is of no harm to the Christian present." Do you want to comment on this? So many missionaries have been eager to uproot any mention of such tales.

FR. MURPHY: There's a German word, *verharmlosen*, to make something harmless. Ancient stories for entertainment are fine. For instance, my grandmother's stories about crossing on the boat to America – I don't need to throw those away. They are part of my memory now. We can over-religiosify ourselves, and when we do that we lose our humanity. That's why it's so holy to listen to great-grandmother's tales. They make us human beings of ancient emotions.

Opposite: Fourteenth-century manuscript of Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda decorated with a Viking-style ship.

Here is a thought from my Christmas sermon: God, in Jesus Christ, became a human being. If He could come down from infinity to our state, why is it so hard for us to become human beings? Blame is often put on religion, but if you look, you will discover that everything Christ preaches is, "Be human beings."

RTE: What about the other northern sagas? How do they fit in? Some seem more factual than others, and you can get a mix of high entertainment, history, and even hagiography, such as the tales that incorporate Olaf Trygvasson, St. Olaf Haraldsson, Harald Hardrada, Sts. Vladimir and Yaroslav the Wise and Ingegard of Sweden (later St. Anna of Novgorod). All are historical figures: three kings of Norway, two kings and a queen of Kievan Rus, all are converts to Christianity from paganism, four are saints, and all are incorporated into the Norse and Icelandic sagas.

FR. MURPHY: With all of our faults and goodness, we need our poets to hold up the mirror of ourselves so we can realize who and what we are. Fiction, too, has its use and its charm. Sagas, lives of saints, St. Harald and St. Vladimir, even Siegfried and Circe, blends of fact, fiction, and rhyme. We need our stories to see ourselves.

The *Heliand* and *Beowulf*

RTE: Will you speak briefly about other northern medieval Christian-authored literature, particularly *Beowulf* and *The Dream of the Rood*?[4] Do you see any connection between them and the *Heliand*?

FR. MURPHY: It is a complicated question actually. They are separate, but they all work together. To take *Beowulf* first, it was certainly not written by the same person who wrote the *Heliand*, but it seems they were drawing on

4 *Beowulf* is a 3100-line epic poem, written in Old English alliterative verse by an anonymous writer around the eighth or ninth century about a fictional hero and king of the Scandinavian Geats. *The Dream of the Rood* is one of the finest and earliest Anglo-Saxon poems in which, in a dream, the poet beholds a beautiful tree, the rood or cross on which Christ died, which speaks to him of Christ's victory over death and his harrowing of hell.

Opposite: Eleventh-century Christian runestone from Morby, Uppland, Sweden dedicating a newly-built bridge as alms to the memory of the sponsor's daughter. (Inscription: "Gullaug had the bridge made for the spirit of Gillaug, her daughter….")

the same tradition. Some think that the nearest relatives to the *Heliand* in style are certain English Life-of-Christ type writings, but I believe that the closest is *Beowulf*. Although there are Christian elements in *Beowulf*, it is not the story of Christ, but rather a heroic pagan epic poem which, like the *Heliand*, honors the idea of fate.

However, there are some odd similarities: for example, *Beowulf* wasn't written down until late – they now say roughly 1000 AD, but it was probably composed 200 years before that. The most likely date for the *Heliand* is around 830, so they come out of the same era. Secondly, at that time Saxons in England and Saxons in Germany are only separated culturally by about 300 years from the first Saxon emigration, so the Saxon *Heliand* and the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* are about as far apart as British English and American English. They still understand each other. The author of the *Heliand* should have been able to read *Beowulf*, and the author of *Beowulf*, the *Heliand*. Physically, it was not that great of a journey across the North Sea – two days, perhaps, with the right wind – and there would have been a great deal of travel back and forth. Both pieces are familiar with the seas and boats, and both have no trouble admitting that there are things too deep to be understood.

RTE: Although so different in subject, do they share in expression or style?

FR. MURPHY: There are certain phrases that are used in *Beowulf* that are also used in the *Heliand*, and that is surprising. As I said, although *Beowulf* is close in time to the *Heliand*, they neither copied from each other nor were they influenced by one another. But there are phrases in *Beowulf* such as this one about a ship being sent to sea carrying a corpse: "Men cannot say for sure, neither counsellors in the hall, nor warriors out under the sky, who received that cargo." (l.50 ff.)

In the *Heliand* you get the same rhythm and formula: "Men cannot say, neither those in the hall…." So, they are coming out of the same poetic story-telling tradition that allowed them to say certain things that you wouldn't expect religious people to say, like "Men cannot say…." You expect that in literature, but you don't expect it in church. But there it is.

In talking about literary aspects, you also have to remember that you are centuries before the printing press, so you can only talk about what the author has heard. Most monasteries had recreation and singing after the meal, and semi-religious types of story-telling, so if the author of the *Heliand* is an epic poet, he would have been influenced by listening to such tales. That was true even in the monasteries. In fact, I believe that Bede protested against it.

RTE: You've also made the point that the *Heliand* was meant to be recited, not just read.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, sometimes you should be chanting things, not just saying them. I also believe the recitation of the *Heliand* was accompanied by chords from a harp. You can play simple or complex chords, but you can also keep a continuous chant note with the harp…. "And-in-those-days-when-Jesus-went-forth…." That is probably what *Beowulf's* author did if he used Christian elements, because there was some Byzantine influence in the north. All you can say for certain is that he had access to the alliterative poetry of his day and had heard a lot of songs himself. Above all, the Mass itself was sung.

RTE: And as you said, the *Heliand* was intended to be chanted after meals in the evenings.

FR. MURPHY: Which is why when I did the translation, I didn't call the headings Chapters, I called them Songs. They could well have been chanted like the Byzantine Gospel form because, among other things, if there are no microphones and you shout a story, the romance is gone. Chanting allows you to project your voice way out to the back of the church or the hall, with reverence. Shouting may accomplish the same thing, but without the reverence.

Now the other possibility is that they could have used a type of Germanic chant, but we don't have any examples and we don't know how it would have sounded. In the West, you would really need something like plainchant or Gregorian.

RTE: Although it is an epic tale, doesn't *Beowulf* also have a distinctly Christian element?

FR. MURPHY: One of the biggest arguments that scholars have is over the Christian element in *Beowulf*. At one point, they were trying to clean the Christianity right out of it, as if the Christian element was an obvious addition. They hypothesized that the *Beowulf* story was first written and told about 400 or 500 (we now know this is wrong), and then recopied by a Christian who kept throwing annoying Christian references into it. Then, supposedly, in 1066 someone in England said, "We'd better write this down before

the Norman Invasion." In other words, Skuld warned them: "The French are coming." *(Laughter)*

But the Christian element cannot be disentangled from the basic story-line without wrecking it, and this is more or less the scholarly stance now. I think it's a better stance. There was no original pagan *Beowulf* without any Christian element, and if you remove the Christian elements from it, you leave a hole that you can't fill with anything you know of. They tried stripping out the Christian phrases, but it doesn't work any better than Thomas Jefferson's New Testament. Jefferson claimed that without the miracles or mention of the Resurrection or Christ's divinity, he had a purified New Testament. It was crazy 18th-century rationalism run amuck.

About *Beowulf*, they now prefer to say: "The story was retold by a Christian and this is the earliest version we have." Sure, there may have been some form of a pagan version of *Beowulf* even before Christianity came north, but the earliest version we have is the version that a Christian told people at night by the fire.

The Dream of the Rood

RTE: And the poem *The Dream of the Rood*?

FR. MURPHY: *The Dream of the Rood* is a bit earlier than the *Heliand*, from around 700, and like most of the liturgical poems about the Cross, the Cross (like Yggdrasil) is capable of saving. But in *The Dream of the Rood*, the Cross also talks.

Almost all of the hymns we have praise the Cross, speak to the Cross, and almost personify the Cross. But only in *The Dream of the Rood* does the Cross talk back, and this is a serious thing. What does it say? It doesn't claim it is Christ, but it says, "I can save you. If you make the sign and take me inside of yourself, I can save you." It is a spectacular poem.

The poem begins with a monk thinking about how most crosses are wooden on the back, while gilded and jeweled on the front. The realization that comes through the poem is, "Don't forget the wood, don't forget the tree, and don't forget the bleeding that saturated that wood."

Opposite: Viking-age crucifix. Lansmuseet, Gavleborg, Sweden.

RTE: To have power, runes must be red.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, and in *The Dream of the Rood* the Cross even says, "I'm saturated." It says, "When I saw the Hero coming toward me to climb up on me, I tried to bow down, but I was not supposed to do that – I was supposed to stay upright and support him." But after He is dead, the tree does bow, because it is okay now: His people have come to take his Body for burial. There is loyalty again.

By the way, *Rood* is the old English word for cross. It means rod or pole, and it is their old way of execution, by hanging people from a pole. So, the tree tells the dreaming monk that it has the power to save, because after He died the Chieftain went down to hell and, with a great army of his own people, marched out of hell into heaven. The gates are now open. The Cross is extremely happy, and tells you, "Anyone who takes this Cross into themselves, I can save."

In fact, the famous sculpted cross in Ruthwell, Scotland doesn't have the entire Dream of the Rood inscribed on it, but only verses where the cross itself speaks, so it is saying to everyone buried there, "I can save you." And it's not just telling a story; it is talking. This cross also has intertwined vines and animals eating on it, so here we are back to Yggdrasil again. It is from within that design that the speech of the cross is recorded. And why in inscribing the Ruthwell Cross did the carver use runes instead of the Roman alphabet? Because for an Anglo-Saxon, a Germanic wonder is happening. The Cross is talking.

RTE: So, the author of *The Dream of the Rood* must have been aware of Yggdrasil's role in northern mythology?

FR. MURPHY: I think so, and this is one of the cases of extremely successful Christian inculturation. We Christians don't give ourselves enough credit here. We did a fairly good job in the north, especially around Christmas, and in regard to the Passion itself. *The Dream of the Rood* is unique in all of Christianity because it preserves the heart of Christ's Passion, and it does this by combining the speech of the Cross with Yggdrasil's desire to rescue the human race.

Opposite: Eighth-century Anglo-Saxon Ruthwell Cross with Yggdrasil-like tree of life images and both runic and Latin verses. Ruthwell Village Church, Dumfriesshire, Scotland.

RTE: One of the most amazing things is that in this great work of inculturation, the author of the *Heliand* and the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* never step over into any kind of double faith.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, there's nothing heretical. There's one place in the *Heliand* where he says that, at the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit became the child in the Virgin's womb, but I don't believe that this is a conscious mistake.

The *Heliand* and J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth

RTE: Moving to a more contemporary piece of literature, how does the epic quality of the *Heliand* compare to *The Lord of the Rings*? J.R.R. Tolkien was Roman Catholic, and he was inspired to write his own epic about Middle Earth after reading the sagas. Do you sense any influence of the *Heliand* in his writing?

FR. MURPHY: When I handed in my manuscript of the *Heliand*, the editor went a little crazy over it, and then she asked, "How about Tolkien's trilogy? I know you must have read it – there are so many parallels here." At that time, I'd been in seminary for years, so I replied, "No, I haven't read it." "After translating the *Heliand*, that's impossible," she said, and that afternoon she sent me the three volumes.

Tolkien has a few things that are very interesting, one of which may come from the *Heliand*, as he taught Old English (Anglo-Saxon). It is impossible to tell if he read it or not, but the problem of evil lurks in his fiction. In his time, Europe was getting dark, especially Germany, the land of poets. World War II was on, and Adolf was watching. *The Lord of the Rings* is modern in that it is more worried about the hidden presence of evil than it is explicit about the hidden presence of good. Tolkien often said that the two world wars didn't have anything to do with the book, but he may have been unaware of how much of that background may have insinuated itself into his writing.

RTE: The *Heliand* seems to be for an audience with deeply-rooted cultural values, but Tolkien is for our own time, and meaningful for a modern young person first encountering nobility, dignity, discernment, chastity and loyalty as real virtues you can cultivate.

FR. MURPHY: I agree that there is an age limit on it. It was fascinating, but for a reader of fifty or sixty years of age, it doesn't seem to have the same impact. By the way, I don't know if you know, but Tolkien's name in German means, "Wildly nuts." *(Laughter)*

VI. The Nativity, Yule, and the Twelve Days of Christmas

RTE: Can we end now where the *Heliand* begins, with the Nativity of Christ? What can you tell us about the Saxon Yule and its influence on our own treasured Christmas traditions?

FR. MURPHY: Before Christianity, the twelve days originally celebrated the turning back of the sun. Astronomically, the winter solstice is now December 21st, but centuries ago it was the 25th. This was Yule. Other cultures waited until March 25 to start the New Year, but in the North, it was when the sun stopped its awful downward slide toward the south. Every morning they would look, and when the sun finally halted they built things like Stonehenge to mark the place and day that the sun stopped and turned back to the north. By the twelfth day, you could actually see the motion. Now, of course, the twelve days of Christmas are Christian.

This feast was universal and the Romans also celebrated *Sol Invictus,* the feast of the unconquered sun. The Egyptians did something similar, but they were more concerned about the flooding of the Nile to restore fertility, while we northerners worried about the sun bringing back warmth, light, and new life.

The Christmas tree is evergreen, as was Yggdrasil, but we don't know exactly what kind of tree Yggdrasil was. Some contradict this and say it is an ash, so that you can associate it with weapons and with Woden, however there is no such tree as an evergreen ash in Northern Europe. There are some species of ash south of the Mediterranean that stay green, but the Germanic peoples wouldn't have known about them. They were trying to balance it all, and had no trouble saying contradictory things that were neither rational nor systematic, like ash and evergreen.

So, you can't establish a point-to-point connection for the Christmas tree back to Yggdrasil, but why try? It's very obvious that Christianity did not

get rid of it, despite the Protestant reformers, and in England it was almost always the holly tree. Pines are not as common in England in the early medieval period as they were in Germany and Scandinavia, but the holly tree was. And so, old English Christmas carols don't sing about the pine tree, but they do sing about the holly.

For example, in "The Holly and the Ivy" both are evergreen, and there is an obvious analogy to Christ in the holly's thorns and red berries. As soon as the printing press was invented in 1450, that song was printed in England. In fact, it was one of the earliest things printed, although Christmas carols were probably not often printed or copied because everyone knew them. The kids knew them, just as Irish Catholic children all knew the verse, "Dear St. Anthony come around, something is lost and cannot be found."

Nevertheless, the Christmas tree is almost certainly Yggdrasil. It is a continued custom of bringing greenery and trees into the hall to celebrate the turning, Yule, of the sun, and this is where the 16th- and 17th-century Protestant reformers, who outlawed the celebration of Christmas, were partially right about it having pagan roots. The chieftain's great hall was where they had the wassail, the big bowl of hot mulled cider or mead flavored with fruit and spices, in front of a roaring fire. A fire of that size and duration requires a huge log to sacrifice itself for many days, so now we are back to Yggdrasil again.

RTE: How wonderful that we celebrate both the life-giving re-turning of the sun and the coming of our salvation in Christ. The reformers couldn't be grateful for either, but the Church fathers knew better when they appointed the celebration of Christmas for this time.

FR. MURPHY: Yes, and this was also tied up with the twelve days of Christmas and the coming of the New Year, and we still sing a song about it. The word Christmas is obviously Christian, but before the "mass of Christ" was the word for Christmas, it was Yule, and Yule means a turning, a wheeling around. This of course is when the sun, which had gone down south as far as it could on the horizon, wheeled to begin its northward turn. The ceremonial Yule logs were to burn hot because the sun needed help. It was extremely cold outside, and the sun supposedly used the log's warmth and energy to pull itself back up north along the horizon.

The *Eddas* depict a deep relationship with nature across time between the human race and the tree of Yggdrasil, and Christianity has carried that along. For the Germanic tribes, here is Yggdrasil as a Yule log helping the sun, just as it will save Lif and Lifthrasir, the last boy and girl who will repopulate the earth after the end times. And why does the tree worry about us? As I mentioned earlier, one of the nicest things in this mythology is that human beings were not made from the clay of the earth, but from plants and wood. Lifthrasir was made from ivy, but Lif was from driftwood, probably pine. They are both evergreen, and thus the tree is exhibiting family loyalty in saving us.

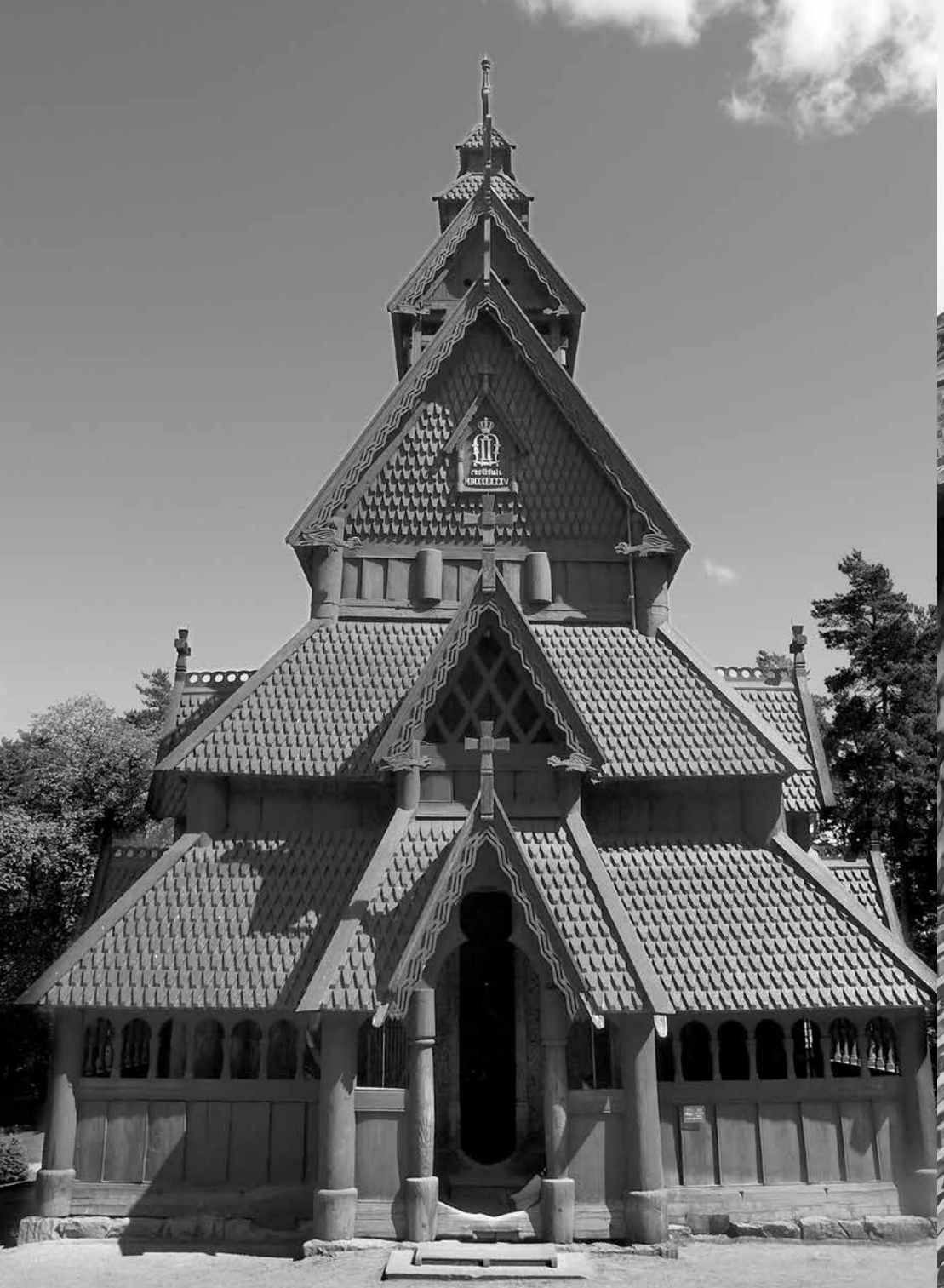
At some point, the tree began to be decorated. I don't know if it was decorated in pre-Christian times, so in this way Christianity has contributed to the Christmas tree that we know now. Then the Germans began putting candles on it. In Germany the tree is given its own room, completely decorated and candlelit. Then the door is flung open, the children rush in, and everyone begins to sing, "O Christmas Tree! O Christmas Tree!"

In German, the second line of the song is not the English, "How lovely are thy branches," but instead, *"O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, Wie treu sind deine Blatter!"* "How faithful are your branches." Again, the northern loyalty, steadfastness, faithfulness….

Further, *treo* the old Germanic word for "tree" is also used for "true." No wonder they picked the tree as the sign of faithfulness! We've made it into "Christ is faithful," or "We are faithful," but they meant, like the evergreen, "The sun is faithful." When it looks like it is going south forever, it slowly turns and begins to move back along the horizon, coming back to us.

RTE: Just as Christ saves us from our own darkness. With these marvelous insights, Nativity celebrations are even richer. Father Murphy, after this astonishing overview of the *Heliand* and the coming of Christianity to Northern Europe, what would you like to leave our readers with?

FR. MURPHY: The Christmas tree, the wooden manger, the Norns, the Cross, the male driftwood and the female ivy, the tree stave church and runes on wooden twigs of Yggdrasil; they are all promises to us of the intercommunion of all things in the Lord of all life and in his beautiful happiness. ✣



Gol Stave Church, Norwegian Museum of Cultural History, Oslo, Norway.

Hopperstad Stave Church, Vikøyri, Sogn, Norway.