How did Christianity change the Vikings?

The assignment that follows has been written by, and is entirely the work of, James Tauber.
Introduction

In pre-modern cultures, religion provides the social and cultural context for the interpretation of the world (Bellah, 2011). The Vikings underwent significant changes with the structured introduction of Christianity. To fully explore this question would require a dissertation on a lifetime of research, however, by confining the discussion, we can at least, provide a high-level overview. The introduction of, and eventual political requirement to practice the religion of Christianity, transformed the core social and cultural fabric of the Norse society.

History

Modern western cultures have been structured to compartmentalize religion, separating the sacred from the secular space. During the Viking Age, the practice of religion was folded into the nature of the culture, and was accepted as necessary for the success of family, village and region.

The Viking religion was polytheistic, as recorded in the sagas that have been passed down through history. Formed around a triad of groups that participated in the existence of the world, gods (Woden, Thor, Frigg), giants (Ymir, Bergelmir) and finally humans (Rosenberg, 1999, p. 463). The Viking religions practices included the establishment of holy areas, axis mundi, that in general were open. These scared places and holy groves provided a gathering space for communication with the gods. There were also temples, identified as ‘cult houses’ for use by groups that focused on communication with a particular god or goddess. The Viking sagas record a world view that is eschatological in nature. This concept reinforced the cultural patterns of the high value placed on the warrior class, as they were extended the opportunity to participate in Ragnarok. Even with an apocalyptic story that clearly defines
how events will play out, in the final battle there is a cyclical influence that provides for a remnant of all three groups, after the final battle, to restart the world.

Given the extensive trade networks, colonization efforts, missionary works and raids, the Christian religion would have been known to many of the Vikings participating in these activities. Unlike the New Religion, the Viking pagan groups had a pluralistic approach to external religions. As trade expanded and the influence of the Roman doctrine spread, Christian groups were required to force their trading partners to convert to Christianity. Recognizing the need for a compromise, these groups fashioned the “Primsigning” (first signing) (Williams, 2011, p. 3) to maintain trade without the full baptism into Christianity.

**Effects on Culture**

The effects on the culture and society were profound. As noted by Kenneth Harl, the conversion was less likely an event, but rather the Christianization of the Vikings over several generations. This assertion is supported by archaeological evidence that shows the coexistence of the two religions. Fragments of pagan images persist into Christian art and official items such as coinage (Harl, 2005, p. 14).

The conversion to Christianity affected how the class roles were defined in their religion. Under the new belief system warriors would no longer have a position of superiority in the afterlife, and the farmer would now have access to the afterlife. However, unlike many other areas that converted to Christianity during this period, the Norse leadership maintained a level of control over the religious members of the community.

The Viking political structure was altered to accommodate the external power structure of the Church. Unlike some groups that saw the introduction and dominance of Christianity, the Norse culture
shows evidence of secular authority of the society while supporting religious conversion. One example relates to the kings and leaders of Iceland, as they continued secular influence over the educated class after converting to Christianity. European monarchs tended to allow a parallel power structure to develop that ceded the providence of education to the Church. The separation of secular and religious controls allowed for the survival of the sagas and heritage that might otherwise have been lost to history.

The sagas recount the stress between the old and new religion, and the impact on the elite population. In Flateyjarbok, the death of Thidrandi occurs through the physical manifestation of nine female spirits of the old religion as they are charged by nine female spirits of the new religion. The story is told with a double message; Thidrandi’s father had converted to Christianity and had not shown respect to the old ways, resulting in his son’s death. It also points out that the old religion was losing its power with the conversion to Christianity and sought to make a lasting memory. (Davidson, 1988, p. 106)

**Conclusion**

At the core, the dominance of a new monotheistic religion would have redefined the working model of the universe and how a person would function within his or her community. The eternal glory of the warrior class would be lost to the new religion. Ancestor recognition would be muted by the redefinition of values within the society and the uniqueness of the Norse would be diluted under the Christian world view. The melding of the existing culture and the new world view and its influence created the new culture that developed into the Scandinavian groups of the mid and late medieval ages.
Bibliography


