JOHN LINDOW

FOLKLORISTICS, MYTH, AND RELIGION

Speech Delivered on the Occasion
of Professor Lindow's Acceptance of an Honorary Doctorate
from the University of Iceland, 14th May 2018

AS A FOLKLORIST,[1] I will begin with a story.

Not too long ago (Spring 2017) Dan Ben Amos, the eminent folklorist at the University of Pennsylvania, asked me to contribute an article to a special issue of the online journal *Humanities* that he was to edit. As he told the story, the editors at *Humanities* had asked for an issue on "The challenge to folklore studies," but he informed them that that issue had been settled fifty years ago. Indeed it had, not least through his own break-through rethinking of folkloristics as the study not of individual items, such as folktales or proverbs, but of the entire process which enabled such items to be transmitted over time and from place to place. We now call this conception of folkloristics the "performance turn," understanding perform-ance to be the occasion on which some member of a community tells a tale or utters a proverb or enacts some other aspect of tradition; and as I have come to see it, it extricated the field of folkloristics from its position on the margins of other disciplines. The challenge to folkloristics having thus been met 50 years ago, Ben Amos suggested to the editors of *Humanities* a special issue on the challenges folkloristics could pose to other disciplines, and he asked me to write on the challenge of folkloristics to medieval studies. That piece appeared earlier this year (2018), but I have continued to think about the issues it took up, and today I would like to add into the mix the research areas of myth and religion,[2] which at this university, and at many others, are studied in conjunction with the field of folkloristics.

1   Folklorists know that texts need not be fixed. This one is not: it has been gently edited somewhat since the oral performance, with a few additions and subtractions.
2   Some of these issues are also treated in John Lindow, "The Rise of Folklore Studies," *Pre-Christian Religions of the North: Research and Reception,* ed. by Margaret Clunies Ross, vol. 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming 2018).

I was from the beginning uneasy with the notion of one discipline posing a challenge to another. I prefer to think of synergy or inspiration, of an intersection of fields that can lead to productive ways of thinking. What is particularly striking in the relationship among the fields I wish to discuss today is the fact that they emerged together: not just at the same time and in the same places, but as more or less the same field. Even as they became independent research fields, they continued to evolve along parallel lines. Nevertheless, significant differences emerged (even if they are most visible in hindsight), and it is in some of these differences that folkloristic research has something to offer to the study of Old Norse myth and religion.

National romanticism, with its view fixed firmly on the past, valued both medieval documents in libraries and archives and the "age-old" poetry and other materials to be heard (and gathered) from the lips of countryside singers and story-tellers. The medium (written or oral) mattered little at this stage of things; what mattered was the supposed voice from the national past. As modern academic study dawned along with the nineteenth century, scholars moved comfortably and seamlessly between what we now regard as two different data sets. The brothers Grimm, and especially Jacob, are the best examples: just as they were issuing editions of medieval literature (ones that look surprisingly competent two centuries later), they were also issuing editions of folklore materials – folktales and legends – and laying the foundation for the academic field of folkloristics. Their famous statement about the two folklore genres ("Das Märchen ist poetischer, die Sage historischer" ["The *Märchen* is more poetic, the legend is more historical"]) remains fundamental,[3] even if we no longer understand the terms "poetic" and "historical" as the Grimms did and take a far more nuanced view of both genres. The notion of the essential equivalence of medieval written materials and contemporary oral materials persisted. In an inaugural lecture in 1863, Svend Grundtvig stated that Nordic philology, then understood as language history and therefore based on older written materials, comprised: "the spiritual life of the Nordic peoples in all ages and in all its manifestations, the way the spirit of this people has revealed itself and still reveals itself both in the language itself – the words, logos, the immediate expression of the

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3   Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsche Sagen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buch-
     gesellschaft, 1977 [1816–18]), 7.

spirit – and in the people's belief and poetry, in its customs, in its whole life."[4]

This statement comes close to including pre-Christian myth and religion within the purview of Nordic philology, and that must have been Grundtvig's view, given the existence in the Nordic countries of ballads apparently based on *Þrymskviða* (or the myth it encapsulates) and Grundtvig's role as the great editor of Danish ballads. In his monumental and fundamental ballad edition, Grundtvig ordered this ballad (Tord af Havsgaard) first of the 539 types in the collection (and it remains first in the standard catalog of Nordic ballads). Grundtvig explained his thinking thus:

> If not the only one of the ancient myths of the North that has survived on the lips of the people until today – for of these are several, also about Þórr's battle with the jǫtnar, although for the most part transferred to Christian heroes, namely to the Norwegian King Saint Olav – , this ballad is the only one of its kind: the only purely mythical eddic poem that has entirely gone over into a medieval popular ballad, distributed throughout all Scandinavia. It therefore is entitled to special attention and justifies its position as the first in the order.[5]

Thus, in Grundtvig's view, myth was clearly part of the "spirit of the people," and indeed the oldest part.

The inclusion of myth and religion in the blended product of folklore and medieval material goes right back to the founding father, Jacob Grimm. Although his *Deutsche Mythologie* did not appear until 1835, a few decades later than the pioneering works of folklore and medieval texts he published with brother Wilhelm, it is common knowledge that the brothers' interest in the tales was sparked to some degree by an interest

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4   Quoted in Jørn Pio, "Svend Grundtvig," *Leading Folklorists of the North*, ed. Dag Strömbäck (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), 222.

5   "Om end ikke det eneste af det gamle Nordens Gudesagn, der har bevaret sig i Folkemunde indtil vore Dage – thi af saadanne findes der flere, ogsaa om Thors Kampe med Jætterne, skjøndt for det meste overførte paa christelige Heroer, navnlig paa den norske Konge Hellig-Olav, – saa er denne Vise dog den eneste i sit Slags: det eneste rent mythiske Eddadigt, der heelt og holdent er gaaet over i en middelalderlig Folkevise, udbredt over hele Skandinavien. Den fortjener derfor en særlig Opmærksomhed og forsvarer sin Plads som den første i Rækken." Svend Grundtvig, *Danmarks gamle folkeviser*, vol. 1 (Copenhagen: Forlaget af samfundet til den danske litteraturs fremme, 1853), 1.

in myth. Indeed, in a remarkable passage in the preface to volume 2 of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, they explain how the tales help clarify various points in heroic legend and also myth: "That Loki remains hanging from the jǫtunn-eagle we understand better through the Märchen of the golden goose, on which maidens and men who touch it hang stuck."[6] They conclude the paragraph with this claim: "In these folktales there resides pure proto-Germanic myth, which people thought was lost."[7]

The governing principle of Jacob Grimm's thinking about pre-Christian religion was that Christianity had never really had much hold over folk traditions, and that by peeling back the veneer of Christianity one could get at the religion. Thus, he thought, there were two fundamental kinds of sources. Here is how he expressed the matter in the preface to the 1844 edition, the last to issue from his pen:

> Much then is irrecoverably lost to our mythology; I turn to the sources that remain to it, which are partly Written Memorials, partly the never-resting stream of living Manners and Story. The former may reach far back, but they present themselves piecemeal and disconnected, while the popular tradition of today hangs by threads which ultimately link it without a break to ancient times.[8]

In other words, there were medieval texts, and there was folklore. The very combination that characterized the works of the Grimms as they led the breakthrough into modern scholarship in the second decade of the nineteenth century is here repeated, now as the linchpin of a theory of recovering the pre-Christian religion of northwest Europe.

Folkloristics broke from philology when it developed a method it could call its own: the "folkloristic method" ("folkloristiche Arbeitsmethode"), as Kaarle Krohn termed it in a series of programmatic lectures published

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6   "Daß Loki am Riesen-Adler hängen bleibt, verstehen wir besser durch das Märchen von der Goldgans, an der Jungfrauen und Männer festhangen, die sie berühren." Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* vol. 2 (Berlin: in der Realschulbuchhandlung, 1812–14), xi.

7   "[I]n diesen Volks-Märchen liegt lauter urdeutscher Mythus, den man für verloren gehalten." Ibid. I have translated "urdeutsch" as "proto-Germanic" in line with the Grimms' usage.

8   Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, translated from the fourth edition by James Steven Stallybrass, vol. 3 (New York, Dover, 1966), xi.

in 1926. When a prominent scholar sums up a "method," one can be quite sure that it is mature or even over-ripe, and such is the case here. The method had been developed by Krohn's father, Julius Krohn, while he tried to come to grips with the numerous variants within Kalevala-style poetry (an inadvertent connection between folkloristics and myth, since such poetry is essentially mythological). To be sure, the folkloristic (or Finnish, after its origin) method looks rather like classical text philology, in that it works to posit an archetype through comparing extant versions and essentially posits that change is the result of "mistakes" – not scribal error or editorial intervention, but rather through a series of "rules" or "laws" of oral transmission posited by Krohn and no longer taken seriously. However, it differs in the very large amount of material that the scholar must ordinarily consider. Thus I think it is fair to say that the field of folkloristics has long been comfortable with large data sets.

The "performance turn" in folkloristics emerged in the 1970s. It conceived of folklore not as static "items" but as event or process and thus represented a fundamental break with the so-called "folkloristic method" as formulated by Krohn and practiced by many. This fundamental insight – not only that within tradition itself "items" exist only as part of a process, but further that performance can function as a paradigm for thinking about culture within communities – now animates virtually all folkloristic analysis. Performance is where stability and variation intersect. Even on the stage, with fixed text, staging, and lighting, no two performances are the same, as any theatre person will tell you.

For a performance to succeed, the performer and the audience must share a common view of what can and cannot happen in the performance, what it is for, why it is valuable, and so forth. Whether folklorists study an actual performance or use the paradigm of performance to analyze other situations, one of the things they are always interested in is the shared competence of performers and audience, to put the matter simply. We may call these shared views "cultural competence." In light of this approach to tradition, I argued in my "Challenge" piece that we should think more about what I would call the "cultural competence" of the authors, scribes, readers of, and listeners to medieval written literature.

Let me now take up this point in connection with the study of myth and religion. This is a subject in which I have been deeply immersed for the last

several years. Planning for volumes in the series Pre-Christian Religions of the North took place in a series of meetings, over several years, in Reykholt, hosted by Snorrastofa, which has continued to give strong support to the project; Reykjavíkur akademían and the University that today has so kindly honored me also provided assistance. The Pre-Christian Religions of the North project has three "strands," one devoted to research and reception, one devoted to close scrutiny of the textual and material evidence, and the third and longest devoted to the "history and structures" of the pre-Christian religions of the North, or to be a bit more specific, the religious traditions and practices that gave way in Scandinavia and the Atlantic islands, including Iceland, to Christianity. It might also be termed northwest European Iron Age religion. Those of you who are familiar with this project will know that the first of the two volumes devoted to research and reception appeared earlier this year (2018) with Brepols, who will pusblish the entire project. My own involvement is with the "history and structures" strand, which I have co-edited with the historian of religion Jens Peter Schjødt of Aarhus University and the archaeologist Anders Andrén of Stockholm University, an editorial team that shows the importance of the material record and of comparison with other religions. This strand is now in press. It consists of some 1600 pages, divided into four volumes treating the following broad topics, beyond the obligatory introductory chapter explaining our notions of religion and reconstruction. These broad topics comprise the following

- the sources: textual, linguistic, archaeological, iconographic, folk-loristic
- the historical and geographic contexts: that is, when and where are we in time and space
- the social contexts, such as concepts of ethics and gender
- communication between worlds: that is, ritual and other contact between humans and the powers
- conceptual frameworks: that is, the myths and the characters who play in them
- the process of Christianization

The three editors spent a fair amount of time thinking about what I have termed "cultural competence." In the very first place, we had to define religion. This we take to be neither belief per se, nor practice per se, but rather a

world view. We define religion as a world view comprising an opposition between this world, where we live now, and an Other world. The term Other world covers more than one conceptual space, or to put it another way, there is no contradiction in speaking of Other *worlds* rather than the Other world; and this is indeed what we find in Nordic mythology, with worlds of gods, jǫtnar, dwarfs, the dead – there is more than one of these – and so forth. They all comprise the Other world. "Otherness" may be temporal or spatial: the distant past (or, in eschatology, a future), or a world to which we have no or only limited access would qualify equally. That is the conceptual part. This world view requires also the possibility of communication between two worlds, and communication is the sphere of the actions. To put it another way: things happen in the Other world, things that we can know about; what happens in the Other world can matter to us; and we can undertake actions – what we usually call religious ritual – to try to sway the influence of the Other world on our world. The religious world view can influence both society and the individual.

This view of religion goes far beyond the "worship" of "gods." The influence of the Other world probably affected nearly every aspect of human life in the pre-Christian world view of the north. Part of the cultural competence of people living with that world view would have been to understand communication between worlds: to identify and interpret "signs" and "tokens" from the Other world and to deliver messages and gifts, through appropriate behaviors, to that world. Approaching the remnants of this world view left behind for us through a lens that is deeply colored by a notion of a clear opposition between religious and non-religious spheres of life would be most likely to lead us astray. It is far more likely that there was a continuum, from, let us say, awesome moments when the gods were presumed to be present in some ritual time and space, to almost wholly mundane moments, with much in between.

One consequence of this world view, which is known in many religions, is a breaking down of the line that seems so clear to us between the human and the divine, and this will serve as an example of how we understand one aspect of the cultural competence associated with pre-Christian society in the north. As my late Berkeley colleague Robert Bellah, the distinguished sociologist of religion, wrote in his 2011 book *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*: "In archaic socie-

ties, complex chiefdoms, and the tribal societies ... gods, powerful beings, ancestors, and humans exist on a continuum – there are no absolute breaks between these categories."[9] Our sources, despite their Christian world view, comfortably support the lack of an absolute break between human and divine. Humans derived from gods (think *Rígsþula*, not to mention the so-called Learned Prehistory); gods and humans interact (think Starkaðr); humans could apparently ascend to the status of gods (think King Eiríkr of Sweden); and the gods themselves are, like humans, mortal (think Baldr and Ragnarøk).

Although the Poetic Edda seems to separate gods from humans, that separation could be the result of the Christian point of view of the redactor, or it may, in fact, just be the result of a medieval historical viewpoint: Óðinn and Þórr lived farther back in time than Helgi Hundingsbani, Sigurðr, Hamðir, and Sǫrli. The same meters were used for all the poems, and the picture stones, too, offer evidence not of separation of gods and heroes but rather of intermingling. A lack of cultural competence could easily lead medieval authors astray. For example, the Christian Snorri Sturluson lacked the cultural competence to see the permeable boundaries among gods, powerful beings, ancestors, and humans, and so he worked with the idea of two separate figures named Bragi, a human poet and a god of poetry. They were one and the same.

I will let the example of the permeable boundaries between gods and humans – and in-between – stand in for the entire notion of cultural competence as it applies to the study of pre-Christian religion of the North. In the time that remains to me, I wish to turn to another point where folkloristics intersects with that study.

From the very beginning of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North project, my co-editors and I have been guided by the fact that there is absolutely no evidence anywhere in the voluminous record of pre-Christian Nordic religion of a canon of sacred texts, like the Bible or Quran. The pre-Christian religious traditions of the north therefore comprised a so-called primary religion, not a secondary religion, according to the valuable distinction put forth by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann. Although canons can exist in primarily oral societies, such as those of ancient Egypt or India, most primary religions exist

9   Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

within societies that for the most part lack writing, and that was the case for Nordic pre-Christian religion. Although many dissenting views have been advanced over the years about the precise operation and implications of oral societies, one principle on which I think everyone can agree is that oral societies have more textual variation than written societies, whether we think of the oral epic singers in the Balkans who told Milman Parry that the various versions of a given song they had sung onto his wax cylinder recordings were absolutely identical, even though any literate person reading transcriptions can see that they were not, or if we think of the copiousness that Walter Ong said was typical of orality, or of the homeostasis described by Goody and Watt, to name just three of the pioneers. Today we can see that many of these founding fathers were talking at cross purposes, and certainly the newer field of memory studies has been able to generate a far greater consensus, but variation is an absolute fundamental of oral societies.

Variation has also been a particular focus of the field of folkloristics. The historic-geographic method is at bottom an attempt to impose order in a world of variation (and the performance metaphor foregrounds other matters). But actually by the time Julius Krohn was finding his way to the historic-geographic method through his study of Kalevala-style poetry, professional folkloristics had come up with another, in my view better and more permanent, way to deal with variation. As I mentioned earlier, the first academic appointment in folkloristics at the University of Copenhagen, even though it was called Nordic philology, fell to Svend Grundtvig in 1863. Fifteen years earlier he had emerged the victor in the so-called "ballad-conflict" ("folkevisestriden"), which attacked head-on the issue of variation. Ballads had been in print for centuries in Denmark, always with the principle "one ballad, one text." Ballad editors compared the various versions available to them and came up with one text, most often a composite. When, in 1847, Grundtvig issued plans for a new edition of Danish ballads, famously promising to the Danish reading public *all* there was of the ballad tradition, *as* it was – that is, publishing *all* the versions of a given ballad, from early printed editions, from manuscripts, and from oral traditions, using the original orthography, and of registering variant readings in an apparatus – the reaction was mixed. Detractors, led by the indefatigable lexicographer, historian, and literary critic Christian Molbech, objected that such an edition would be an unreadable mess; but in the end the issue was, I think, partly aes-

thetic and partly a question of the break with philological text editing that Grundtvig's plan would bring. Grundvtig won the short but bitter and highly public conflict, and his ballad edition, which began publication in 1853, set the standard for the rest of the world. And this principle held not just for ballads. For example, Evald Tang Kristensen's editions of the legends and indeed other folkloristic materials of Jylland show us pretty much *all* there was, *as* it was, as do some other legend editions from the Nordic countries. Digital technology will make such projects far easier, and internationally it can certainly be said that folklorists are among the humanists and social scientists best positioned to take advantage of advances in thinking about big data. Everything there is or was, as it is or was, is an increasingly attainable goal even when the amounts of material are almost too vast to contemplate.

Had the philologists of the twentieth century followed this plan for mythological materials, they would have published separately, and in full, the two versions of *Vǫluspá* and the stanzas from the poem quoted in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*. They did not, although Sophus Bugge had done so in the nineteenth century. The result was, to give a personal example, that when I first came to the poem through the edition of Neckel and Kuhn, I studied *one* text with little consideration of the differences. I am glad that we have moved on over the years, that the value of paying attention to variation is obvious, and that the edition of Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason prints the versions separately.

As an aside, I can mention that when we were working on the History and Structures strand of the Pre-Christian Religions of the North project, I lobbied for citing stanzas in *Vǫluspá* by indicating where the stanza was in both *Konungsbók* and *Hauksbók*, if in both, and noting any variations, if any, in Snorri's version. I was overruled by my editorial colleagues on the ground that only specialists would understand such citation, and that we were aiming for a wider audience than specialists. Perhaps, but it still troubles me that non-specialists miss the fact that what they think of as *Vǫluspá* is an arbitrary construct. If they read my chapter on the written sources they will be disabused of this erroneous notion, but if they encounter references to *Vǫluspá* elsewhere in the volumes they may not.

Folklore traditions and folkloristics, the field that studies them, have insights to offer about variation that go beyond the way we should edit and

discuss the apparent survivals we do have of myth and legend. For what folklorists know and have always known is that the amount of material is vast – in some cases almost too vast to contemplate, as I just said – and that the variation within this material is endless. This is a lesson I learned when I innocently set out to prepare a lecture comparing Old Scandinavian mythology with the mythology in Kalevala-style poetry from Finland and elsewhere. I was first drawn to the project by some obvious similarities of structure and style, which I conjectured might have presupposed bilinguals around the Baltic Sea influencing each other's verse. I duly toted up such similarities in my lecture, but what I took away from that piece of research is that most of us working in Old Scandinavian myth and religion have simply no idea of how large the scale of narrative materials can be in oral tradition. The corpus of mythological poetry published by the Finnish Literary Society, *Suomen kansan vanhat runot* [old runic songs of the Finnish people] fills dozens of thick volumes. Areas of distribution include Finland, Karelia, Ingria, and Estonia. Having also seen the amount of material in the Parry-Lord collection at Harvard, and a few other large folklore databases, I am firmly convinced that modern collecting techniques over, let us say, the last 200 years of the Viking Age, would have yielded a corpus of something like the size of materials we find for Kalevala-style mythological poetry: dozens of thick volumes instead of a few thin ones.

Based on this assumption, a pessimist might be tempted to say that our extant materials are simply too scanty to make us very confident in our reconstructions of pre-Christian religion of the north. I would argue instead that it makes our job easier, since apparently contradictory data are precisely what we would expect. If we consider the large corpus that surely underlay the few texts and other sources that have come down to us, we must say: *Of course* Þórr fishes up the world serpent alone in the boat in some versions and with a companion in the boat in others. *Of course* Þórr kills the world serpent in some recorded versions of the myth but not in others. *Of course* Þórr fights the serpent at Ragnarøk, even if he previously killed it when he fished it up. Large oral corpora must show variation, some of it considerable.

But – and this is the takeaway – within all this variation there are constants. Þórr battles the world serpent, just as he battles other powerful chaos beings. Knowledge of that constant, part of what in the Pre-Christian

Religions of the North project we have called the "semantic core" of the deity, was part of the cultural competence of people in differing times and places. The details vary more or less endlessly, but the core is fairly stable. That is something any folklorist could tell you.

It is impossible to study the pre-Christian religion of the north without the requisite philological skills – that is a given, as is the necessity for consideration of the material record and the use of comparison. But it is easier to make sense of the material if we employ the understanding within folkloristics of cultural competence and the significance of stability and variation.

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