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## WERE THE ICELANDERS GOOD CHRISTIANS, ACCORDING TO SAMTIDARSÖGUR?

May I request your forbearance if I begin with personal remembrances? Some thirty-five years ago, when I started my Old Norse studies, fascinated as I already was by this culture and civilization, I wanted to study sagas in order to demonstrate firmly, according to an old point of view well living at that time in my country, that they, as we say, expressed "l'âme germanique" (the Germanic soul), that they were quite typical of the so-called pagan Germanic mind and the like<sup>1</sup>. I had decided, accordingly, to retrace and illustrate the Icelandic, or Old Scandinavian, or ancient Germanic specificity, an idea which, for various reasons, historical as well as sentimental, has always attracted my compatriots. I took advice of my two old Icelandic friends (it was in 1962), Sigurður Nordal and Einar Ól.Sveinsson, and they both advised me to start from an analysis of Sturlunga Saga. Sigurður was dear to me because of his famous Íslenzk menning and Einar, for his Age of the Sturlungs. They must have been both in agreement with what we call now the "problématique du modernisme" (the modern way of raising problems) since this choice was to open quite new ways...

I had had the chance in my life of getting a good classical and west-european training and, being a church going Roman catholic myself, I was well aware of the meaning and contents of this religion. And so, I started reading Sturlunga saga<sup>2</sup>, Byskupa sögur and other similar texts. The result was confounding : after hardly six months of reading, I was sure I had already read a

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<sup>1</sup> these ideas, as one knows, are still living, even in France, but they are nowadays the fact of well-known and clearly situated political factions and lack the weight of scientific value.

<sup>2</sup> which I read in the Jon Johannesson, Magnus Finnogason and Kristjan Eldjarn edition, I-II, Reykjavik, 1946. For Byskupa sögur, I took the Gudni Jonsson edition, I-IV, Haukadalsutgafan, 1953. The references below will be to those editions

great amount of such texts, either in Latin or in Old French. Moreover, I recognized situations, characters, episodes, scenes and even ways of saying. True to say, I was one of the first non-Germanic people to study such matters, but the surprise was great indeed! Really, reading this works, I felt "en famille" (at home). The rest is known to you. I happened to operate on parallel basis with E.O.G.Turville-Petre and his disciples, Hans Bekker-Nielsen and his friends, many other, and the result was that I could publish a doctor's thesis on the topic of the religious life in Iceland during the *ritöld*<sup>3</sup>. There, and in a lot of subsequent works of all sizes and kinds, I could demonstrate, between other things, that the sagas, whichever the category they belong to, derive from the Latin classical hagiography and from the medieval equally Latin hagiography<sup>4</sup>, an opinion which has progressively been adopted everywhere, as far as I know, as the last expression of the well-known theory called Buchprosa. Suffices also to mention Hermann Pálsson or Klaus von See, between other, who have more or less confirmed my own intuitions in their various works. And I am very glad to add that such eminent Icelandic scholars as my friend Jonas Kristjansson have not really objected to these views. In the "Roman" world, as you would say, I am happy and lucky enough to have got a lot of students or disciples who are working on the same lines and reach similar results.

Now, I know quite well that one thing is to adopt themes, images, characters, episodes, expressions (in a let us say "exotic" way) , another, to live according to the message the sources are supposed to convey. The Icelanders have been able to translate some of Chrétien de Troyes's romances, they have never lived according to the courtois fashions! Then, one can imagine persons or situations in accordance with the models one uses, one is not obliged to live accordingly! After all, an Icelandic saga is not identical to Suetonius'works nor to a good *vita* ! There is a specificity which is precisely the reason why the sagas are so interesting to us all. My opinion is that it is a matter of form, the renowned saga-style - and you will certainly object that this way of expressing oneself reflects obviously a *Weltanschauung* , a vision of the world, of man and of life, which must be typical - but I should like to maintain that this vision itself has been permeated by a Christian ideology and that it is not forbidden to try to find,

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<sup>3</sup> has been published in its type-written form in 1970 and printed, although slightly shortened ,in 1979. Title : La vie religieuses en Islande (1116-1264) d'après la Sturlunga Saga et les Sagas des Evêques. Paris. Fondation Singer-Polignac.

<sup>4</sup> the demonstration is to be found, chiefly, either in Les sagas islandaises, 3d ed., Paris, Payot, 1992 (1st ed. 1978), or in Sagas islandaises, 2e ed. (1st ed. 1987) Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, in the Introduction.

beyond the texts themselves, in deep structure, a genuine influence of ideas, feelings and images that came from abroad. True to say, I do not intend to demonstrate that sagas are Christian works : it would be excessive, nor do I want to remind you of the impressive list of readings one can easily retrace behind such texts. But the question remains, to know whether the *sagnamenn* (as Hermann Pálsson would have it) were living according to Christian patterns and ideals, or if they were simply doing *imitatio* , as the Occident would have said at that time.

Another point is to take care of the category of sagas we have to choose in order to study that precise matter. It seems to me quite clear that *Islendingasögur* or *konungasögur* are endeavouring quite visibly to follow various non "Germanic" sources, they are what we call "historical novels", they try to reconstitute an old (two centuries and a half, or more) past and there, they needed guides or models which they used generously. But the situation is different with the *samtíðarsögur* since they are supposed to tell us everyday's life in Iceland during the XIIth and XIIIth centuries<sup>5</sup>. I have always thought, besides, that one should attempt a general study of the *samtíðarsögur* as possible sources for other categories of sagas - but it is not the subject of the present paper! What I should like to show here, it is the fact that the Icelanders we see living, feeling and acting in *Sturlunga saga* were actually "good Christians" and that they would not seem quite foreign or strange if they would have happened to live in continental Germany, or France, or other Christian countries, in that time.

Of course, we cannot judge of the faith of these men and women, nor of their genuine piety, this matter cannot be the object of any "scientific" study. But I do not see what could prevent us analyzing their behaviour, their reactions towards the rules and laws of the Church, in short their way of practising their religion, not to forget that in 1116 (date of the birth of Hvamm-Sturla Þórðarson) they had been officially Christian for more than two centuries, not to speak of Sturla Þórðarson, the author of Islendinga saga who died 285 years after the official adoption of christianism by the alping of 999. And there, we shall come to very interesting constatations.

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Thus, the Christian practice in everyday's Iceland in the XIIth and XIIIth centuries, according to Sturlunga saga.

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<sup>5</sup> which is also the reason why I shall concentrate on Sturlunga saga more than Byskupa sögur which, for most of them, go back too far, very often, in the past.

Let us begin with a general consideration. When E.Perroy tells us that "The deep penetration of Christian attitudes and feelings into the smallest details of the lay way of living /.../ will not cease to assert itself during the whole XIIIth century"<sup>6</sup>, we are allowed to apply the formula to Iceland. Especially if, as I stressed the point, we keep close to the observance of the rules of Christian life, to the submission to a ritual. Let us examine some important points.

1) The attendance to the offices, first. It seems to have been regular and constant. If we compare the Icelandic *skriftabod* with their Western European equivalents, we are astonished to see that reproaching to the faithful not to attend sufficiently the offices is far more rare! The *Byskupa Sögur* as well as *Sturlunga Saga* give us plenty of "technical" details which indicate a perfect knowledge of this point : *lágasöngur*<sup>7</sup> , *præfatio* , *sursum corda*<sup>8</sup>, *aftansöngur*<sup>9</sup> or *kvöldsöngur*<sup>10</sup>, *náttasöngur*<sup>11</sup> , *nóntíð*<sup>12</sup> , *óttusöngur*<sup>13</sup> , *morgintíðir*<sup>14</sup> and the like. The word *tíðir* with the general meaning of office, being nearly common! We see, in IS 117, *kvátra* players, although passionate, stop playing "er hringdi til aftansöngs" and go to church. In HSS 19, Hrafn, in spite of the fact that he is besieged into his house, goes to his *stofa* with his clerics and they "syngja óttusöng" . PSB 5 tells us, about Páll's first mass when back to Iceland, that everybody wanted to hear him singing mass because "ekki /er/ minna vert at hlýða prestsmessu nývígðri, inni fyrstu, heldr en byskupsmessu einhverri." I could multiply such instances.

2) As for the practice of sacraments, the picture is still more convincing. To give only a few hints : baptism was judged so important that we see, in ASB 7, people being very glad because bishop Arni has decided to have children who died unbaptized, buried just outside the churchyard, "en áðr vǫru þau grafinn fjarri vígðum stöðum sem sekir menn, ok kölluðu fáfróðir menn þau útburðir" : the choice of such terms as *sekir menn* or *útburðir* , which belong to pagan times, is interesting. Private baptism was known and practised (*skemmri skírn* , JGB33, *skírn af leikmanni* , JGB 29<sup>15</sup>). Sveinn Sturluson refuses to kill the priest who has

<sup>6</sup> E.Perroy, J.Auboyer, Cl.Cahen, G.Duby, M.Mollat : *Le Moyen Age*, Paris, 1961 p. 276

<sup>7</sup> passim, cf JfB II 17, JSH I 28, GSA 21

<sup>8</sup> both GSD 19

<sup>9</sup> passim, cf GSD 8, IS 21, ÞSS 19, JfB III 9, JSH II 25

<sup>10</sup> JGB 15

<sup>11</sup> ÞSH 11, JSH I 34

<sup>12</sup> GSD 4, JpB III 9, JSH II 25

<sup>13</sup> passim, cf ÞSH 28, HSS 19

<sup>14</sup> IS 154.

<sup>15</sup> with the opposite notion : *skírdur fullri skírn*, JfB II 19

baptized him, his *skírifaðir* accordingly, precisely because of this fact (StS 15).

Confirmation existed as well. The verb *biskupa* occurs in PGG 3 or ÞSS 1.

The case of penance is extremely interesting. Sigurður Nordal thought<sup>16</sup> that this sacrament, as well as the notion of sin should have been foreign to a Nordic conscience. I do not want to expatiate on this idea, but I see that, most surprisingly, the Icelanders of the XIIIth century attached a very great importance to the fact of shriving; although we see priest Ingimundr reproaching to the crew of his boat to think of shriving only in case of fare (PGG 6). Yet, the punishments were hard, let us remember Sturla Sighvatsson in Roma (IS 92<sup>17</sup>). We see mere ruffians imploring the help of a priest ("þóðr prestr, ek vilda gjarna skriftast við þik" ÞSS 76), other shed tears in their repentance (HSS 19 or IS 179 where Hrani has put his weapons away before shriving). Murderers want absolutely to get their absolution (*lausn*) after their misdeeds (so in IS 77, about the murderers of a priest<sup>18</sup>). People who are to be executed ask, systematically, a *prestsfundr* (GSD 10 : notice the fact that this will save the life of Ögmundr sneisl). Before a battle, everybody shrives itself (IS 84, 98, 137; ÞSS 50). "Þú skalt deyja/.../ - Prestsfund vilda ek hafa" (SvS 11): this dialogue appears frequently<sup>19</sup>. In ÞSK 18, Svarthöfði and Teltr seize Helgi and ask him to "rannsaka ráð sitt ok tala við prest" and the text adds immediately "ok svá gerði hann". And in the hopeless cases, one has always the possibility of saying *Agustínusbæn*, exactly like Sturla Sighvatsson before Öryggstaðir battle (IS 138). Is it necessary to insist? Such attitudes look more like reflexes than like deliberate decisions : they are certainly the result of a religion deeply anchored in common behaviour!

Eucharist - about which we know that it was far less practised in the Middle Ages than nowadays<sup>20</sup> - enjoyed a great favour in Iceland. Of course, the fact is consigned chiefly for people *in articulo mortis*<sup>21</sup>. But *þjónusta* is often mentioned (for instance IS 96, JSH II 34, HSS 19) and we may read such expressions in secular texts like "*þjónustu, hold ok blóð Jesu Christi í sinn líkama*" in SvS 11, or metaphorical images like *heilagt*

<sup>16</sup> ? Islenzk menning I p. 198

<sup>17</sup> he has to go bare-foot from church to church and to be flogged before all the main churches!

<sup>18</sup> the case of the men who has put Flugumýrr to fire, in IS 175 and obtain absolution from bishop Heinrekr is perhaps more dubious!

<sup>19</sup> for instance IS 188 : "Prestsfund vilda ek í guðs nafni"

<sup>20</sup> Saint Louis (Louis IXth), for example, receives holy communion only six or seven times a year!

<sup>21</sup> the word is *hunslaðr* or *húslaðr*, IS 94, 138

*götunisti*, which is literally *holy viaticum*, in JSH I 39<sup>22</sup>. See also þSS 53 where a murderer obtains absolution *tíl samneytis*! Never do we find doubts about the real Presence or heresies like those of the Paulicians who, according to Ari Þorgilsson, may have visited Iceland (he calls them Armenian, as you know).

Now, for marriage, the question is more complex since this institution had a kind of equivalent in Pagan times. The Church has been obviously confronted to real difficulties about the cases, rather frequent in a so small society, of marriages between close parents<sup>23</sup>. PGG 19 tells us the troubles encountered by bishop Páll to avoid the concubinage of Þorlák and Árni rauðskeggr, "*ok fekk hann eigi skilit þau*". But such occurrences are rather rare. Jon Loftsson does not yield in his quarrel with bishop Þorlák on law points, but he obeys him as far as his concubinage with the bishop's own sister is concerned (Oþ 7). Of course, getting married for financial or political reasons is nearly normal, in Iceland like in the rest of Europe at that time, and the mutual fidelity of husband and wife is not greater! But we must admit that it is surprising that this sacrament has not encountered greater difficulties in Iceland, knowing the situation in the Germanic world.

Ordination will be envisaged briefly only here. It may be possible that priests have got it somewhat loosely<sup>24</sup>. But on the whole, the competence of the clergy is not frequently questioned, which may seem strange when we know the general situation in the Western world, on this point, at that time! I find only one instance of a priest who refuses the duties of his function (Oþ 3), decides to attack the bishop and proposes to transform the church in Bær in a *hrossahús*: the pun on *krossahús* is clearly a blasphemy<sup>25</sup>.

Extreme unction also is very common. The word is *oleaðr* (IS 94, 119, 120, SvS 9, þSS 57 etc) or, more developed: *smurðr helgu víðsmjöri* (PSB 17).

We must take notice, equally, of the very numerous cases of excommunication: being buried in a consecrated soil was felt very important. As the excommunicated persons had not such a right, it is very frequent to see them repent *in extremis* in order to avoid being "*kasadr í urð sem melrakki*" (þSS 44). There is something moving in the efforts displayed by the friends of Oddr Þórarinnsson, who has died being excommunicated, to bury him as close as possible to the churchyard (in IS 188). And the

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<sup>22</sup> with this explanation: *er kallast englabrauð og vegfarandi manna fæða, alla reidu* GSD 5.

<sup>23</sup> see Hþ 5, PGG 9, GSD 9, IS 164.

<sup>24</sup> this could be suggested by passages like ÞSB 4 or MGB 11

<sup>25</sup> see also the case of priest Knútr in IS 76, who has been dismissed because of his behaviour

concurrence is great between the normal and "neutral" words for "to die" (*andast, deyja*) and Christian ways of saying : *sáladr*, IS 50; *skildist öndin við líkamann* IS 119, *færa hédan af heimi* ÞSS 81, *sofna til guðs* PSB 17). Interesting also is the progressive "depaganization" of well known expressions dealing with death like *vara í helju* or *valr* which mean simply : be dead (so in IS 129 or IS 124).

On this precise point, dealing with the sacraments, we may already draw a conclusion which can apply to our whole little study : the practice is effective, regular and nothing allows us to take it for unsincere. But the pathos, the sentimentality, the unuseful wordiness which are the rule elsewhere are absent here. And I find this normal : why would we want of these men and women who react before the worse catastrophes by a simple terse sentence that they would become suddenly talkative when religion is concerned?

3) The same remarks apply to prayers. J.Lestocquoy, studying "the normal day of an average Christian" in France, in the XIIIth century, states : "Religious exercises took a considerable part of everyday's life" and he precises : "morning prayers, mass, offices, fifty Ave Maria the evening", he evokes Philippe de Navarre: crossing himself three times when awakening, then a prayer, then mass and alms<sup>26</sup>. I must say that the *samtíðarsögur* do not contradict this opinion. Ceaselessly, we are told of prayers, which is very astonishing when we know the rarity of the prayers let us say in the eddic poems. Let us read JSH I 24 : bishop Jón wants his compatriots to : cross themselves as soon as they are awoken, say the Credo, never eat, drink or sleep without having crossed themselves, know their Pater and Ave Maria and praise God seven times a day<sup>27</sup>. Indeed, it is a bishop who is speaking, but his advices are respected, as far as the *samtíðarsögur* are concerned. The matter is so rich that I cannot even give an idea of the fact. Hafr, in IS 43 "*gekk hverja nótt til kirkju til bænahalds*". Skíði Þorkelsson, although a ruffian, asks if it is *nón* "ok söng Pater Noster" (IS 108). "*þú ert orðinn fyrir guðs reiði, says bishop Jón, en þó grandaði þér þat nú mest, er þú drakkt síðla dags ok óræktir at signa þik ádr*" (JSH II 35). Hafliði Másson, before leaving for the alþing, "*bað líðs lærða menn, at biðja skyldi fyrir þeim til guðs*" (ÞSH 21). We may understand Gizurr Þorvaldsson, in IS 172, when he prays, during the Flugumýrr arson, like no one has ever prayed, or Ormr's sons, in SvS 11 just before being executed. But what about Þorgils skardí (pSS 47) when he begins his speech with "*vil*

<sup>26</sup> *La vie religieuse en France du VIIe au XXe siècle*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>27</sup> one can compare with the *Homilubók*, Wessen edition, pp.104-111, chiefly in fine.

ek nú þess biðja, at hverr maðr syngi Pater Noster þrim sínum, ok biðjum þess, at guð gefi oss gott ráð, ok geymi hverr sín, en guð allra." I do not insist on byskupa sögur, where such attitudes are expected, but Þórðr Sturluson, just before dying, says "Pater, in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum" (IS 120). Indeed, the list of the prayers that are mentioned or evoked in the samtíðarsögur is most impressive. True to say, in L.Génicot's terms "Religion was a code more than a doctrine and it was less founded on love for God than on fear for damnation"<sup>28</sup>. We cannot expect the situation to be different in Iceland but the similarity with the let us say European situation is striking all the same!

4) Two words, now, on fast which a well known practice in the Middle Ages. Shall we be surprised if we ascertain that it was quite usual according to the samtíðarsögur? The Old Icelandic had invented a word for the food to be used in such circumstances: *föstumatr* (so in GSD 5 or IS 104) with amusing precisions, IS 96 doing the difference between *þurr matr* (dried fish, in fact) and *hvítr matr* (dairy produces). The nuance exists also between *vatna* or *vatnfasta* (which is fast by taking only bread and water) and *fasta* (which is abstinence, so ÞSK 29 or JbB III 7). *Quadragesima* exists in the samtíðarsögur: it is *kárinufasta*, fast during fourty days; it is not indifferent that the word comes from the French *carême*! (So in IS 43, 141 or ÞSS 14). We have very numerous instances of the fact about the vows on which I shall expand later<sup>29</sup>. In ÞSS 50, some of the people swear they will fast all their life long on the eve of Saint Þorlákr's day. Certain cases are touching: in IS 55, Sigmundur snagi, who is yet a *flugumaðr*! is fasting every Friday: "/Hann/ hafði háttat í dagsljósi, er frjádagur var". Because his son, who has committed a murder, is dead without having found the time to expiate, Þorsteinn does a *kárina* in his place (IS 141). I should be tempted to say: and so on... We have even, in the biskupa sögur, such disputations, the Middle Ages were so fond of, about very difficult questions, of the type: must we fast on a Christmass day if it falls on a friday (so in MGB 9)!

5) We spoke of the Cross, of the sign of the Cross, of crucifix. It is really astonishing to see at which extent they have been kept in great honour in Iceland. Van Hamel, studying the Christian habit of praying the arms crosswise, an attitude familiar to those who wanted to make penance or get satisfaction to a most urgent need, quotes the example of Alcuin putting to an end a fire by so doing on Saint Martin's tomb: *extendit se super terram in cruce* <sup>30</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> *Le XIIIe siècle européen*. Paris. PUF, 1968, p. 283

<sup>29</sup> let us notice, for the moment, IS 156, 196 or ÞSS 50.

<sup>30</sup> "God hanging on the tree" in *Acta philologica scandinavica*, VII, 1932-33p.284



Icelanders were aware of this practice : see the attitudes of Þorvaldr Snorrason and Byjólfur Kársson in IS 67 (or AS 8). IS says : *og lagði hendr frá sér í kross*, but AS precises : *svá sem til bænar*. Just before being beheaded, Þórdr Þorvaldsson lies on the ground *ok signdi sik* (IS 85). We remember that the cult of the Cross existed already since the times of the *landnåma*, and there are in Sturlunga Saga several places named Krossaness, Krossavík, Krosshólar, Krossholt, Krosssund. It is not possible to give the list, here, of all the mentions of the crucifix (*róðukross*). But let us, at least, notice IS 96 : Kálfr Guttormsson is to be beheaded, he lies on the ground, a crucifix beside him. The executioner warns him : Beware, Kálfr, do not lie so close to the cross, blood could splash it! JfB II 20 shows us a woman in prayer before a cross. As can be expected, bishop Guðmundr Arason was a kind of specialist of this practice. For instance, to protect fishermen against the *flagó* Selkolla, he raises a beacon (*hafnarmark*) in the shape of a cross (*hafnarkross*, JGB 21).

6) It would take a very long study if I wanted, now, to indicate all the references to alms, charity and good works in the *samtíðarsögur*. This too belonged to the normal way of living of the Middle Ages. I do not know really if the institution of the *hreppar* existed before the christianization, or not. In any case, the Church adopted most willingly the practice. Taking care of the *ómagar*, for instance, was felt as a strict duty<sup>31</sup>. I count at least twenty examples of the fact, IS 145 precising that the *Sauðafell bær* provided for fourteen *ómagar* ! Of course, a close reading of the Diplomatarium Islandicum would be far more eloquent here<sup>32</sup>. Suffices here to quote T. Þorhallsson : "The Catholic Church modified completely the way of thinking of the Icelanders in this respect, on a few generations. They gave, most willingly, great properties to Church, so that it could fulfill pious works<sup>33</sup>". I simply remark that þSB 60 introduces a *bondi* who is *ólmusugodr*.

7) I prefer to insist a little on a practice which seems to me the best illustration of what I am trying to demonstrate, the habit of making vows. Once more, we are here, indeed, in the Middle Ages and I have to add that, like in some other cases I mentioned above, the link may be easy and natural with pagan practices. In a very pragmatic religion as the Old Nordic one is supposed to have been<sup>34</sup>, offering something to a god or to God in exchange for some

<sup>31</sup> good instances in StS 15, 16, PGG 11, GSD/, HSS 14, 15, 17, IS 3, 59, 145

<sup>32</sup> some hints at this subject are given in my book (see note 3 above) in the printed edition, pp. 279-280.

<sup>33</sup> "Ómagahald, matgjafir o.fl." in *Skirnir* CX, 1936, pp. 123-132

<sup>34</sup> I tried to study this aspect in Le Christ des Barbares. Le monde nordique (IXe-XIIIe siècle). Paris. Editions du Cerf. 1987, pp. 17-75

expected benefits is rather well attested<sup>35</sup>. But we have such a number of vows in our texts that it is excluded that the fact would appear by chance. I count some one hundred and fifty vows in the *samtíðarsögur*, generally in close connexion with one of the practices we have mentioned above (prayers, fast, alms).

Some of them are very complex. So, in PSB 12, to stop a famine, one should sing every day three Pater, one will give to the poor once a week all the milk of the ewes and a truss hay by cow one possesses and one mörk flour per person<sup>36</sup>. "Hey þú, inn heilagi Jón byskup (says one Narfi who is threatened to suffer shipwreck) ef þú mætt þat óðlast af guði fyrir þitt árnáðarorð, at vér komim í dag heily ok höldnu í þá höfn, er næst er bæ mínum, þá mun ek gefa hátíðardag þinn fátækum mönnum mjólk þá alla, er frá kúum mínum kemr, ok efa aldri um þína göfugliga verðleika" (JSH II 36). The contents of these vows is, in general : gifts to the poor or to the church, fasts, various devotions and having masses sung for the rest of the soul of one's parent or friend. As for the gifts, they range from the simplest (one ell *vaðmál* for instance) to the most sumptuous (one cow, GSD 14) with amusing details : a candle as long as half the size of the poor dropsical man (PSB 47)<sup>37</sup>.

I shall end with some small details which do not belong to the above categories and appear all of a sudden in a sentence : they are the true reflection of folklife in its spontaneity. The young Guðmundr Arason, when he is a child, plays the bishop with mitre, crook and altar (PGG 4). The consecration of a new church is always described with great care<sup>38</sup>. And the texts of the *samtíðarsögur* give us, *en passant*, with a kind of pleasure, details about things irrelevant to their main subject, but interesting on religious grounds : thus, PSB 9 speaks of the way of making wine for mass out of *kraekiber*, pSB 5 discusses amourosly some detail of the ecclesiastical code like marrying priest porláktr porhallsson to a widow.

If I had had place and time, I should have developped here some other points which interest the theme of this paper. For instance, one would be highly interested by a study of

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<sup>35</sup> I could as well point to my article "Le culte dans la religion nordique ancienne" in *Inter-Nord* N°13-14, décembre 1974, pp. 223-243, or to *Yggdrasill. La religion des anciens Scandinaves*. Paris. Payot. 2d ed. 1992 pp.152 ssqq.

<sup>36</sup> JfB III 7 is still more complicated : feed five poor people, sing five times the whole psalter, say prayer : *Deus qui populo tuo*, make abstinence six days and five nights before St Þorláktr's day, fast on the sixth night, give one half-mörk to Skálaholt and go there in pilgrimigel

<sup>37</sup> see also pSB 25, JfB II 12, 19

<sup>38</sup> PGG 7, IS 37, 183, ÞSK 47, ÞSB 48, JfB I 3, H 10

the cult of saints according to the *samtíðarsögur*<sup>39</sup> (with the habit of referring to an event after the saint's day it came out), or the devotions towards angels, or the part the devil plays in our texts (with a particular emphasis on hell) . I count more than one hundred and fifty saints who can have been worshipped in Iceland, according to the *samtíðarsögur*. I could even say, without having here the possibility of demonstrating the fact, that the cult of the saints has been far more developed in Iceland than in the other nordic countries. And do look at some details like nicknames : the *samtíðarsögur* propose an *Ásgeirr araprestr*, one *Runólfr amma* (that is to say anima), one *Bagal-Már*, one *Biskup-Börkr*, one *Jón engill*, one *Jón hálfprestr*, one *Oddr oremus*, several *Prest-something* (*Jóan, Oddr, Valdi*), etc...

Some important reflexions could equally concern the cult of relics, as living in Iceland as everywhere in the Christian world, or the pilgrimages. Or the particular devotion attached to the Virgin Mary. Or the respect due to the Holy Spirit. But I have spoken enough, I think, to convince you that the very detail of everyday's life in Iceland in the XIIth and XIIIth centuries proves that Christian religion was deeply rooted in the souls and consciences.

You will say that my reflexions are valuable for the authors - known or unknown - of the *samtíðarsögur*. *Islendinga saga*, for instance, illustrates the mentality of *Sturla pordarson*, not necessarily that of the average Icelander in the end of the XIIIth century. I have already answered that such details as those we have seen seem to belong to the field of reflexes more than to the one of deliberate and conscious will. I feel something like a total assimilation in such nicknames - since I spoke precisely of them - like *Kirkju-Grímr* (because he is a coward and seeks refuge in churches every time he thinks he is threatened) or *porgils pafill*!

Although the matter is more and more discussed now, I think one has not sufficiently studied the audience of the sagas at the time they were written and publicly read. The men and the women who attended such sessions or read such books were, as I tried to show, "good" Christians with the whole amount of images, feelings and thoughts belonging to Church. They lived of their religion, with their own temper, of course : this is the reason why we do not find, practically, any case of fanaticism<sup>40</sup>, and why it is difficult to discover such exaggerations or pathos as is very common in the rest of the Christian world, and the relative absence of

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<sup>39</sup> this point and the following ones are discussed in the book already quoted in notes 3 and 32, pp. 283-304.

<sup>40</sup> the two cases I find are GSD 18 and IS 24 (but they may come from a will of imitating "continental" models! )

mysticism or of spirituality is probably due to the Scandinavian dislike for abstract matters! But nothing, absolutely nothing authorizes us to declare that there was a resistance against Church or a distance towards christianism in Iceland. The authors of *samtíðarsögur* and their audience thought and felt in quality of Christians. And their true heroes are Þorlákr, Jón and Guðmundr, especially the last one : they have given birth to a literature which surpass, at least in length, considerably the "lay" *samtíðarsögur*.

Which is tantamount to saying that *Byskupa sögur*, ( and, of course, *Heilagra manna sögur*, *Póstola sögur* ) and even most of the texts included in *Sturlunga saga* are like our cathedrals : they are living stones.

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List of the abbreviations employed in the text :

GSA : Guðmundar saga Arasonar (in *Byskupa sögur*)  
GSD : Guðmundar saga dýra  
H : Hungrvaka  
HSS : Hrafnas saga Sveinbjarnarsonar  
Hp : Haukdoela þáttur  
IS : Íslendinga saga  
JGB : Jarleinabók Guðmundar Byskups  
JSH I and II : Jóns saga Helga I and II (according to Guðni Jónsson's edition)  
JpB I, II and III : Jarleinabók Þorláks byskups I, II and III  
MGB : Midsaga Guðmundar byskups  
Op : Oddaverja þáttur  
PGG : Prestssaga Guðmundar góða  
PSB : Páls saga byskups  
StS : Sturlu saga  
SvS : Svínfellinga saga  
pSB : Þorláks saga byskups  
pSH : Þorgíls saga ok Hafliða  
pSK : Þórdar saga kakala  
pSS : Þorgíls saga skarda