

Jessica McGillivray

Instances of Religious Roles of the Anglo- Saxon Warrior Class

Jessica McGillivray received three Bachelors of Arts in Anthropology, History, and Religious Studies in Spring of 2013 from University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and served as former President of Pagan Student Fellowship and Faith'N'Queers student organizations at UWM. Her favorite area of interest is Northern European history and culture studies. She feels it is important for religion to be discussed. One cannot ignore the base reality of existence for so many people on our planet and then pretend to say they understand all of the complications in politics and social change. Understanding our historical and cultural past helps us understand who we are today. The motto for the Faith'N'Queers club applies to scholarship and social activism. "Put down the stones. Climb out of the trenches. Let's talk."

Introduction

Looking back into history to discover the roles of religious rituals and beliefs as practiced by a certain part of society can be arduous, particularly when there are not historical annals written about the precise rituals being practiced by those in power. However, in the case of Anglo-Saxon Britain, which would have lasted from the fall of Roman influence around AD 400 until the Norman Conquest in the 11th Century, many texts of literature have survived. These include "Beowulf", "The Wanderer", "Judith" and "The Dream of the Rood". These were all written in Anglo-Saxon, and likely recorded by monks in the scriptoriums of the monasteries of Britain. Although the original manuscripts of these stories are lost, much can be learned from these copies that did survive. The rich detail of the texts provide a window into the Anglo-Saxon world, in which warriors were ever embarking on quests, and fulfilling social and religious duties in that process.

Considering these four poems is important. There are scholars who have completely misunderstood the pre-Christian religious practices of Anglo-Saxon culture when interpreting these texts for the modern readers. By using the four texts in concert, we can see the pre-Christian roles of religious rituals and practices in as well as the Christian and Christian lens additions. Where using one text may have allowed room for doubt or inconclusive results about these roles, when combined the conclusions are clear.

These stories are the oral traditions of the warrior class turned into written accounts that have survived to the present day. The raids, gift giving, oaths, and devotion to each other were the social aspects of a society that depended on war for its financial economy. While these stories also leave out the farming freemen and slaves of the lower classes, much can be gleaned about the traditions of the warrior classes from these stories.

A definition is in order. Paganism was used to describe "anyone who worshipped the spirit of a given locality or pagus". Pagus comes from the latin word meaning rural or countryside. This means that paganism would have been the non-Christian local beliefs of the

persons or group.¹ Then these poems will reflect on the religious aspects of the warrior class based on these definitions.

There is much debate, to be sure, about the extent to which of these poems are pre-Christian, Christian, or Pagan with a Christian lens. These texts were likely written down by Christian monks as they collected and transcribed stories when not writing translations of the Bible. However, even with that known, it is still clear that these texts contain much of the pre-Christian oral tale as transcribed by the monks.

Therefore, these four texts are rare gems. When used together, the sources build a picture of Anglo-Saxon warrior society and its religious and social customs. These customs would have been interwoven and considered to be joined in purpose. These practices would show that even the most mundane of warrior tasks were all part of the social and religious responsibilities of the warrior thanes.

Christian Instances

When considering these poems, there are instances of clearly Christian origin inserted into the poem, or in the case of "The Dream of the Rood", a Christian story told from Anglo-Saxon cultural perspective. "Judith" also is a Judeo-Christian story told from an Anglo-Saxon perspective, but the narrative of that story is not as distinctly different from Anglo-Saxon culture as the story of the Passion told in "The Dream of the Rood."

It can be said then, that "The Dream of the Rood," has a Christian theology built into the narrative. This very fact is the focus of much scholarship. One of those scholars, Anthony Grasso writes about the Christian theological aspects of "The Dream of the Rood". He begins with this

The poem is fascinating for the way in which it portrays Christ's dual nature in concrete images, using minimal theological language. Yet the poem's theology is of a piece with its literary expression and structure; the two are clearly intertwined. The poem's impact and message are not of the didactic type, aimed at correcting heretical thought. Rather, the poem presupposes belief in the tenets of faith, Christ's salvific death and resurrection."² Rev Grasso is asserting in his paper that the Anglo-Saxon poem is a theological devotional poem, written for the person to reflect on. He goes on, "Because it maintains structural and theological affinity with that prayer, 'The Dream of the Rood' may well have been composed as a personal meditation on the Creed by a monastic author."³

He then goes on to describe why he asserts this point.

Just as one is drawn into the wordplay of the riddles to discover their possible meanings, one quickly becomes absorbed in the poignant experience of the personified cross...The cross, central symbol of Christianity, is also the concrete sign and gesture performed frequently in prayer. The sign of the cross is made at the opening and closing of the Mass and at other devotions. Thus, associations among the cross, the person and mission of Christ and the Creed, which contains references to all three, could have arisen naturally from various monastic liturgical practices, including celebrations of the Mass."⁴

This would suggest a later date for the creation of the story of "The Dream of the Rood" than "Beowulf" as well as likely written by an Anglo-Saxon religious person, possibly in a

monastery. It is also likely that "The Dream of the Rood" was originally written, while "Beowulf" may have started orally and then was transcribed by an Anglo-Saxon monk in a monastery. Beowulf was written between the 8th and 11th centuries, but as with many transitions from oral to literate cultures it likely existed in an oral form before being written.⁵ Parts of the Dream of the Rood go back as far as the 7th Century on a stone cross known as the Ruthwell Cross and may have been used as a conversion tool.⁶

Explicitly Christian aspects of these poems are not as common as the instances of Pre-Christian and Pagan through the lens. However, their presence does add to the diversity and richness of the religious instances of these poems.

Christian Lens Instances

The Christian Lens aspects are in a way, reading the pre-Christian stories with a pair of glasses to help us read. These glasses are the Christian minds of the monks who transcribed these stories from the oral narratives and then translated them over and over again, giving us the versions we have today. The lens provides a look into the interaction of the burgeoning Christian dominance in the area as the scholars record the oral stories of the Pagan past.

Christina Heckman also discusses "The Dream of the Rood" in her article about the poem Anselm's militant Christianity. Anselm was the Archbishop of Canterbury around the turn of the last millennium. He would have therefore been quite familiar with the Anglo-Saxon/Norman culture, and by then that culture would have been Christian. Dr. Heckman states

While the intermediary of the cross in The Dream of the Rood might distance the Dreamer from Christ, as both co-sufferer and instrument of suffering, the cross provides a penitential paradigm through which the Dreamer obtains an expansive understanding of the nature of sin, forgiveness, and redemption. The Dreamer is tormented by his own sin and by the suffering which his sin inflicts upon Christ. Through the cross, however, he gains the hope of forgiveness and fulfillment in Christ's heavenly home. The poem places Christ's suffering at a remove, one which proves very effective for the Dreamer's understanding of sin and redemption and his subsequent transformation from fear to hope. Therein lies the poem's affective force.⁷

This plays into the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the warband succeeding or failing together, as told through Christian terminology. When the war leader dies, the warband is honor bound to stand until the end defending and supporting their leader. Or, in the terms of suffering, when the war leader suffers, so does the warband. Alternatively, when the leader succeeds and is rewarded, so is the warband.

The Dream of the Rood is a tale depicting the death of Jesus from the perspective of the Cross who bore him. The Cross is depicted as a warrior standing with his leader until the fateful end. The dreamer of the story begins by describing this,

*All there beheld the Angel of God,
fair through predestiny. Indeed, that was no wicked one's gallows,
but holy souls beheld it there,
men over earth, and all this great creation.
Wondrous that victory-beam--and I stained with sins,
with wounds of disgrace.⁸*

The invocation of original sin and falling from grace is implicit in the beginning of this tale. Also the Rood describes its loyalty to its leader in strife and battle with this passage.

*Then saw I mankind's Lord
come with great courage when he would mount on me.
Then dared I not against the Lord's word
bend or break, when I saw earth's
fields shake. All fiends
I could have felled, but I stood fast.
The young hero stripped himself--he, God Almighty--
strong and stout-minded. He mounted high gallows,
bold before many, when he would loose mankind.
I shook when that Man clasped me. I dared, still, not bow to earth,
fall to earth's fields, but had to stand fast.
Rood was I reared. I lifted a mighty King,
Lord of the heavens, dared not to bend.⁹*

In this section, even though the Rood knows the King is going to die, he stands with him with all his strength and bravery anyway. This is an example of the bond of warriors in Anglo-Saxon society, and its description here would lend credibility to the idea that the warrior bond was a religious bond among the tribes. This excerpt then, is a mix of pre-Christian warrior culture and sacred bonds being described through a Christian holiness view.

The story of "Beowulf" also begins the genealogy of his Noble birth in a familiar Christian perspective of the messiah.

*To him was born/a boy later on,
A good youngster to his hearth/ That God had sent
To save the people/ God saw the dire need,
That lacking a leader/they had languished earlier
A lingering time/to them the Life-Giver,
Glory-Wielder/Gave world-honor:
Beo-Wulf was peerless/His prowess widespread,
The son of Scyld/in Scandinavia.¹⁰*

The allegorical comparison to the birth of Christ being given as a son to save the people is obvious and would have been to the audience at the time as well, but the excerpt also harkens back to the Wodensprung theme. Pointing out the immediate blends of religious beliefs at the beginning of the poem is important because it helps demonstrate the way that Anglo Saxon society was unified in its traditions. To talk about the history of the tribe and individuals in history was to talk about the religious traditions of the tribe.

Judith is a tale from the Old Testament, but an Anglo Saxon epic poem of the story exists. This means that an explicitly religious text talking about the history of the Judeo-Christian people is interpreted through the lens of the Anglo Saxon culture. The beginning of this story starts with an invocation to God.

*/Reward is doubted
Of a fair share in this wide world/yet therein she found abundantly
The helping hand of the great/Guardian when she had most need
Grace of the Highest Lord/For by Him she was shielded,*

*Creation's Wielder, against highest threat/to her the Sky-Father
Allowed illustrious favor/for she held firm devotion
Always to the almighty¹¹*

The invocation to the Christian God, of a Judeo-Christian adapted story, does help show the Christian view point of a pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon cultural narrative.

These instances of the stories with a Christian lens are important. Once dissected apart from the pre-Christian instances, as well as the explicitly Christian instances, it is easier to discern the levels of complexity and layers of religious and cultural influences in what survives of these tales today.

Pre-Christian Instances

The pre-Christian instances are either non-Christian or pre-Christian interference with the Anglo-Saxon culture that would have been dominant in Britain since Rome fell and abandoned the isle to the pagan invaders. The cultural worldview of the Anglo-Saxons would consist of an entire world surrounded by their beliefs and spiritual practices as is common among pagan cultures.

While discussing the roles or aspects of religion in the four poems from Anglo Saxon literature, some of the secondary sources on the matter, are quite accurate. One of the basic points of accuracy is whether or not the source recognizes that it is possible to discern the pre-Christian beliefs and practices of the Anglo-Saxon groups from the poems. The Anglo-Saxon groups were part of the larger Germanic tribes that spanned much of Northern Europe, and a lot has been written about them by Roman authors Tacitus being one of the more famous. Because of these writings based on the interactions of the Germanic peoples with the literate societies of late Roman and early medieval chroniclers, as well as from the texts written in Anglo Saxon itself, it is quite possible to discern the religious elements of the four poems. One scholar who recognizes this documentation in the historical record is Judith Beall. She writes,

The Barbarian peoples about whom Tacitus wrote were part of a larger westward migration involving the Franks, Goths, Alemanni, and other tribes. While they brought their own cultures, laws, and values into the Roman lands, they gradually (and often reluctantly) adopted many Roman practices and frequently ended up as members of the Roman army.¹²

She then discusses the Germanic tribes pertinent to the discussion of Anglo-Saxon poetry. "In the fifth century, barbarian tribes moved in large numbers from Germania into Britain. They came principally from two powerful tribes, the Saxons and the Angles, from which we get the familiar term 'Anglo-Saxon'."¹³ Beall continues to discuss how "Beowulf", Tacitus, and "The Life of Saint Boniface" all show representations of Germanic customs, including religious before their conversion to Christianity.¹⁴ Dr. Beall is not the only scholar focusing on the references in the historical record to pagan religious practices of the Anglo-Saxons.

Carole Cusack discusses the role of Charlemagne's campaign in Saxony to describe the literal existence in the historical record of the religious practices of the pagan Saxons. In her article about this topic, she writes a few cautionary words of wisdom for studying pre-Christian beliefs in this period.

Nevertheless, as methodologies develop in order to be applied, this article proposes that the models of 'world religions' and 'indigenous religions' from the academic discipline of religious studies can be usefully employed to facilitate new interpretations of early medieval Paganism and to draw parallels between the medieval and contemporary religious contexts.¹⁵

A little further in her article comes the next cautionary tale about those who dismiss the existence of Paganism in the historical text.

Scholarly arguments attempting to diminish the significance of Paganism, or to assert its non-existence, have postmodern qualities, in that they seek to confine history to the text and in some cases deny that the existence of anything outside the text can be posited.¹⁶

The last bit of knowledge she gives to those who wish to look at the texts with a modern secular background. "Indigenous religions are local, earth-bound, and this-worldly. Compelling evidence can be assembled to support the contention that indigenous cultures recognize no division between the 'secular' and the 'sacred.'"¹⁷ To summarize both Dr. Cusack and Dr. Beall then, the historical record has documented evidence of the religious beliefs of the Germanic tribes, and it is able to be discerned from the primary sources.

These scholars are all demonstrating the existence in the historical record of Anglo-Saxon religious practices as well as Germanic tribes in general. They are also utilizing the texts themselves to describe the instances and aspects of the religious practices of the warrior classes in the Anglo-Saxon society.

"The Dream of the Rood"

As discussed previously, "The Dream of the Rood" is a Christian Passion story told in a cultural context from the Anglo-Saxon worldview. It is also a warrior poem, in which the warrior is Christ on the Cross, and the Cross itself.

*Then dared I not against the Lord's word
bend or break, when I saw earth's
fields shake. All fiends
I could have felled, but I stood fast.
The young hero stripped himself--he, God Almighty--
strong and stout-minded¹⁸*

Clearly, the poem is telling the tale of the Passion of the Christ from the perspective and role as a warrior. This poem is interesting in that it is written as a Christian devotional poem, but still in the Anglo-Saxon warrior tradition of war bands, oaths and honor. Further on in the poem, it goes into more detail about these sacred warrior bonds.

*I have not now many
strong friends on this earth; they forth hence
have departed from world's joys, have sought themselves glory's King;
they live now in heaven with the High-Father,
dwell still in glory, and I for myself expect
each of my days the time when the Lord's rood,*

*which I here on earth formerly saw,
 from this loaned life will fetch me away
 and bring me then where is much bliss,
 joy in the heavens, where the Lord's folk
 is seated at feast, where is bliss everlasting;
 and set me then where I after may
 dwell in glory, well with those saints
 delights to enjoy. May he be friend to me
 who here on earth earlier died
 on that gallows-tree for mankind's sins.
 He loosed us and life gave,
 a heavenly home. Hope was renewed
 with glory and gladness to those who there burning endured.
 That Son was victory-fast in that great venture,
 with might and good-speed, when he with many,
 vast host of souls, came to God's kingdom,
 One-Wielder Almighty: bliss to the angels
 and all the saints--those who in heaven
 dwelt long in glory--when their Wielder came,
 Almighty God, where his homeland was.¹⁹*

This section, although a long excerpt, demonstrates the tie between honor and success as a warrior on Earth, with the reward of honor and success in heaven in the great mead hall of God. This aspect being retained from the Anglo-Saxon tradition of a warrior heaven is an interesting aspect hidden in the poem of "The Dream of the Rood".

The Wanderer

Building then on the concept that the virtues of the warrior band were as much a religious bond as a social bond, the poem of the Wanderer can then be understood as a religious poem. Instead of being a Judeo-Christian story adapted to Anglo-Saxon culture, the Wanderer, like Beowulf, might be a religious lament of Anglo-Saxon pre-Christian society. Some excerpts depicting this lament would be these,

*So said the wanderer, mindful of hardships,
 of cruel deadly combats, the fall of dear kinsmen –
 "Often alone each morning I must
 Bewail my sorrow; there is now none living
 to whom I dare tell clearly my inmost thoughts."²⁰*

*Sad, I sought the hall of a giver of treasure,
 Where I might find, far or near,
 one who in the meadhall might know about my people,
 or might wish to comfort me, friendless,
 entertain with delights.²¹*

*The powers of spears took the noblemen,
 weapons greedy for slaughter; fate the renowned,
 and storms beat against these rocky slopes,
 falling snowstorm binds the earth,
 the noise of winter, then the dark comes.²²*

These excerpts help to describe that religious nature of the warrior bonds of Anglo-Saxon culture. Honor in life and death was achieved by standing with your fellow warriors in the warrior band until death or win.

"The Wanderer" also has a summary of the role of religious rituals and teachings interwoven with the customs of the warrior class.

*So spoke the wise in spirit, sat by himself in private meditation.
He who is good keeps his pledge, nor shall the man ever manifest
the anger of his breast too quickly, unless he, the man,
should know beforehand how to accomplish the remedy with courage.
It will be well for him who seeks grace,
comfort from the Father in the heavens, where a fastness
stands for us all.²³*

The older warrior is imparting knowledge and wisdom to the younger listener of advice for any warrior searching for greatness to follow. The excerpt also refers to a faith in God in order to show honor and respect toward God and to be rewarded with honor and respect among one's peers.

"Judith"

The poem of "Judith" the biblical tale is re-written and included in the Beowulf manuscript from the 8th-10th Century. It summarizes the interweaving of the roles of religion and the customs of the warrior classes of Anglo-Saxon society.

*/Judith said, for all of this,
Glory words to the Lord of Hosts/Who gave her high worthiness,
Fame in the earth realm,/And also honor in heaven,
Triumphant gift of the sky glory,/Because she had true belief
Always in the Almighty./In the end indeed she did not doubt
Her long earned reward./For that be honor to the blessed Lord
Ever to the ages,/Who shaped the air and wind,
The skies and the vast plains,/And also the scathing floodwaters,
And heaven's dream-joys/Through his high favor.²⁴*

Not only did she win in the battle, but she won both for and because of her faith in God, who gave her strength and honor in her success over her captor. Judith, from the biblical story, is being re-told as a warrior princess saving her people. "Judith" the poem, is in the minority for its emphasis on the woman being the war hero of the story, but nevertheless, the emphasis of duty and reward for the warrior class is still present in this poem.

Beowulf

"Beowulf" the three part epic poem consisting of thousands of lines each, is the Anglo-Saxon epic. This story is one of the more commonly known of the Anglo-Saxon literature. Using Dr Beall again, she discusses Beowulf,

So ends the saga that reprises many of the themes present in the Germania, albeit in a language and with an outlook that are distinctly non-Roman. Its prologue explicitly connects the motifs of treasure, the loyal warband, and the courageous leader to the welfare of the people.²⁵

When describing the end of the poem, as well as its purpose, she further states

Having neither leader nor treasure, they are left defenseless; Beowulf's dying hope is disappointed... The key to the poem's resigned conclusion is the failure of the warband itself.... Treasure has an inherent power to activate the reciprocal loyalties of leader and warband. It acquires a sacred or magical quality (indicated here by its dragon protector) and may even be worth dying for. But if human loyalties fail, the treasure loses its power. It must be hidden or destroyed, while the people face enslavement.²⁶

The point of this passage is that Dr. Beall is recognizing that the tone, flow, and purpose of the poem are in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon culture. There was no sacred vs. secular in that culture. The death of a king due to failure of the warband was not just a loss on the battlefield; it was the end of their religious favor with their gods. The power and honor associated with war raids, treasures, and oaths to each other constituted legal aspects, as well as sacred practices of religion in their society.

It is evident, from the sources, that Anglo-Saxon society had a war-based economy which focused on thanes and war bands. The poem is intent on telling a tale about the warriors. It describes at length the previous successes and failures of warriors in the present story and in their past. It also describes at length the ritual and customs associated with the warrior classes.

Beowulf has numerous examples of religious aspects being represented by the warrior class. During the time of Beowulf, for both the Christian contemporaries and the pagan contemporaries, religious spheres and secular spheres would not have been existed. This makes analyzing the religious aspects of Beowulf difficult but not impossible. The beginning of the poem starts with a harkening back to the ancestry of the tribe and their brave warriors and successful tributes.

*Behold! We from the Spear-Danes/In our days of old
Found out the glory/of our folk-hero kings,
How the princes/proved their courage.
Often Scyld Scefing/amid shouting enemies
Took over meadhalls/of many races,
Terrorized their leaders/Lost adrift early
And found abandoned/He abounded in graces,
Grew strong in the sun/Succeeded worthily
Until to him/the whole area
Over the whaleroad/honored his rule
Gave him tribute/A good king, he!²⁷*

In the Germanic tribes, this would have been considered a good king. In order to be king, the warrior needed to be Wodensprung²⁸. Wodensprung would have meant descended from Odin.²⁹ The Germanic tribes, such as the Anglo-Saxons, believed, as many cultures have, that their leaders are of noble birth because they are descended from the gods. So if a Wodensprung

leader is a good king, then he would be put in the annals orally passed down about the traditions of the tribe and their origins. The mythology of the tribe, as defined literally as an allegorical narrative, would have been central and key to the identity and cohesion of the tribe.

The giving nature of the leader, for success in war, would have demonstrated that those with the most valor, honor or success in battle, would have been rewarded with the best treasures from the fight. Those who abandoned their comrades in battle would have been shamed and never trusted again. A society that takes the oath of warrior bands as sacred would have viewed someone who broke that oath in the time of most need as the worst of cowards.

/Oaths of valor

*That he would keep/in safety the survivor warriors
By decree of councilors/nor could any man
In words or works/want to break it,
Nor ever complain/in enmity;³⁰*

This excerpt of a tale being told at the feast celebrating Beowulf's success over Grendel shows how the penalty for oath breaking was great. The entire tale being told at the success feast in Beowulf's honor could be considered a morality tale as much as a historical story about warriors gone by. In that sense, the tale being told at the feast, a tangent in the story of Beowulf, is like the Wanderer. It serves as an Anglo-Saxon religious lament and morality tale.

There are other moments however in the scholarship about these four poems, in which the secondary source gets their assertion incorrect. One of the more blatant incorrect assertions comes from Mary Parker when she is discussion religion in "Beowulf." At the beginning of her book *Beowulf and Christianity*, Parker states

Though the question has in the past been addressed as a dichotomy between Christian and pagan aspects in the poem, this study acknowledges and describes the mixture of Christian and secular elements. As will be shown in Chapter 2, too little is known about pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon religion to contrast it with Christianity.³¹

She then asserts this point,

The concepts that Cherniss saw as secular are evident in several Old English Christian poems, especially loyalty and vengeance in 'Andreas', 'Elene', 'Judith', 'The Seafarer', and 'The Dream of the Rood', and treasure in 'The Dream of the Rood', 'Judith' and 'The Seafarer'... Then as the new religion became more pervasive, Christian stories were grafted onto heroic concepts and values.³²

As I have already demonstrated both with references to the historical record and to the primary sources themselves, aspects of pre-Christian religious beliefs are clearly present in the texts. At the time of the Anglo-Saxon culture when these poems were written, not only was there no such thing as secular to the pagan Anglo-Saxons, there was no such thing as secular to the Christianized Anglo-Saxons or their Roman missionaries either. The idea of a secular world devoid of any religious or spiritual aspect is an entirely modern concept only a few hundred years old at the most. Parker, is clearly using that lens of modern secular society when looking back into these texts.

Parker, however, is not the only offender of incorrect assertions. Susanne Weil also makes an incorrect assertion when referring to "Beowulf". In her article, "Grace under Pressure: 'Hand-Words,' 'Wyrd,' and Free Will in 'Beowulf,'" focusing on the words used in the poems, and the meaning deduced from those words, she describes the creation stories of Christianity versus the Anglo-Saxon Germanic story.

Life began in the Germanic universe with giants being mysteriously shaped out of vapor; the Aesir themselves came to being because a hungry cow licked an ice floe until her lickings inadvertently shaped their progenitor but who created the cow? Even the three Norns who spun and snipped the threads of fate for each man were shadowy figures, spinning, not quite shaping, apparently acting without a purpose of their own. As we push the parameters of the mythology, every possible explanation seems to lead to another mystery. The Anglo-Saxon universe seems curiously without cause, yet brimming with effects-all subsumed under the murky heading of wyrd, which remains a force, not a figure. Who, then, is the Shaper?³³

In essence, Weil is claiming that as an outsider of Anglo-Saxon culture and beliefs, there is no legitimacy to their creation story. It is full of effects and no causes. Weil may be surprised to find that someone not familiar with her culture could misinterpret her belief system and worldview with just as much disbelief. An Anglo-Saxon scholar looking at our culture would say, who or what created your God? This is an example of ethnocentric logical fallacy.

This assertion, that "every possible explanation seems to lead to another mystery", and "seems curiously without cause", is a demonstration in Christian ethno-centrism. According to Oregon State's Anthropology Glossary, Ethnocentrism is defined as "judging other cultures by the standards of your own, which you believe to be superior."³⁴ Ethno-centrism is something that should not be present in an academic paper. This is when such a blatant example is used as evidence for the lack of legitimacy of another culture's belief systems, especially of a culture before the inventions of secular lifestyles and science.

Beowulf then, being the largest of the poems has an abundance of text for dissection. In the examination of the poem, it is not difficult to understand the pre-Christian roles religion plays in the poem's narrative.

Conclusion

It is clear then, that each of these poems reflects the religious cultural roles of the warrior band society we call the Anglo-Saxons. These four poems together give us a window into the Anglo-Saxon worldview, and each does so, in its own way.

"Beowulf" is the epic poem of the four selected. While there are moments in which there poem is seen through the eyes of a Christian monk, the poem is filled with pre-Christian examples in the narrative. Beowulf is a warrior thane who through his behavior enacts the social bonds necessary to carry out the duties both in this world and the next. He has a warrior band that swears sacred bonds to him, and he swears bonds to them. These bonds were not just secular as some scholars have suggested. There was no secular society in Anglo-Saxon culture. These bonds, and the deeds they did together because of the bonds, were as much religious as their prayer of thanks over a bountiful feast and treasure.

"The Dream of the Rood" also shows the aspects required for a warrior to fulfill their religious and cultural bonds in society. When everyone else betrayed Christ, the Rood was

picked from the forest to be the cross. When all of his followers abandoned Christ, the Rood stood tall and strong holding up in support Christ. Finally when Christ went to heaven, the Rood himself will be rewarded an honor in Heaven for his courage and bravery when all else had failed Christ.

Judith also attains status and honor for her warrior prowess. When she succeeds at beheading her captor in faith and strength of herself and God, she then dedicates the honor of her safety to God. When she returns to her people, she reminds them that not only was she strong enough to lop his head off, but her faith was strong enough to have the courage to try. This interweaving of the traits and responsibilities is integral to understanding the Anglo-Saxon retelling of this biblical story.

Finally the Wanderer tells his story of search for glory and honor to a younger warrior. In the story, the search for honor and battle is both a social and religious metaphor. The wanderer needed to find these battles not only for the honor and rewards among his comrades, but also for the honor and rewards due to good warriors in heaven. By telling the story to the younger warrior he is also carrying on that tradition into another generation, instilling honor and courage in a younger warrior to carry on the traditions of their people for social and religious responsibilities.

These four poems represent a sample of the Anglo-Saxon literature that has survived to Modern times. Each in its own way gives a window to allow us to look into the warrior culture of the Anglo-Saxons. From helping out neighboring tribes such as in "Beowulf", to retribution in "Judith", to searching for bonds and glory in "The Wanderer," to redemption in "The Dream of the Rood", each story is told with Anglo-Saxon cultural and religious flair.

Most interesting is the idea that these four poems could be considered a religious ritual in themselves. While requiring further study into the tradition of oral narratives as ritual in Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic cultures, it is an interesting concept. Warriors such as Judith, Beowulf, and the Rood would have been honored in the mead hall of "heaven" known as Valhalla for their honor and deeds. The Wanderer was seeking his glory to make it to Valhalla. It is not that difficult to posit for further study then, that the oral narratives exchanged during feasts in the mead halls of successful warrior chiefs are themselves a ritual. The warriors of past both great and of folly would have had tales told at these feasts. To honor great warriors of past, and to use them as models for behavior was common. I would be willing to say it is like our martyrs and saints of Christianity. However, by keeping the memory of the warriors alive in the oral tradition as well as later in the written tradition, they were paying respect to their ancestors, as well as reminding each other of the morals of the warrior code of ethics. That aspect would make these four poems religious in nature in their own right, and deserves further study.

However, these four poems do show aspects of Christian, pre-Christian and a mixture between the two that is easy to decipher when one knows how to look. By picking out the immediately Christian references, what is left is the mixed and pre-Christian. By defining and understanding the pagan nature of Anglo-Saxon culture, it is easy then to discern and then remove the Christian lens. Once that has been removed, it is easy then to see the pre-Christian culture of Anglo-Saxon warrior society. This task is much easier and comprehensive when taking all four poems in concert together. Separate, they form great stories, but do not provide the full view of the religious nature of Anglo-Saxon warriors.

¹ Jones, Prudence and Nigel Pennick, *A History of Pagan Europe*, (Routledge, New York, 1995), p 1.

² Anthony Grasso, "Theology and Structure In 'The Dream of the Rood'," *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 1991), p 23.

³ *Ibid.* p 25.

⁴ Ibid. p 26.

⁵ Kiernan, Kevin, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, (Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan, 1996) p 162.

⁶ Schapiro, Meyer "The Religious Meaning of the Ruthwell Cross," *The Art Bulletin* September, 1944, 26 (4), p 232.

⁷ Christina Heckman "Imitatio in Early Medieval Spirituality: 'The Dream of the Rood', Anselm, and Militant Christology," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 22 (2005), p 150.

⁸ "The Dream of the Rood," In *Lightspill Poetry*, translated by Johnathon Glenn, Lines 9-14, Accessed on 9/18/12 <http://www.lightspill.com/poetry/oe/rood.html>.

⁹ "The Dream of the Rood," lines 33-45.

¹⁰ "Beowulf," In *Beowulf and Judith, Two Heroes*, Translated and edited by Robert Trask, (New York, University Press of America, 1997), lines 12-19.

¹¹ "Judith," In *Beowulf and Judith, Two Heroes*, Translated and edited by Robert Trask, (New York, University Press of America, 1997), lines 1-7.

¹² Judith Beall, "The Barbarian Ethos, the Germania, Beowulf, and the Life of Saint Boniface," In *The Middle Ages in Texts and Textures Reflections on Medieval Sources*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011), p 34.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. p 33-43.

¹⁵ Carole Cusack, "Pagan Saxon Resistance to Charlemagne's Mission: 'Indigenous' Religion and 'World' Religion in the Early Middle Ages," *The Pomegranate* 13.1 (2011), p 35.

¹⁶ Ibid. p 40.

¹⁷ Ibid. p 41.

¹⁸ "The Dream Of The Rood," Lines 35-40.

¹⁹ Ibid. lines 131-156.

²⁰ "The Wanderer," Translated by Siân Echard, (University of British Columbia), Lines 6-10, Accessed by 9/18/12 <http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/sechard/oewand.htm>.

²¹ Ibid. lines 25-29.

²² Ibid. lines 100-104.

²³ "The Wanderer," lines 113-118.

²⁴ "Judith," lines 341-349.

²⁵ Beall, p 37.

²⁶ Ibid. p 39.

²⁷ "Beowulf," lines 1-11.

²⁸ Tacitus, Translated by Harold Mattingly, *Agricola and Germania*, (London, Penguin Group, 2009) Ch 7, 9.

²⁹ Chaney, William, "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England," *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Jul., 1960), p 197.

³⁰ "Beowulf," lines 1097-1101.

³¹ Mary Parker, *Beowulf and Christianity*, (New York, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1987), p 1-2.

³² Ibid. p 2.

³³ Susanne Weil, "Grace under Pressure: 'Hand-Words,' 'Wyrd,' and Free Will in 'Beowulf,'" *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 24, No. 1/2 (Nov., 1989), p 94-95.

³⁴ "Definitions of Anthropological Terms," Oregon State, Accessed on 12/10/12 <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth370/gloss.html#E>.