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Imago Dei in Vǫluspá?[1]

In recent times Gro Steinsland (1983), professor of history of religion in Oslo, has been advancing the idea that the second part of Vsp. 18, particularly the words <lito goða> in line 8, reflects a case of *imago dei* anthropogenesis of a kind attested in religious speculations of the early Middle-East. Initially, the idea failed to win any support, but two years ago the thesis was embraced by Else Mundal (2001: 204), an eminent scholar in the field of Vǫluspá criticism. Mundal's subscription to the idea raises the question whether Steinsland's interpretation has been undeservedly neglected and whether, therefore, the scholarly community should reconsider its stance. In the following investigation, I will look into the matter by discussing two points: is there any ground for regarding Vsp. 18 as an example of *imago dei* anthropogenesis, and if not, is the motif absent from the poem?

Imago dei anthropogenesis in Vsp. 18?

The stanza first records the deficiencies which characterize Askr and Embla's state of being, then describes how Óðinn, Hœnir and Lóðurr, by bestowing mental and bodily abilities, raise the couple to a level of animated life. In the words of the poet:[2]

Vsp. 18 ǫnd gaf Óðinn,
óð gaf Hœnir,
lá gaf Lóðurr
ok lito <goða>.

Of this finishing touch supplied by the gods, the first two gifts are com-

[1] I am indebted to Robert Cook (Reykjavík) and Annelies Roeleveld (Zuidoostbeemster) for reading this article and making stylistic suggestions.

[2] References to *Vǫluspá* are to Jón Helgason's edition in *Nordisk filologi*.

paratively straightforward.[3] More of a problem is *lá*. The word was long interpreted as 'vital warmth', but this meaning was reached on the basis of an alleged Germanic prototype **wlahō* not reflected in any Old Germanic dialect. The interpretation, which originates with Adolf Noreen, has now widely been discarded. At present the word is widely regarded as identical with Old Norse *lá* 'shallow water near the shore', which in the sense 'liquid' occurs as the base-word of kennings denoting the mead of poetry. According to some scholars this *lá* 'liquid' must be taken in the sense 'blood', which is doubtful, but this will not concern us here.[4] The second quality donated by Lóðurr long posed no problem. Over a century, the words <lito goða> were interpreted as *lito góða* 'good colours', an indication, it was thought, of the newly created people's fair complexion. The first to challenge this interpretation was Steinsland (1983: 82,87), who some twenty years ago suggested that the manuscript reading <lito goða> should be transcribed *lito goða*, instead of the conventional *lito góða*. As she saw it, the word <goða> did not contain the epithet *góðr* 'good', but the genitive plural (*goða*) of the noun *goð* 'deity'. Ludvig Holm-Olsen, to whom Steinsland (1983: 82) turned for support, initially spoke against it because of the awkward metrical pattern this reading would produce. Steinsland thereupon enlisted the help of Magnus Rindal, who came up with the half-lines *Lofars hafat* (Vsp. 16/8) and *um himinǫður* (Vsp. 5/4) as evidence that forms like *goða* were capable of carrying the line's second full stress.[5] The form *himinǫður*, though generally adopted in normalized editions, is in fact an emendation (cf. Pipping 1926: 19), but even if, on the strength of Vsp. 14/2, we accept the reading *ok lito goða* as theoretically possible, the question remains what reason there would be to prefer this interpretation to the traditional one. Steinsland's argument is based on comparative mythology, in that she interprets the presumed transliteration *ok lito goða* (literally 'and the colours of the gods') as a reflection of *imago dei* anthropogenesis, the concept that man was created in the image of his divine creator. This

[3] *ǫnd* 'life-breath' corresponds approximately to Lat. *spiritus* (with the same semantic development to 'ghost' and 'soul'). *óðr* 'mind, emotion' (cf. Goth. *wōþs*, OE *wōd* 'voice', OHG *wuot* (with extended meanings as 'anger, frenzy, insanity') probably comprises Lat. *ingenium* and *lingua*, speech being the distinctive feature of man gifted with reason. The word is cognate with Latin *vātes* 'seer', Old Irish *fāith* 'prophet', meanings not found in Germanic. For a recent discussion of the stanza, see Josefsson (2001).

[4] The interpretation 'blood' was refuted already by Edgar Polomé (1969: 283), who, however, failed to come up with a more satisfying explanation.

[5] Steinsland (1983: 82 and 2001: 255) consistently refers to Vsp. 16,9, which I have been unable to find in any edition consulted by me. I take it that Vsp 16/8 is meant.

motif, found in Gnostic and Jewish speculations of the early Middle-East, Steinsland believes echoed in Vsp. 18. The comparison with early Middle-Eastern religious concepts is not without interest, but as an argument it fails to convince. Steinsland, however, takes the connection even further in that she claims the motif's occurrence in Vsp. 18 to be crucial for a proper understanding of the poem's structure. Recently, Steinsland (2001) returned to the matter, without, however, producing additional arguments to strengthen her case, the difference being that she is now willing to accept some degree of Christian influence in the poem. The alleged *imago dei* motif of Vsp. 18, which was earlier attributed to Gnostic or early-Jewish influences, is now thought to hark back to the biblical story of Genesis I, which marks a concession on the part of Steinsland, who on earlier occasions sought to explain the poem as the product of a genuinely pagan culture.[6] Even so, the shift in her approach is only marginal, with little bearing on the thesis as such, which remains unconvincing. The arguments adduced by Steinsland prove little, and not nearly enough to make us accept the poor metrical pattern required to make the alleged reading possible. Dronke (1997) mildly rejects the interpretation, whereas Hermann Pálsson (1994 and 1996) makes no mention of it.

I cannot see better as that *litir góðar*, as assumed by generations of scholars, refers to a healthy hue. The words bring to the fore a well attested opposition of good colours versus bad ones, of which the latter, expressed in terms like *bleikr*, *grár* etc., were associated with the appearance of berserks and other unsavoury figures outside civilized society (cf. Bächtold-Stäubli III, 1123). A comparable distinction of features holds for the dead, whose colours were regarded as markedly different from those of living men (cf. Heller 1984: 96). The distinction is manifest in a passage of *Snorra Edda* (Finnur Jónsson 1931: 66), where we are told how the gods' envoy, Hermóðr, sent to obtain Baldr's release from the underworld, is stopped at the entrance by a woman who asks him for his name, saying *eigi hefir þú lit dauðra manna, hví riðr þú hér á helveg?* (You don't have the colour of the dead, so why are you riding the road to Hel?). The conclusion is clear: the faculties bestowed on the anthropomorph (?) couple found on the land (*á landi*) mark their

[6] Steinsland's less rigid views are also to be inferred from her explanation of *Askr* and *Embla*, whose names she now links to the biblical first couple Adam and Eve (cf. Nordal 1923: 52). Unfortunately, the new derivation only weakens her thesis in that *litir goða*, a plural form, is now derived from *imago Dei*, evidently a singulare tantum. To eliminate the problem, Steinsland (2001: 251) wants to reduce the triad of godheads to one by treating Hœnir and Lóðurr as hypostases of Óðinn (as suggested earlier by Friedrich van der Leyen 1938: 268), which is at odds with the kenning *Lóðurs vinr* for Óðinn.

transition from the world of the dead to the abode of the living, and there is accordingly no reason for transcribing <lito goða> as *lito goða*, as an alleged instance of *imago dei* anthropogenesis.

Is the *imago Dei* motif absent from the poem?

Our rejection of Steinsland's interpretation of Vsp. 18 does not necessarily mean that the *imago Dei* motif, as I write it, is altogether absent from the poem. There is some reason for believing that the motif, albeit indirectly and less obviously, does in fact occur, though not in the way envisaged by Steinsland. I am referring to the poem's opening lines. As it happens, Vsp. 1/1–4 contains two, possibly three addresses, depending on how one views the helming. After articulating her bid for hearing in the first half-line, the vǫlva addresses the audience collectively, then proceeds to greet *Valfǫðr* in the second helming, whom she addresses with a question which is both formal and menacing. Here, we are only concerned with the words *allar helgar kindir, meiri ok minni, mǫgo Heimdallar*. We first have to establish whether we are dealing with one nominal clause here. Nordal (1923) and Finnur Jónsson (1911; 1932: 1) apparently assumed an asyndetic construction, in that they believed *helgar kindir* to refer to the gods, *meiri ok minni mǫgo Heimdallar*, on the other hand, to mankind. Such syntax would be highly unusual, however, and in order to support it, Nordal felt it necessary to refer to Vsp. 29, where the vǫlva is said to look far and view every world. The argument is a weak one. The fact that the vǫlva's narrative involves both gods and men, not to mention other creatures of the supernatural, does not imply that the audience includes representatives of all the groups she is telling about. Nordal's solution, therefore, must be dismissed. Syntactically, we cannot but conclude that the whole clause applies to one group (Neckel 1934: 170; von See 1981: 515). The conclusion that the poet's address refers to one group does confront us with a problem, in that the various appositions and epithets constituting the phrase have greatly different connotations. It is, however, precisely this opposition of features involved in the phrase, which enables us to detect the underlying presence of the *imago Dei* motif as the organizing principle of the vǫlva's address. To make this clear, I will briefly discuss the various connotations of *helgar kindir* and *meiri ok minni*, respectively.

Vsp.1 Hlióðs bið ek allar
helgar kindir
meiri ok minni
mǫgo Heimdallar;
vildo at ek, Valfǫðr
vel fyr telia
forn spiǫll fira
þau er fremst um man.

1/2 helgar] so H, omitted R, 1/4 Heimdallar] Heimdalar R

The apposition *meiri ok minni* reiterates and defines the adjective *allir* of the foregoing half-line, a zoom of focus which underscores the weight the poet attaches to it. The hierarchy contained in the words apparently refers to the social stratification of human society. As such, the phrase does not stand isolated. A comparable wording occurs in Ragnars saga: *hvárt sem hann er af meirum stigum eða minnum* (Magnus Olsen 1906–1908: 121,1–2). The phrasing of Vsp. 1/1–3 brings to mind the opening sentence of the late-medieval Redentin Easter Play, where a request for silence is similarly combined with an address to all people, be they poor or rich: *Swiget al gelike, Beide arm unde rike!* (Krogmann 1964: 15). The explicit reference to these various categories of society brings out the message that what the audience is going to hear will be of interest to all people, whatever their wealth or status. Medieval theatre, to be sure, was performed in the open and statements like the above need not be more than empty rhetoric in order to draw the people to the performance, an aspect not necessarily absent in Vǫluspá.[7] However, the use of *heilagr*, as well as the concept of divine filiation articulated in *mǫgo Heimdallar*, suggests that the words *meiri ok minni* may well have a double valence, in that they, on another level of interpretation, remind us that at the Last Judgement the rich and the poor will be treated alike, each individual being judged according to *opera sua*. The message is amply testified in Christian writing. As the *Apocalypse of Peter* puts it: there shall be no poor man, nor rich, nor tyrant, nor slave, none great nor small any longer (James 1953: 524).[8] In the words of the ninth-century monk Druthmar of Corvey, in the other life there is no distinction

[7] One might even argue that the similarity betrays the poet's indebtness to a medieval Miracle Play of some kind, something which can not be ruled out entirely (Samplonius 2001: 220 n. 119).

[8] In his missionary speech at Mostr (Fms 1, 282; Flb. 1, 284), king Óláfr Tryggvason

between master and servant other than for what they have done (*Non erit in alia vita discretio domini et servi, nisi per merita* PL 106, 1321). The idea was expressed eloquently in the Old English *Judgement Day*, presumably a late-tenth century translation of Bede's *De Die Iudicii*[9] (Kirk Dobbie 1942: 62):

> þær beoð þearfan and þeoðcyningas,
> earm and eadig, ealle beoð afæred;
> þær hæfð ane lage earm and se welega
>
> There will be the paupers and mighty kings
> Poor and rich, all will be frightened;
> There will have one law, the poor and the wealthy

The underlying sense of *meiri ok minni* concluded above is conjoined with the word *heilagr*. Earlier generations of scholars tended to identify those thus addressed with the community of the gods assembled for hearing the vǫlva's message, which, it was thought, sufficed to explain the use of the epithet. Müllenhoff (1908: 86) and Neckel (1934: 170) explicitly referred to the *þinghelgi*, which they assumed to have been declared on occasion of the vǫlva's performance. There is, however, little to sustain this view, and support for it has crumbled. Nordal (1923: 34) believed *helgar kindir* to refer to the gods, notably Óðinn, whose presence seemed implied by the vocative *Valfǫðr* of the second helming. There can be no doubt, indeed, that *heilagr* makes an appropriate epithet for a god, as can be seen from Vsp. 6 and 9, where the words *ginnheilǫg goð* apparently refer to the participants of the gods' assembly (de Boor 1930: 94–97). What makes the interpretation problematic is the word *kindir*, which is never used for gods (Dronke 1997: 106), while *meiri ok minni*, as shown above, almost certainly refers to humankind.[10] How, then, are we to understand the concurrence of *heilagr* and *meiri ok minni* in one and the same address? Icelandic editors of the poem have solved the problem by removing the word

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emphasizes that those baptised will have the eternal reward of the almighty God, be they poor or rich (*svá óríkir sem auðgir*). Cf. note 12.

[9] On the relation between the Old English and the Latin versions, see Caie (1991).

[10] Cf. Markús lǫgmaðr's reference to Óláfr Tryggvason's speech at Mostr (Flb. 1, 285): *Sidvandr siðan kendi, sannfróðr trú góða / herlundr hǫlda kindum* (The serene, well-informed [lit. truth-wise] warrior then taught the good faith to the sons-of-men), in which the audience, in a manner reminiscent of Vsp. 1, is referred to as *kindir*.

heilagr, thus restricting themselves to the text offerred by Codex Regius (Gísli Sigurðsson 1986, Hermann Pálsson 1996). This has the advantage of eliminating the testimony of *heilagr* as an indicator of divine quality, and would bring unity to the vǫlva's audience, the gods now being excluded from the scene. The solution also meets Judy Quinn's recent criticism of the widely established scholarly custom of piecing together a text from different versions (Quinn 2000). Even so, it must be rejected, because, sound as this approach may seem, the R reading is metrically problematic. In his commentary, Hermann Pálsson (1996: 57) goes to the trouble of commenting that the pronoun *ek* (Vsp. 1/1) carries full stress and alliterates with *allar* of the second half-line, a scansion first suggested by Jón Helgason (1951: 1). I have my doubts about the tenability of the alliterative pattern thus proposed. The days of Sievers may be over, and scholars are rightly more lenient at present in accepting metrical deviations, but a hypometrical a-verse of three syllables is still something of an anomaly in regular fornyrðislag.[11] More importantly, pronouns, to the best of my knowledge, never alliterate when preceded in the line by a fully stressed noun that does not participate in the alliteration, as would be the case here. So, as regards Vsp. 1/1–2, it is difficult to escape the impression that the text of H, which is metrically impeccable, is more original than the reading of R.[12] It leaves us, however, with the intriguing problem, outlined above, of how to reconcile *heilagr*, as a marker of divinity, with the words *meiri ok minni*, apparently a reference to mankind. Von See (1981: 515) once suggested that the hierarchy implied in the words might refer to the stratification of the divine: there are major gods and there are minor gods, as well as supernatural beings of a lesser stature, such as *valkyrjar* and *einherjar*. This would indeed remove the obstacle, but forces us to interprete *Heimdallar megir* as 'Heimdall's friends', which is not very satisfying. To solve the problem, there are two options. One could assume a stylistically motivated transfer of epithet (*enallage*), which is unattractive, even though, as Dronke (1997) points out, of all the gods mentioned in Snorra Edda, only Heimdallr is called *heilagr*. The alternative is to assume a double valence, in that the word, on a higher plane, underlines the God-like aspect of mankind as God's ultimate creation: *creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam* (Gen. 1, 25,

[11] I leave aside the poems *Rígsþula*, *Hyndluljóð* and *Baldrs draumar*, in which three-syllable verses seem kind of permitted, though rarely, if ever, as a-verses.

[12] A similar omission can be observed in Vsp. 60 , where H, as the conjunction *ok* (60/5) shows, appears to have the more original text.

cf. Lactantius, Div. Inst. II, 11). In my opinion, it is this last possibility that we are dealing with. What we have here (Vsp. 1/2) is a manifestation of the *imago Dei* motif, the presence of which in the poem was advocated, albeit on questionable grounds, by Steinsland in another context. The motif is a standing one in medieval literature. We find it for instance in the Latin *Life of Adam and Eve*, where God says: Behold Adam! I have made you in Our image and likeness (*Ecce Adam. feci ad imaginem et similitudinem nostrem*). In the words of Ælfric: *We men sind Godes bearn* 'We men are children of God' (Thorpe 1844, 258). God's children are holy, because God is holy (cf. Leviticus 11, 44: *sancti estote, quia ego sanctus sum*, and Psalm 81,6 *Dii estis, et filii excelsi omnes* 'You are gods, and all of you the sons of the most High'). The holiness of man, however, manifests itself, not in human society, which is but transistory, but at the end of it, when on Judgement Day the worthy will resume the God-like state lost through the Fall and become the sons of God. As Lactantius words it (Div. Inst. VII, 24), the righteous shall produce an infinite multitude, and their offspring shall be holy (*infinitam multitudinem generabunt et erit suboles eorum sancta*). Throughout the Middle Ages, the deification of man at the end of times was regarded as the goal of His all-powerful divine Providence. The idea represented a significant thread of medieval theology, in the East, where Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite referred to the righteous as gods (Constable 1998: 153; Roques 1958: 92,147), but also in the West. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, saw divinization as the predestined process by which righteous man is spiritualized in conformity with Christ and partakes of God's eternity (Wild 1950: 157). In his *Libellus octo quaestionum* Honorius Augustodunensis maintained that the cause of the Incarnation was the predestination of the deification of man (*Causa autem Christi incarnationis fuit prædestinatio humanæ deificationis*, PL 172, 1187C). The doctrine, as Bonner (1999: 369) has shown, was known and on occasion taught by Augustine and Bede. It seems a reasonable guess, therefore, that the words *helgar kindir* have proleptic overtones: while resonating God's creation of man *ad imaginem suam*, they point ahead to mankind's ultimate destination, when the original God-likeness of man will be restored to the righteous, who will enjoy perpetual happiness in the New Jeruzalem. This may seem rather speculative, but in fact it is precisely this promise of everlasting joy that the audience is reminded of at the poem's end (Vsp. 64), which lends support to the idea that the epithet *heilagr*, on a Christian plane, incorporates an echo of the medieval view on man's

predestined deification. It may be added that the theology of the image of God was linked to the idea of divine filiation — the rigtheous were called the Sons of God (Ps. 81,6 cited above) —, which *mutatis mutandis* accords conspiciously with the words *mǫgo Heimdallar.*[13]

Investigations like the above will always have a speculative touch, but I hope to have shown that there is a case for arguing that the vǫlva's address gives us a glimpse of the ideological background against which the poem's composition must be judged.

To return to the question raised in the beginning: does the scholarly community have to reassess its stance? Yes and no. As our investigation shows, there is reason for believing that the *imago Dei* motif was part of the poet's inventory, but only indirectly, and any suggestion to explain Vsp. 18/8 along such lines must be rejected.

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[13] The examples could easily be multiplied. The eighth-century *Concilium Baiuvaricum* (Rau 1968: 440), for instance, refers to the holiness of life received through baptism (*sanctitatis vitae quam in baptismo adsumit*) and calls the peace-loving blessed, because they are the Sons of God (*filii Dei*). It is instructive to compare these words with Óláfr's speech at Mostr, cited above (note 8).

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