

St. Olav as Legislator

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, today I will say a few words about St. Olav as legislator. Some of you may feel that I should have written “Olav Haraldson” as legislator, since his struggle to introduce Christian laws was fought before he was sainted. True enough! Yet I will still retain my title St. Olav as Legislator, because the term ST. OLAV’S LAW became a firm expression which lasted for many centuries after his death and well into post-reformation times.

St. Olav’s life

Before we start to unravel the story of St. Olav as legislator, I will - for those of you who feel that the life of Norway’s perpetual king might be a little vague – briefly present his historical life. The boy Olav was born in 995 at Ringerike, in south-eastern Norway. Historians debate both the year and place of his birth. When he turned twelve, his mother Åsta, helped him to claim his first command of a Viking ship. He raided the countries around the Baltic Sea and later England. Then he continued his wild journey along the coast of western Europe, all the way to Gibraltar.

He had plans to enter the Mediterranean for further plunder there, but was stopped by a dream. In this dream, Olav Tryggvasson asks him to return to Norway and claim his inheritance, Norway, which properly belonged to a descendant of the Hårfagre Clan. Consequently, he turns his ship towards the north. He spends the year 1013-1014 in Rouen in Normandy with his relative duke Richard II, only interspersed with brief forays across to England. Richard II was a pious Christian. The whole of Normandy, indeed much of Catholic Europe, was strongly affected by the religious reform which spread from Cluny Monastery in the south of France. Duke Richard was a descendant of the Norwegian Viking chieftain Gangar- Rolf. His brother was archbishop of Normandy’s capital, Rouen.

This one year in Rouen greatly influenced Olav’s understanding of Christianity. He attended lessons for converts, probably in the company of his men, who had travelled with him from Norway. Olav Haraldson was baptized in Rouen. Then he takes up his vocation: He wants to become king of Norway and bring Christianity to the land. He has already understood that these two matters were interdependent: Only united under one king could the people become a Christian people, and only as a Christian country would Norway have a chance of remaining united. It was the only way to break the power of the clan-chieftains and their constant warring. He sails via England where he leaves the Viking ships behind, and in the autumn of 1015 he sails to Norway with two trading ships together with 220 selected men-at-arms. With him there are also four English bishops and some priests. Of the bishops, Grimkjell was closest to Olav. He became bishop for Olav’s armed men, followed him on all his travels around Norway and was his main advisor in all church matters. Olav makes landfall at the island of Selja and proceeds to conquer the whole country. He is proclaimed king at all the “Things” (legislative meets). This takes one year. Then he begins his missionary work. This went relatively smoothly in the south around Viken, on both sides of the Oslo fjord. Christianity was already well known there. The same was true of coastal Norway as far north as Trøndelag, where Christianity had been introduced by Olav Tryggvason. In the deep valleys in eastern Norway and the inner parts of Trøndelag however, the heathen cult was still firmly rooted. This is where the so-called sword-mission was

carried out, where people were forcibly baptized. After this short introduction to St. Olav's early life we will delve into the main topic for today: St. Olav as legislator.

Christian Codes

Once the majority of the people in Norway had been baptized, the king begun his main work, introducing Christian Codes into the Norwegian statutes. This was done in close cooperation with Bishop Grimkjell. Introducing Christian Codes had not been attempted previously, neither by Haakon the Good nor by Olav Tryggvason. The Christian Codes were based on the moral commands which all Christians at all times had been obliged to live by.

The Church Thing at Møster

The Christian Codes were first enacted during the Thing in 1023 at Møster in Sunnhordland. This was probably not a standard Thing, but rather a church meeting after the Anglo-Saxon model, where the bishops and the king's men gathered. Olav had been introduced to the Christian Codes both in Rouen and in England, but one may assume that it was Bishop Grimkjell who was the main architect of the Codes in Norway.

To make it quite clear: It was not the church meeting at Møster which decided that Norwegians should become Christians and be baptised. This had already been decided at all the district Things. What was new at Møster was that a new legal code based on moral laws was to be worked out and agreed upon. The church meeting at Møster had no legislative power. What happened was that the Christian Codes were included in the existing Land Codes of the Lag-Things (central Things), where they form a separate section. Only when that was done could the new Christian Codes be passed into law. We still have copies of the law codexes of Gulathing and Frostating. It is not always easy to know which laws were promulgated at Møster and which were added later. But we can with great certainty state which sections were presented as a result of the cooperation between Bishop Grimkjell and Olav at Møster. In these law books we can still find the centuries-old Land Codes together with the new Christian Codes.

Reflection

Here, at Møster, I would like to stop up for a moment and present some questions. When Norwegian historians, old as new, write about the introduction of the Christian Codes, they have shown great geniality in finding parallels between the English and the Norwegian legal structures. That is quite natural, considering the fact that Grimkjell had been involved in pastoral work in England for many years before he decided to follow Olav to Norway. But the same historians also claim that Norwegian farmers almost without opposition enacted and approved the Christian Codes at the District Things, and that all baptized farmers from now on, and without serious protest, accepted and lived by them.

The Farmers opposition to the Christian Codes

I do not believe this in the least. On the contrary, I am quite convinced that the enactment of the Christian Codes at the Things, and the restrictions this enactment placed upon the farmers in their day to day living, was one of the main reasons why the farmers took up arms against King Olav at Stiklestad and cut him down. The strongest motive for killing Olav was probably the clan chieftains', since Olav had found it necessary to reduce their political power. Olav knew that in a society based on clan-structure Christianity would have very meager possibilities. The clan chieftains would rather have a foreign king on the throne – for example Knut the Great of Denmark-England – as long as Norway's clan chieftains were left

alone to rule themselves, which in practice meant that the clan came before everything else. Olav had had to punish some clan chieftains for carrying out blood-revenge and thus breaking the new law. This would also have been a major reason for the chieftains' revolt against the king.

But historians do not mention the possibility that the ordinary farmer found the Christian Codes so bitter that he would rather kill the country's legally elected king than having to live by these codes in his everyday life. Historians refer to England, where the Christian Codes were well established and accepted, but they forget that England at this time had been Christianized for well three hundred years. Only Sigrid Undset hints briefly, in her book *Norwegian Saints*, that the farmers felt a strong dislike of the new codes.

When our historians tell us that Norwegian farmers accepted the Christian Codes as a section in the Land Codes, this must be taken with a pinch of salt. The Gulating on the west-coast and the Frostating in Trøndelag had in pre-Christian times been *Almanna-Thing*. This means that every free farmer in the region could meet at the Thing and voice his opinion. But under the kings Håkon the Good and Olav Haraldson, both Gulating and Frostating were reformed as representational Things. Only selected wealthy farmers were allowed to meet at the Thing and participate in the debates which took place. These wealthy farmers would have been close friends of the king, and for them, the inclusion of the Christian Codes in the old Land Codes would not have been a problem. But to the ordinary farmer, the Christian Codes must have been like a dagger-blow aiming at the very core of their society's clan-structure. It is certainly true that the Norwegian clans were under pressure at the time, and that society slowly was being modified in the direction of a centrally organized society. But at the time of King Olav, most Norwegians still acted and thought according to the centuries old clan-codes, and to them, the Christian Codes must have felt like a foreign intrusion into centuries old customs and habits.

Two opposing moral views

Let us look closer at this. First, during this period of Christian missions, two totally opposed moral views clashed. In the Norwegian clan society the moral – if we can talk of moral at all at this time – was relative. At the District-Things, ancient agreements between individual farmers were presented orally before they were written down and enacted. But these laws were not understood as absolute norms defining good or evil. No farmer was bound by his conscience to follow the laws enacted by the Thing. If a decision passed by the Thing went against a man's clan and its interests, then he would ignore that decision and act according to that which served his clan. Neither was the Norwegian farmer at this time bound by any demands from the Norse gods. Odin and Tor, Frey and Freya, Njord and all the other gods and goddesses did not concern themselves with the actions of their followers, or with whether these actions were good or evil. The only thing these gods demanded was regular blood-offerings. This satisfied them, regardless of whether the man who presented the offer was an infamous murderer.

Blood-revenge must also be mentioned. Most legal differences were settled privately – either with fines or revenge. Murder was not considered immoral in any way – to die at the hand of another man was the most common cause of death in Viking times. What did concern the relatives of the murdered person was the loss of power and prestige suffered by the clan. The balance of power between the two clans had to be re-established - normally through heavy fines or through revenge. If revenge was the means chosen it was irrelevant whether it was

the murderer who was struck down. The best outcome would be if an important person in the murderer's clan was killed.

From what I have presented here it should be obvious that the morals of people here in the north, through hundreds of years and up until the times of the Christian mission, was relative. The people did not consider that they faced an absolute moral good or an absolute moral evil. The moral – and I repeat, if we can talk of moral at all – was flexible and adapted to the needs of the clan, thoroughly relative.

And then Olav Haraldson returns to his homeland. During the year he had spent in Rouen in Normandy as guest of the pious Catholic duke Richard II, Olav had become familiar with a Church and a God which held people responsible for their actions. He had learnt that some actions were considered wholly good because they agreed with the demands of the ten commandments and human nature and thus reflected the will of God, and other actions were considered wholly evil because they were against the ten commandments and human nature and therefore wholly against the will of God. In other words, as a consequence of his baptism in Rouen, King Olav had been accepted into a church which proclaimed that God had given to humans laws to which they were wholly bound. To mention some examples: All people, regardless of status, sex, time and place were bound to honour and love God. This was a wholly good act and was wholly binding on everyone. Every human life is of boundless value in the eyes of God, because it is created in his image. Thus every human life demanded respect, whether it was a slave, a free-born or a chieftain. All human beings have equal value in the eyes of God, because they are created in his image. This demand was absolute. Olav had also learnt that some acts were wholly evil and should be forbidden and punished.

From this we can draw the conclusion that when Olav Haraldson together with Bishop Grimkjell presented the Christian Code at Møster in 1023, two opposing moral viewpoints clashed. King Olav represented the Christian Catholic moral, with its absolute demands of obedience. The farmers fought against these demands, used as they were to a relative, fickle and opportunistic moral with no absolute truths and no absolute moral demands, and with personal honour and the advance of the clan as the only motive for actions. There was no open revolt initially. The king's power was too great for that. But the people grumbled continuously. At Stiklestad the discontent broke out into open revolt. The farmers, armed to the teeth, were united in their fight against King Olav and all that he represented.

The Laws of the Christian Code

Two concepts of kingship

So far, we have spoken in general terms of the Christian Code and St. Olav as legislator. Let us now go in more detail. The first law of the Christian Code states: "The source of our law is that we shall bow towards the east and pray to the Holy Christ for peace and good harvest, that we shall retain and build our country and remain wholly faithful to our king, for him to be our friend and we his, and God the friend of all." («Det er opphavet til vår lov at vi skal bøye oss mot øst og be til den hellige Krist om fred og godt år, at vi skal få holde vårt land bygget, og være vår konge full-tro: være han vår venn og vi hans, og Gud være vår alles venn.» Sigrud Undset's translation from the Norse).

The first words of this law are as expected: that we shall pray to the Holy Christ for peace and good harvest. But the next sentence must immediately have created opposition from the ordinary farmer in Norway: That we shall pray to the Holy Christ that we may "remain wholly faithful to our king".

Two opposing world views clash with this: Traditionally, the king and his chieftains legitimized their authority – not only through their properties and their political power, but also through their ability to bring peace and good harvests. Kings and chieftains had, according to heathen beliefs, a position between the clan and the gods, as mediators between the two. This position gave them the right and the duty to bestow peace and good harvest on the clans, on the whole farming community. A chieftain's renown after his death was dependent on the quality of the harvest and the fertility of animals and wives.

Snorre tells us, that during the reign of the Swedish king Domalde, there were three consecutive bad harvests. His people were convinced that the hunger and want they suffered came as a result of their king, so they took him and offered him to the gods in Uppsala. This represents a heathen view of the king's power. If the king was unable to ensure peace and good harvest, then the basis for their oath to him, and the basis for his continued power over land and people were lacking.

From Rouen and England, Olav Haraldson had brought with him a totally new concept of kingship which was strongly influenced by Biblical, almost Pauline philosophy. St. Paul writes in the 13th chapter of Letter to the Romans that everyone should be obedient to the authorities set to rule over them, since there is no authority not from God, and that which is has been granted by God. Anyone who opposes them - the authorities – is directly or indirectly opposing that which God has ordained. The authorities are described as God's servants in the Bible. They have been set to do what is best for you, but if you act with evil intent you have every reason to fear. The authorities do not take up weapons for no reason, but are God's servant and will carry out His punishment on those who do evil.

This is the royal ideal which Olav seeks to represent. He is fully aware that the heathen chieftain legitimizes his power through his ability to ensure peace and good harvest. But Olav is convinced that neither power, property, good harvest nor acclamation at the Thing gives him the authority to rule over land and people. He believes that he – like the kings, princes and dukes in Europe - is Norway's king by the grace of God – *gratia Dei* – that the authority to rule has been granted by God. He wants to be a *rex iustus*, a just king, a *servus Dei*, a servant of God, who in the name of God enforces the law of the land and who punishes those who oppose the law, both the old Land Laws and the Christian Codes. In the heathen farming-society, fealty to kings and chieftains were dependent on a number of things. For Olav, with his Christian, Catholic background, revolt against the king must have been equal to revolt against God. Two such completely opposing views of what constitutes royal power had to lead to forceful clashes between Olav and Norwegian farmers.

Prohibition against blood-offerings, heathen practice and witchcraft

Worship of the major, well-known Norse gods such as Odin, Thor, Frey and Freya etc. is not mentioned in the Christian Codes, since prohibition against the major, annual blood-offerings had been instigated already by Olav Tryggvason. When the Christian Codes specifically forbid blood-offerings, they are concerned with all heathen practice carried out privately and in the homes. The Norwegian farmer considered the private worship carried out on the farm as equally important, maybe even more so, than being present at the great annual offerings. Private worship consisted primarily of the thousands of customs which had to be observed throughout the seasons concerning all activities on the farm: animal husbandry, slaughter, spinning, weaving, sowing, harvesting, marriage, childbirth and burial. To ensure and

increase the fertility of a field, ritual intercourse was carried out in each of the four corners of the field.

We also know of blood-offerings taking place in smaller groups, where a few farming families might get together, or on the individual farm. On each farm a blood-offer was carried out to the forefather who had cleared the land and established the farm, and to each of his male heirs. In addition, blood-offerings were given to the *dise*. The *dise* were a group of goddesses concerned with fertility. *Diseblot* was celebrated in late autumn after the harvest was safely gathered. During this private offering, strangers were forbidden to stay at the farm. Historians tend to interpret the *Volse* saga as a description of *diseblot*. *Volse* was a stallion's penis which had been wrapped in linen and soaked in onion juice to prevent it from decomposing. At night, with the whole family gathered for the blood-offer, *Volse* was handed around while each man and woman recited a verse of undisguised sexual content. Viking-pornography one might think, but the purpose was not to titillate. This was a fertility ritual carried out to prevent the winter from becoming too mighty and cause suffering among people and animals and damage the power which caused new growth. Private worship at home also included *alveblot*. We know little about this. Scholars assume it had something to do with death and fertility, since new life springs from death. All such heathen customs and traditions were now forbidden and would be punished. Perpetrators could be fined, outlawed or exiled.

Building Christian churches and providing priests

St. Olav was an avid church builder. He ensured that churches were built in each district, the district-churches. Some rich farmers also built churches on their farms to please the king. All well and good, but at Moster it had been established that only the bishops could decide who would serve as priests in the district-churches and even in the private churches built on the chieftains' farms. This must have been experienced as an insufferable blow against old traditions, since from heathen times only the king or chieftains could serve as *gode*, as it was called, during the annual blood-offerings in the central *hov*, places of worship. And at home on the farms, the oldest living male heir descended from the forefather who established the farm was the natural celebrant. And then the Christian Code turns it all around and says no, only the bishops may decide who will be priest in district-churches and in private churches. The ordinary farmer, man and woman, must have felt this as an attack on the very heart-beat of society. From now on, a foreigner – and in the beginning this invariably meant a man with poor knowledge of Norwegian and with absolutely no connection to the farm or its people – was to serve as celebrant. For many this must have been an unacceptable violation of traditions going back a thousand years.

Burial in a cemetery

At Moster it was also established that all dead people were to be buried in a cemetery, in consecrated soil. There were some qualifications added to this, since suicides and murderers were denied burial in consecrated soil. In the heathen farming community the custom was that people were buried at or close to their ancestral farm, under the main farm-yard tree, in a stone cairn or in an earth barrow, but always quite close to their home farm. Archeologists have found evidence of this burial custom dating back 30 000 years, from the time when the ice withdrew from the coast and people made a living from hunting and gathering. These our pre-historic ancestors buried their dead close to the cave they lived in, in stone cairns or refuse heaps. Once houses were built, children were even buried indoors. Thus the custom of keeping your dead relatives close by you dates back thousands of years. Ancestral worship

was a reality, and its purpose easy to comprehend. The dead were there to protect their living relatives from evil powers. In return, the dead demanded blood-offers on the major heathen feast days.

With this tradition in mind, it is easy to understand that when Olav Haraldson proclaimed that the dead were to be buried in consecrated ground, which often meant far from the ancestral farm, people responded with horror and shock. The ordinary farmer and his wife must have been outraged, because to them, removing the dead meant that the farm was left open to attack from evil powers. To follow this code would result in the family bonds being torn apart and the farms being weakened and defenseless.

Witchcraft, incantations and spells

Witchcraft was prohibited at Møster. What did the word witchcraft actually entail? The Norwegian words *seid* and *galder*, which are the words used at the time, are probably best translated with incantations and spells. *Seid* was considered an especially potent form of spells. They could take different forms. In the Saga of Olav Tryggvason, a king places a group of *seidmenn*, spell-makers, on a rock called Skratteskjær, so that they will drown when the tide comes in. The *seidmenn* on Skratteskjær were a group of evil men engaging in what we today would call black magic. They cast spells to harm their fellow men and women. They were feared, and if caught, they had to be drowned.

But if spells were cast for good and just causes, it seems that the heathen farming community tolerated it. In the Icelandic family saga about *Egil Skallagrimsson*, we can read how Egil fell foul of King Erik and his wife Queen Gunnhild while on a visit to Norway. Queen Gunnhild was a skilled spell-caster, and Egil had to flee the country to save his life. On his way back to Iceland he lands on an island where he raises a *nidstang* – a pole of evil intent – against the royal couple. He places a horse's head on top of the pole, and then he recites an incantation: "Here I raise an evil pole and turn this evil towards King Erik and Queen Gunnhild." He turns the horse-head towards land to unsettle all supernatural land-forces, so they will know no peace until they have chased Erik and Gunnhild from the land. Contemporaries of Egil have no quarrel with this way of using incantations, because his spell was turned against an enemy who was disliked. In any case, King Erik and Queen Gunnhild had declared him an outlaw.

The response was different when the popular giant of a man, *Grette Ásmundsson*, was made outlaw for murder in Iceland. For twenty years the outlaw lived on an island with vertical cliffs all around so no one managed to come ashore and kill him. At that time there was an old woman on the mainland who was skilled in witchcraft. She bewitched a log of wood and steered it towards the island. Grette wanted to cut it up for firewood, but the axe slipped and cut his leg. The wound festered and he was close to death when his enemies, led by Torbjørn, finally managed to kill him. People on the mainland thought it ill that Torbjørn killed the outlaw Grette with the help of witchcraft, and as a consequence Torbjørn was made outlaw by the Icelandic Allthing. This took place about one hundred years after Egil had raised the *Nidstang* against King Erik and Queen Gunnhild. At that time, both Norway and Iceland were heathen, and witchcraft was accepted in special circumstances. When the outlaw Grette was killed with the aid of witchcraft, people reacted with disgust. At that time Olav's son Magnus

the Good was king in Norway and both countries were by this time Christian. The Christian Code had been accepted in the countries.

Both Olav Tryggvason and St. Olav are known to have punished severely anyone causing harm with the aid of *black magic*. Sigrid Undset claims to have found evidence which points to both Olavs having practiced black magic during their Viking-voyages, and only later understood that this practice involved playing with the devil and his evil spirits. Such bitter experiences explain why they responded so harshly against the *seidmenn* in Norway.

Tore Hund, one of the three said to have caused Olav's death during the battle at Stiklestad, had the lapps in the north say spells over the reindeer coat he wore during the battle. The spells made Tore invincible, weapons could not harm him. With such spells, Tore had disobeyed the prohibition in the Christian Code against all forms of witchcraft.

Much more might be said about spells and witchcraft as recorded in the saga-literature, but these few examples will have to suffice. A less potent type of spell – *galdring* - was also used privately on the farms. A woman who had difficulties during childbirth would have spells said over her to ease the birth, as would anyone suffering from severe illness, both humans and domestic animals. This was considered a benign form of witchcraft. It was mostly the so called wise women - or witches – who practiced this. The practice of this type of spell-casting was not so easily removed, if indeed it ever has been.

In the Christian Code all types of spells were explicitly forbidden, both the evil spell-casting and the benign spells used for domestic purposes, which we probably would call *white magic* today. Whoever practiced such magic was deemed outlaw. The ordinary farmer and his wife must have considered this prohibition a sever disturbance in everyday life, inter-woven as their entire life was with superstition, taboos, ancestor-worship, signs, runes, rites, incantations and spells to seek advice from the dead, from lesser gods and supernatural beings, and even from the devil himself.

Sabbath and Holy Day regulations

At Moster it was declared that every seventh day of the week should be celebrated as a day of rest and worship. The same law applied to all the major feast-days when Biblical events were celebrated in church or holy men and women were remembered. No work in field or forest was to be carried out on such days, and hunting and fishing was forbidden. Imagine the response of the ordinary farmer to such a prohibition, especially when we bear in mind how short the summers are here in the north, how barren and meager the soil is in much of the country, and how often the winds from north or west breaks down the rye to leave it rotten and inedible. It must be said that church rules often made exceptions from the rules about keeping the Sabbath in Norway. Nevertheless, the farmers must have found the Sabbath-regulations insufferable and even dangerous, attacking the very foundation for making life possible in this country.

Thralls and slaves

Another declaration from Moster was considered at least as harmful, the prohibition against keeping thralls. Every medium-sized farm in Norway had at least three thralls. Most were prisoners taken during Viking-raids in foreign countries. Regardless of their position in their homeland, as thrall in Norway their past was wiped out. They were the property of their new

master, and he could do with them as he wished, have them killed when they became ill or decrepit, or sell them. Thralls had no protection under the law.

Two laws were enacted at Moster connected to thralldom. It was established that each year the farmers had to set free thralls, one each at the local and the district Thing. This was to take place on important Holy Days for the sake of Jesus Christ. During the 13th century this act was removed from the law books because at that time the custom of keeping thralls had ceased in Norway. But at the time when it was introduced, this was yet another serious blow against established society. The farmers had paid dearly for their thralls – men and women – and they were seen as a necessary workforce on the farm. And now they were to be set free! Not only that, those still in thralldom should rest from all work on Sundays and Holy Days. The farmers knew that behind such irresponsible laws there stood Olav. They asked themselves what indeed this Olav Haraldson knew of the work and toil required to make a living for one's family in this hostile land. After all, he had left the country when he was twelve and lived abroad as a Viking, raiding and pillaging until well into adulthood.

Prohibition against setting out unwanted children

The custom of placing unwanted children in the forest was also forbidden at Moster. This custom seems to have been practiced in most societies at some time. We find it among the Arabs, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Persians, the Romans, the Germanic tribes, and also here among us in the North. In most cases it was not lack of love for the children or faulty parenting that was the cause behind it. It was a necessity caused by poverty and lack of food. Here in Norway it was the owner of the farm who decided if the child were to live or die. If it was allowed to live, he would take the newborn and place it on his knee. If not, it was carried out and placed between rocks with some sort of provisional roof over. A piece of fatty meat was put in the child's mouth. Such small protections probably expressed a hope that wealthier people would find the child, bring it home and keep it. The Christian Code expressly forbade the setting out of children. A child has the right to life, regardless of defects. It must be taken to church, baptized and brought up as a Christian. This was yet another prohibition which must have been felt like an attack on society. Especially the less wealthy, who often struggled to survive through the winters, must have found this hard to accept.

The position of women

Although the Norse woman had a much stronger position in society than women further south in Europe, at Moster it was further strengthened. Women in Norway already had the right to demand divorce if the husband was cowardly or was made outlaw. But she had no say in whom she was to marry. Here – as in most other things – the needs of the clan decided. Through marriage, two clans who might have been bitter enemies, could join in peace and friendship and strengthen their power and importance in society. In this, the women were mere pawns in the power games of the clans. If the clans found that it served their purpose, she might well be forcibly married.

But in the Christian Code at Moster it was stated, as it was everywhere else in the Catholic Church, that for a marriage to be lawful the woman had to freely consent. Without this free consent the marriage is unlawful. This was yet another ruling which broke with old traditions, another blow against the very fabric of society.

Sexual morals

The heathen practice of sexual morals did not favour married women. It was legitimate for a man to have several wives. If he preferred to take only one wife, this wife was not to complain if he in addition kept concubines. The woman had no such rights. She was expected to remain faithful to the one man, her husband. Monogamy was established at Moster as the only alternative and the keeping of concubines or other affairs outside the marriage were forbidden.

Human worth

All these laws caused a humanising of society. The Christian values which refused the setting out of new-born babies, gave thralls freedom and the right to days of rest and worship, and gave women the right to choose their partner in marriage, all reflect the Catholic Church's human value system. And behind all this, there stands Olav. The teaching he received in Rouen prior to his conversion had emphasized that every human – man and woman, child and adult – possessed an infinite value because humans are created in God's image and redeemed through Jesus Christ.

This human value system – which since then has influenced Western civilization, was not easily acceptable by the Norwegian farming clans. In heathen times the individual human being had little value. It was the clan that was of value, it was only the clan that counted. Individual beings belonged first and foremost to the clan, and much more to the clan than to themselves. And the further down the ladder of society a man or woman stood, the lesser was his or her value.

I think that the story of Egil Skallagrimson, from when he was a boy in Iceland, is a good illustration of this: His father's hard-working servant is out in the farm-yard, leaning forward over something he is doing for his master. The boy, Egil, cannot resist the temptation. He chops the head off the servant. When he comes in to dinner, his father, Skallagrim is sulky and cross, not because the boy committed such an atrocious act, but because he has lost a good worker. Egil justifies the atrocity by hinting that the servant happened to be «in the right place at the right time».

Another example of the small value placed on individuals in heathen times: If hunger or war caused hardship in the community, heathen law and custom demanded that those who lacked the protection of a clan were taken and placed in graves to die. Whoever survived at the end would be lifted from the grave and given the right to live.

St. Olav's martyrdom

Ladies and gentlemen! Let us stop for a moment and think. By most historians Olav Haraldson is presented as a power-hungry king who, for strategic reasons, forcibly introduced the Christian Codes in the country. The Codes from Moster should serve as the glue to bind the people together under his sovereign rule. Let us not deny that such thoughts well might have entered Olav's head. In Europe he had observed how Christianity, combined with the rule of a central king, had created peaceful and prosperous nations. But we will be guilty of naïve short-sightedness if we believe that the only reason for introducing Christianity in Norway was political strategy

Our fellow Catholic, professor Erik Gunnes, writes in *Norway's History, volume II*, that it was precisely the introduction of Christianity which ruined the power base for both Olav

Tryggvason and Olav Haraldson. Both Olavs lost, through this action, the support of people they really needed. Through his policy of introducing Christianity, "Olav Haraldson insisted on a change of religion which made enemies of people who otherwise would have been his natural friends – enemies so numerous and so powerful that they finally struck him down." These words from an acknowledged historian are better understood in the context of what Snorre repeatedly states: That Olav was a man of prayer, a convinced and practicing Christian, and that miracles took place even before his death at Stiklestad.

St. Olav was no holier-than-thou saint, but a sinful saint whom we all can relate to. He fought all his life to control unfortunate character traits which he had inherited from his clan, Hårfagreætten, and to restrain the wild streak he had developed during his youth as Viking. It could well be said that at the beginning of his rule he still lived with one foot in Viking times and one foot in Christianity. His whole life he fought to bring the Viking foot across into the Christian camp. He succeeded during his suffering in Gardariket and with his death at Stiklestad.

Having said that, I consider Olav a saint and martyr, as indeed the Church always has done.

Two aspects of the martyrdom

His martyrdom is strangely bifurcated, divided in two. Of the first part we possess considerable knowledge. As a point of departure we must remember that Norway was a society built around mighty clans led by chieftains such as the Lade Earls, Einar Tambarskjelve, Erling Skjaldsson, Tore Hund, Hårek fra Tjøtta and many more. These clan chieftains always placed the clan first, and only when that was satisfied could they consider the kingdom. For King Olav, the situation demanded a reduction of the chieftains' power so that Christianity could put down roots among the people. In a clan society, where clan fought clan and where blood revenge was a standard response, Christianity had few possibilities of becoming more than an external embellishment for the mighty to adorn themselves with. But Olav did not succeed in restricting the chieftains while he was alive. That spelled his downfall, since he would rather die than reduce the demand that all – also the chieftains – had to submit to the central power of the king.

But Olav's martyrdom also had another aspect which is often ignored by historians and non-historians alike, but which I hope to have illuminated in this lecture, namely the farming communities' forceful opposition against the Christian Codes. It was not only the mighty rulers who responded with fury against King Olav when he returned from Gardariket to reconquer Norway. Also the ordinary farmer marched against him armed to the teeth.

Snorre recounts in the Saga about St. Olav that the army which rose against him mostly consisted of farmers who had gathered from the districts round about. This sounds most plausible, Snorre knew what he was talking about. The ordinary Norwegian farmer, as opposed to the chieftains, had little interest in the distribution of power in Norway. What they feared was Olav the LEGISLATOR, returned from exile in Gardarike and probably with the same intent as earlier, namely to introduce the Christian Code in the land. This Code which, to quote Gunnes again, "the farmers considered an attack on the world order as they knew it."

I may fear to use such strong words, but I would still claim that the ordinary, Norwegian farmer feared the Christian Code as a life-threatening attack which would unravel the fabric of society and destroy their lives.

After the death of St. Olav at Stiklestad, the Christian Code – slowly - came to be accepted as the only right code of law by the Norwegian people. It was a slow process and it took a very long time. Between the Thing and church meeting at Moster in 1023 and the Battle of Stiklestad, only seven years had passed. Seven years was of course far too short a time for the farmers to become reconciled with the enactments of the Christian Code, which they found abhorrent. It is most likely that the farmers, especially in Trøndelag, during these years had returned to their heathen ways. Thus it was quite natural that the farmers, one and all, armed themselves and marched as one man to confront the returned king with fury and enmity.

But St. Olav was unable to retreat from the demands of the Christian Codes, which he considered as given by God. It was not only power-hungry chieftains who killed St. Olav, but also an army of enraged farmers. With this in mind, the martyrdom of St. Olav becomes clearer and more easily understood.

Another lecture is now needed, where the lines from *St. Olav the Legislator* could be followed through Medieval times and far into post-reformation Norway. I would also be pleased to greet a third lecturer, who might consider the danger we are being confronted with in our own times, as we slowly return to heathen times, through the removal from the Norwegian Statutes of the Christian Code established under St. Olav.

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