



## Why We Can't See Them

### *Icelandic Christianity*

Not many years after the world was created, God returned to Paradise to pay a visit to Adam and Eve. They were sincerely glad to see him, which pleased the Supreme Maker, but he also noticed a faint shadow of concern and uneasiness on their faces. He said nothing, however, lest he should disturb them, and tried to ease the situation by suggesting that they show him all the things they had invented to make their lives more satisfactory.

Eve and Adam showed him the wooden huts they had built among the branches of a huge, leafy tree, and they also showed him the tools they had made to make their daily chores easier. God was surprised, however, that they did not introduce him to their children, since there were obviously more tools and gadgets here and there than two people could possibly need. So, finally, since they said nothing about it, the Creator asked them to introduce their children to him.

At that point, the expression of uneasiness on the faces of the two humans became fully apparent.

'Yes, of course,' said Eve with a strained smile. 'We were saving this surprise for last,' she added, as she watched Adam quietly walk off in the direction of the river.

After a couple of minutes, Adam returned with two boys and two girls of not very different ages and presented them to the Almighty. God smiled warmly at them and, kneeling down to their level, embraced them

tenderly, and then asked them what their names were. Then he stood up again and asked the two adults:

‘Are these all your children? Are there none missing here?’

Eve and Adam swallowed hard and smiled a deeply uncomfortable smile.

‘No,’ Adam replied, his voice cracking. ‘None of them are missing.’

Nevertheless, so many other children had been left on the banks of the river, children that the first man and woman had not dared to show to the Maker. They were aware that they had had too many children in too short a time, and that day, like so many others, they had not even had time to wash them all and give them the care they needed, so they had only shown God those who were in the best and most presentable state.

God looked at Adam and Eve with a sad look on his face and said:

‘What human beings hide from God, God will hide from human eyes.’

Eventually, the children that Eve and Adam had not shown to the Almighty would become invisible, and would establish their dwellings in mounds, hills and rocky places, in forests, lakes and rivers. From them descend the elves, while we humans come from those four children that Adam and Eve did show to God. That is why we humans can only see the elves when they themselves choose to let themselves be seen.

It is said by some that on that distant day in Paradise, when he left the place where the first human beings lived, God walked crestfallen for a long time, with his hands on his back, thinking that perhaps he should have designed differently the method of procreation of human beings and the needs and care that it demands.

‘They’ll have to learn that for themselves,’ he muttered to himself afterwards with a compassionate sigh. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2024).

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## Comments

In the Arnason's (1864) version of this story on which we have based ourselves, the burden of guilt, as well as the burden of childcare, falls on the character of Eve. In this new version, we have made the appropriate changes to update the story and bring it into line with new educational approaches and the current social and historical context.

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The religious syncretism of some of Iceland's ancient inhabitants is apparent in this story, which combines Judeo-Christian elements, such as those found in the *Genesis* narrative, with pagan elements related to the spirits of nature. The Christianisation process in the Northern European countries was a slow process, which developed over several centuries, allowing some people a certain fusion of beliefs over a long period of time.

To start with, we must bear in mind that Icelandic society did not exist as such until the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the Christianisation of northern Europe had already been in a slow process of development for a couple of centuries (Kristjándóttir, 2004). This possibly meant that some religious syncretism could already have come from the Scandinavian peninsulas. If we add to this the fact that the process of Christianisation of Iceland also took several centuries – between the early 10<sup>th</sup> and early 13<sup>th</sup> centuries – we may well conclude that Iceland was, for a long time, a meeting place for two quite different spiritual traditions; a meeting that, according to many authors, seems to have followed more or less peaceful lines.

However, other more recent authors, including Kathleen M. Self (2010), Professor of Religious Studies at St. Lawrence University in New York, do not think so. According to this author, although there was no overt violent physical conflict in these centuries of 'conversion', there were some violent episodes, as well as large doses of 'verbal aggression ... considered a destructive force on par with physical aggression' for the Icelanders. According to Self, 'the narratives reveal that they perceived their conversion to have been a result of severe conflict between Christian missionaries and pagan adherents.'

As for episodes of actual physical violence, two men are known to have been murdered by Thorvaldur Kodransson, a Christian missionary who tried to convert Icelanders without succeeding - as might be expected from the 'methodology' employed. Slightly less violent, but equally wayward in his ways, Stefnir Þórgilsson, missionary sent by King Olaf I of Norway, had no better idea than to destroy representations and shrines held sacred by the pagans on the island. Another missionary sent by Olaf I, a certain Thangbrand, left several dead behind him during his two-year evangelising mission between 997 and 999. And, to further 'ingratiate' himself with the inhabitants of Iceland, King Olaf I decided to deny access to his ports to Icelandic seafarers, preventing trade with the island, which was entirely dependent on King Olaf's ports, and taking the Icelanders living in his territory hostage (Haywood, 2015).

Whatever the case, the religious syncretism of the story we offer here perhaps draws from other sources, such as the Celtic world, where the spirits of nature – elves, leprechauns, goblins, nymphs and so on – are still rooted in the unconscious – and conscious – of the people. In fact, Ari Þorgilsson, author of the *Íslendingabók*, written between c. 1122-1133 CE, states that, prior to the arrival of the Icelanders, Irish Christians had lived in Iceland. But the conflict between nature-bound paganism and Christianity, which saw nature as essentially sinful, is shown in other texts, where it is suggested that pagan shrines and temples had to be destroyed in order for Christianity to take root in Iceland. Thus, in one of the texts, the Bishop Friðrekr had to bring an evil spirit out of a rock in order to make his first convert, whereas the prophet Þórhallr witnessed the nature spirits packing up and leaving Iceland at the news of the arrival of the missionary Þangbrandr from Norway (Grønlie, 2017).

This might lead one to think that the story of "Why We Can't See Them" was perhaps the attempt of a lucid, open and tolerant mind to offer common ground between pagans and Christians in a divided society such as Icelandic society seems to have been between the 10th and 12th centuries CE.



## Sources

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## Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 7e: Ensure universal access to health care that fosters reproductive health and responsible reproduction.

## Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble: The Global Situation: An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 9b: Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

Principle 11c: Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

