This Town Ain’t Big Enough

Within *The Life of St. Margaret*, three different religions are described: Christianity, Islam, and an unnamed Pagan religion. Margaret serves as the shining example of Christian perfection, acting as a beacon to the unenlightened peoples that surround her. She is repeatedly praised for both her physical beauty, and her extreme devotion to the Christian religion. This is only fitting; her father has a premonition that she will follow Christianity from her birth, and though he intends to kill her for this decision, her mother saves her life. In spite of this, he does not exactly believe in the gospel of Jesus:

Febylle was his herte and false was hys faye;

The fendys oute of helle, thei servyd hym both nyghte and day. (8-9)

Instead, he possesses a “false” faith, and spends his time in the company of devilish creatures. The narrator says that he believes in “false goddys” (11) - from the very beginning, the narrator depicts Christianity as a beautiful and pure pursuit of Godliness, while the father’s Pagan religion is described as evil, unholy, and downright frightening. He is described as a “heathen”, a term that refers to someone who follows an “unenlightened” religion - anything other than the big three of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In Old English this term referred to someone who lived on a “large open space” or heath, indicating that the society was uncivilized - there were no churches or chapels in these undeveloped plots of land. While this term was eventually applied to those who practice Islam, these devotees were typically referred to as “Saracens”. The cruel king Olibrius is jealous, selfish, and irreverent in his attempts to win Margaret’s affection. Just like Margaret’s father, he is known for his contact with the grotesque - “Olibrius than was lord… He served both nyghthe and daye the foule fendys of helle.” (37-39). Again, the author aligns each and every non-Christian belief with demons, and even mentions that Satan himself is probably Olibrius’ uncle. By contrasting Margaret with her father and king Olibruis, the author depicts Christianity as an honorable and noble path of spirituality, while *anything* that is non-Christian is portrayed as a direct path to hell. In considering every non-Christian person a “heathen”, including the Saracens, the author presents the notion that Christianity is the only acceptable or “correct” religion, and that even another equally organized and monotheistic religion like Islam can not be considered anything but heresy.