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“An eye for an eye?” The Church and revenge in saga literature.

Introduction

There is a tendency in some critical saga studies to speak of texts such as *Brennu-Njáls saga* as depicting the change from the old, pagan ethic of revenge to the new, Christian ethic of forgiveness and grace.¹ However, this conception cannot always be supported by the texts themselves, and often indicates a lack of awareness of how very different medieval assimilations of the Christian message could be from some modern ones. This paper explores aspects of the depiction of the early Northern Church in saga literature, with particular reference to its involvement in, and attitude to, revenge. It also outlines some official, non-fictional, attitudes to revenge and the Church's participation therein.

Christian Revenge?

One might expect the Icelandic Church's attitude to revenge to follow that of the Bible, perhaps based on such passages as in *Romans* ch. 12, where the Apostle Paul (quoting *Deuteronomy* 32: 35) says:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.

Indeed, this seems to be the attitude in parts of the *Homiliubók*:

Dominus let eige hefna sín: ne veria síc þa es hann vas bondlapr. oc bundeN af gyþingom. heldr grædde hann eyra þræls eiNs er petrus hafpe af hogvet. Scammese oc þa liótr ofstope váR. oc hefnese me es ver gerom við ovine óra alt þat er ver megom. oc viljom þat mart gera es ver megom eige. En dominus wár. es alt má gera þat es hann vill. hefnde sin eige sialf: oc lét eige aþra hefna. heldr veltte hann góþgemeng ovinom sínom. oc greódde þaN es særp vas. hversom megom vér verþa líþer crists. ef vét georom oss aþra goto en hann geck fyrer.²

Here, Christ's behaviour serves as an *exemplum* for Christians, and forgiveness and kindness, not revenge, is what is expected of the Icelandic Christian. However, of course the picture is much more complicated than this in medieval Iceland. That revenge will be exercised is taken for granted in secular texts such as the *Konungs skuggsjá* and *Hirðskrá* and in law-codes like *Grágás*. These texts, however, refer primarily to individual, secular revenge – it is a different matter when it comes to the involvement of clerics in vengeance and litigation.

¹ Studies which fit this formulation either explicitly or implicitly include: L. Lönnroth, "The Noble Heathen: A Theme in the Sagas," *Scandinavian Studies* 41 (1969), 1-29; T.M. Andersson, "The Displacement of the Heroic Ideal in the Family Sagas," *Speculum* 45 (1970), 575-593.

² "The Lord did not let himself be avenged nor defended when he was seized and bound by the Jews. Rather he healed the ear of a certain slave which Peter had cut off. Our ugly arrogance and revengefulness is then shamed (?) when we do to our enemies all that we can, and desire greatly to do many things that we cannot. But our Lord, who could do all he wishes, did not avenge himself, and did not let others avenge him. Rather he granted kindness to his enemies, and healed that one who was wounded. How can we become Christ's followers, if we take a different path from the one he took?" *Homilii-bók*, ed. T. Wisén. Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1872.

Change in the Church

Orri Vésteinsson's book, *The Christianization of Iceland: Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000-1300*,³ makes very clear how this period in the Icelandic Church saw the gradual disentanglement of ecclesiastical and secular power. At the beginning of the period, clerics were heavily involved in legal prosecutions, the overseeing of fighting, or even participated in fighting themselves. Orri details the legal dealings of Bishop Klængr Þorsteinsson (1152-1176), who, in 1160, was asked to arbitrate between Sturla Þórðarson in Hvammur and Einarr Þorgilsson in Staðarhöll. Bishop Klængr took the part of Einarr, his second cousin, with whose sister he had had an affair. However, when in 1170 the enmity was still unabated, Bishop Brandr stepped in to arbitrate, this time taking the part of Sturla, his first cousin once removed. Brandr was heavily involved in politics and arbitration. In 1190, he had seized control of a church-farm because the owner died and he deemed the sons incapable of taking over. By 1200, the sons felt they were old enough to take charge, but Brandr refused to relinquish control, and they asked Chieftain Þngmundr sneis to help them occupy the farmstead and prepare for battle. Bishop Brandr assembled a force, which marched on the church-farm under the command of his grandson Kolbeinn Arnórsson and Hafr Brandsson (possibly his illegitimate son). The fighting was averted, but this does indicate the way that bishops were functioning much like chieftains at this period. Reform began under Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson (1161-1188).

Ecclesiastical Reform

Eysteinn's archiepiscopal letter of *circa* 1173 clearly and specifically attempts to remove clerics from the field of legal prosecution, and even retributive violence. He states:

Nu kenne menn aller. þeir sem menn hafa drept. þa fyrribyð ek þeim Guds þjónustv gjörð. fra hinne fystu uigslu til emnar eftstu. og framleidis fyrribyð ek öllum ken[n]e monnum soknar mal.   hendur sier at taka nema orvðssum frændvm sinvm. eda bömmvm. föðvr lausvm. eda konum vendarlausum. og þo felausvm. og fyrri gudz saker...⁴

However, immediately following this, the archbishop makes it clear that violence against clerics by laymen will not be tolerated, such acts not being susceptible to absolution except by intervention of the Pope or archbishop:

hverr er sa j gudz banne og papans er misþyrmer kenne manni med heiptugri hendi. og ma hvergi lavsn taka vm drap. eda afhög[g] ken[n]e manz eda mungs. nema þar sem papinn er. en af oss fyrri sar og lost. eda bardaga.⁵

Nevertheless, it is apparent that these reforms took time to take hold, if indeed they were ever wholly successful. Both Orri Vésteinsson and Jón Jóhannesson (in his *Íslendinga saga*, translated as *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth*)⁶ are pessimistic about the effectiveness of the

³ Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴ 'Now let all men know, those who have killed men, that I forbid them God's services, from the first ordination to the uppermost, and further I forbid all clerics to prosecute lawsuits [lit. take into their own hands] except on behalf of their aged kinsmen, or children, orphans, or defenceless women, and yet [they must do it] without money, and for God's sake...' in *Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI)*, vol. 1, ed. J. Sigurðsson. Kaupmannahöfn: S.L. Möller, 1857, p.222.

⁵ 'each one is under the interdict of God and of the Pope who maltreats clerics with vengeful hands, and none may take absolution for the killing or striking of a cleric or monk, except where the Pope is concerned, but from us for wounds and lust or fighting.' *DI* 1, p.222.

⁶ J. Jóhannesson, *Íslendinga saga*. Reykjavík: Almenna bókafélagi, 1956; tr. H. Bessason. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1974.

reforms, and this is borne out by the later archiepiscopal letters. Around 1179, Archbishop Eysteinn had to write again, this time to support Bishop Þorlákr's institutions, which apparently were being disregarded because of the fact that they were new laws (*helldur til nymælis*).⁷ Then, around 1180, he writes not only to the bishops, but also to the chieftains Jón Loftsson and Gizurr Hallsson, making it clear that clerics should not bear arms, but that the chieftains should be supporting the discipline of the bishops.⁸

Change had still not occurred by 1189, when Archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson (1189-1205) felt he had to repeat his predecessor's instructions. He writes to Bishops Þorlákr and Brandr that: "Kenne menn bere eigi vopn. og skulv vera fridsamer vit olærda menn."⁹ He also re-emphasises that clerics should not litigate on behalf of anyone other than defenceless relatives. His following letter also repeats directions about clerical immunity, and forbids ecclesiastical involvement in violence and litigation.¹⁰

Orri Vésteinsson suggests that these archiepiscopal letters of the late twelfth century only began to have their effect in the thirteenth century, when it gradually came to be perceived that clerics were "benevolent and trustworthy", and increasingly involved in reconciliation.¹¹ However, one must also take account of the work of Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, which shows that canon law and the Niðarós diocese were bringing to bear strong influence on the Icelandic church in this period, and that canon law instigated certain changes in judicial matters such as the legal protection of individuals being taken over by official institutions of Church and State.¹²

The implication of the evidence we have just surveyed, therefore, is that clerics up until this period were heavily involved in all kinds of violence and litigation. Turning to the sagas, whether *Íslendinga sögur* or *samtíðar sögur*, we can get a fuller picture of what kind of situation the archbishops were addressing. We must of course always remember that the degree of historicity and fictionality within both kinds of saga texts is very variable, and it is not in fact my intention to claim any direct relation to actuality for the discussion which follows. Rather it will serve as a window onto the world-view of certain Icelandic saga authors, focussing particularly on their perceptions of the interaction of Church and State in the matter of revenge.

Clerics and Revenge in Saga Texts

In chapter 49 of *Laxdæla saga*, Kjartan throws down his weapons so that Bolli can slay him, in a gesture sometimes compared to those of medieval Christian martyrs:

Síðan kastaði Kjartan vápnum ok vildi þá eigi verja sik, en þó var hann lítit sár, en ákafliga vígmóðr.¹³

The author of *Njáls saga*, too, is sometimes seen as validating the new Christian way of peace over the old heathen way of vengeance (famously exemplified by the conduct of Hallr of Síða, who, in the interests of peace, waives both revenge and compensation for his son's killing). Lars

⁷ *Dfi* i, p.259.

⁸ *Dfi* i, pp.262-264.

⁹ "Clerics should not bear weapons, and should be peaceful toward laymen." *Dfi* i, p.288.

¹⁰ *Dfi* i, pp.290-291.

¹¹ O. Vésteinsson, *Christianization of Iceland*, p.234.

¹² G.Á. Grímsdóttir, "Um aðskipti erkbiskupa af íslenskum málefnum á 12. og 13. öld," *Saga* 20 (1982), 28-62.

¹³ "Then Kjartan cast down his weapons and would not defend himself, and yet he was little wounded, but terribly weary from fighting." *Laxdæla saga*, ed. E.Ó. Sveinsson. Íslensk Fornrit V. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1934, p.154. The comparison is made despite the fact that a more traditional martyr, such as St Edmund in *Ælfric's Life of St Edmund* refuses to fight from the beginning.

Lönnroth, for instance, argues that the author of *Njáls saga* had grown up with the older law-code *Grágás*, but was influenced by the later *Járnsíða*:

The author of *Njála* probably believed that the new system was in better accord with Christian doctrine than the old one; but he was obviously fond of *Grágás* and the pagan society out of which it had developed, and he wanted to find Christian excuses for this lost world.¹⁴

Therefore, according to Lönnroth, the narrator quotes the old law, makes the ones who respect it either Christians or noble heathens “acting in the spirit of the new law by taking revenge only when they were prompted by justice, atoning for their sins like any good Catholic, sometimes even abstaining from seeking legal compensation when higher interests were at stake.”¹⁵

However, we must place this against *Njáls saga* chapter 129, where Njáll refuses to leave his burning farmstead at least in part because he can neither avenge his sons nor live in shame, however martyrlike other aspects of his death may seem. He says: “Eigi vil ek út ganga, því at ek em maðr gamall ok lítt til búinn at hefna sona minna, en ek vil eigi lifa við skömm.”¹⁶ Further, in the same saga, Ámundi inn blindi (‘the blind’) is miraculously awarded his sight for just long enough to avenge his father with an axe in the head of his slayer. Lýtingr has refused to pay him compensation, and Ámundi says “ef ek væra heileygr báðum augum, at hafa skylda ek annathvært fyrir fõður minn fëbætr eða mannhefndir, enda skipti guð með okkr!”¹⁷ Immediately, his eyes open, and he cries “Lofaðr sé guð, dróttinn minn! Sér nú, hvat hann vill.” After Ámundi has killed Lýtingr, his eyes close once more, “ok var hann all ævi blindr síðan.”¹⁸ It can be argued that, in choosing to take revenge rather than the other option he mentions, compensation, Ámundi has misinterpreted God’s will and his subsequent blindness is a punishment of his vengeance. However, it is equally possible that the quick succession of events – prayer, miracle, revenge, then blindness once more – implies that divine intervention was necessary to restore the ‘right’ state of affairs, and that blindness is merely Ámundi’s normal state, not a judgement upon him – he certainly is not represented as complaining about his lot, only as celebrating his chance to restore equity. Hildigunnr’s inciting of Flosi in *Njáls saga*, ch. 116, further complicates the matter. She says:

“Skýt ek því til guðs ok góðra manna, at ek sceri þik fyrir alla krapta Krists þíns ok fyrir maundóm ok karlmennsku þína, at þú hefnir allra sára þeira, er hann hafði á sér dauðum, eða heit hvers manns niðingr ella.”¹⁹

Flosi’s oft-quoted retort “eru köld kvenna ráð” (‘cold are the counsels of women,’ p.292) and the insistent personal deixis in Hildigunnr’s speech (*Krists þíns; karlmennsku þína*) make it clear that Hildigunnr is enlisting the authority of the male, Christian God in her quest for vengeance. Although it might seem that she represents the ‘old way of vengeance’, kept alive by women, she equally evidently does not associate the Christian God with an ethic of forgiveness. This is a

¹⁴ L. Lönnroth, *Njáls saga: A Critical Introduction*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, p.147.

¹⁵ Lönnroth, *Njáls saga*, *ibid.*

¹⁶ ‘I do not wish to go out, for I am an old man and little equipped to avenge my sons, and I do not wish to live in shame,’ *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. E.Ó. Sveinsson. Íslenzk Fornrit XII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1954, p.330.

¹⁷ ‘if I were whole in both eyes, that I would have either compensation or blood-revenge for my father, and so may God judge between us!’ *Njáls saga*, ch. 106, p.273.

¹⁸ ‘Praised be God, my Lord! It can now be seen what he wishes’; ‘and he was blind all his life afterwards,’ *ibid.*

¹⁹ ‘I call God and all good men to witness that I adjure you with all the powers of your Christ and your manhood and manliness, that you avenge all those wounds which [Höskuldr] had upon him when dead, or else be called every man’s niðingr.’ *Njáls saga*, p.291.

point in the saga, nonetheless, where the relationship between Christianity, vengeance and gender is less than clear, abetted by the traditional external focalisation of the saga narrative – the author avoiding explicit intrusion which might guide the reader’s judgement.²⁰ A full analysis of Christianity and revenge in *Njáls saga* would demand a book in itself, and is far beyond the scope of this paper. In *Njála*, however, it does seem that God may not always be averse to individuals taking vengeance. Certainly there is no clear denunciation of ‘just’ revenge, and, in fact, the family sagas often present a similarly mixed attitude to revenge in a Christian context.

In *Þorvalds þáttur víðforla*, Þorvaldr kills two men who have composed an obscene poem about him and the bishop, implying that they have had sexual relations and the bishop has borne Þorvaldr’s children. However, when Þorvaldr tells the bishop about the killing, the latter rebukes him. Þorvaldr gives as his excuse that he “þolda eigi, at þeir kölluðu okkr raga.”²¹ However, the bishop replies:

“Þat var lítil þolraun, þó at þeir ‘ygi því á þik, at þú ættir börn, en þú hefir fært orð þeirra á verra veg, því at vel metta ek þera börn þín, þó at þú ættir nokkur. Eigi skyldi kristinn maðr leita at hefna sín sjálfir, þó at hann væri smáðr hatrliga, helðr at þola fyrir guðs sakir brizlí ok meingörðir vándra manna.”²²

Later, Heðinn – a man who spoke out effectively against the bishop’s preaching, leading to the utterance of the slanderous poem already mentioned – puts into the same harbour as Þorvaldr, and the latter takes a slave into the forest where they know Heðinn to be, ordering the slave to kill Heðinn. When the bishop is told, he says to Þorvaldr:

“Fyrir þetta víg skulu vit skilja, því at þú vilt seint láta af manndrápum.”²³

Bishop Friðrek goes to Saxony, and we are told that he dies there with *heilagleik* (‘holiness’) – an implicit commendation of his rigid line on vengeance and killing.²⁴

On the other hand, in *Knýtlinga saga* chapter 96, Archbishop Ózurr addresses Eiríkr’s troops before the impending battle:

“Nú er sú skript mín, at ek býð yðr í guðs nafni, at þér gangið fram karlmannliga ok berizk djarflega. Hugsið þat, sem er, at guði þykkja ekki betri huglausir menn en røskvir drengir. Skal ok eitt sinn hverr deyja.”²⁵

Eiríkr immediately follows this with an exhortation of his men, ending:

²⁰ Saga authors sometimes intrude implicitly via a number of devices, some of which are considered by Lönnroth in “Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas,” *Scandinavian Studies* 42 (1970), 157–189.

²¹ “could not endure that they called us effeminate,” in *Flateyjarbók*, ed. S. Nordal. 4 vols. Akraness: Flateyjarútgáfan, 1944–1945, I, p.299.

²² “That was a small trial of patience, though they lied about you that you had children – but you have taken their words in a worse way, for I could well bear [i.e. carry] your children, if you had some. A Christian man should not seek to avenge himself, though he might be reviled hatefully – rather suffer for God’s sake the reproach and offences of wicked men.” *ibid.*

²³ “Because of this killing we two must part, because you will be slow to leave off man-slaying.” *ibid.*, p.300.

²⁴ In stark contrast, we may add, with the attitude of the notorious Bishop Þangbrandr; not considered in detail here for reasons of space.

²⁵ “Now this is my penance, that I command you in God’s name that you go forth in manly fashion and bear yourselves boldly. Think upon this, which is that faint-hearted men do not seem better to God than brave champions. Also everyone has a time to die.” *Knýtlinga saga*, in *Damakonunga sögur*, ed. B. Gaðnason. Íslenzk Fornrit XXXV. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1982, p.260.

“Má oss hugkvæmt vera, hvers at hefna er.”²⁶

The implication is, thus, that the archbishop is underwriting this revenge – and, indeed, (*í guðs nafni*) bestowing God’s blessing upon it.

Still another attitude is shown in *Ljósvefninga saga* chapter 20, where Þorvaldr Höskuldsson wants to avenge his brother upon hearing of his death on his way back from Rome. Þorvaldr has presumably been on a pilgrimage, and declares:

“Ok verði nú sem Pétur postoli vill. Ætla ek þó, at betra væri, at ek koema eigi út apr.”²⁷

He suddenly develops severe eye pain, dies, and is thus prevented from taking a revenge which is implicitly both desired, but also perceived as sinful.

In *Egils þátr Stöu-Hallsonar*, the eponymous hero acts against King Óláfr’s will by releasing some prisoners, thus angering the king. Later, when Egill is ill and asks to see the king, Óláfr is unwilling to see him or show him mercy. However, Egill’s friend, Finnr Árnason, asks the king to let Egill benefit from his goodness, and Óláfr replies:

“...víst vilda ek þess guð biðja, at hann léði honum líf, til þess at ek mætta hefna honum ok fá fullt víti fyrir þat, at hann gerði.”²⁸

And, indeed, although his bark appears to be worse than his bite, Óláfr will not pardon Egill and receive him back into his friendship until he has managed to get his intransigently pagan father, Jarf Valgaut, to visit the king.

These passages – just a few of those which might be cited in this connexion – serve to highlight the far from consistent attitudes to the involvement of Christians and clerics in revenge evinced in the family sagas and associated *þættir*.

Clerics and Revenge in the Contemporary Sagas

The *Sturlunga saga* compilation as a whole, by the use of theme and the process of compilation itself, urges the necessity of moderation and mediation, lest the violence of the Age of the Sturlungs bring Iceland to ruin.²⁹ Within this broader context, however, it is possible to draw out separate strands of narrative that create a picture of the complex of attitudes which must have prevailed according to individuals’ different understandings of the place of vengeance in Christian society, reflected by their differing educational, theological and spiritual experience.³⁰

²⁶ “We must be mindful of what there is to avenge.” *ibid.*

²⁷ “And let it now happen as the Apostle Peter wishes. I think, though, that it would be better that I did not come back to Iceland.” *Ljósvefninga saga*, ed. B. Sigfússon. Íslenzk Fornrit X. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1940, p.103.

²⁸ “I will certainly pray that God grant him his life, so that I will have a chance to take my revenge and punish him fully for what he has done.” *Egils þátr Stöu-Hallsonar*, ch. 3, in *Harðar saga*, ed. Þ. Vilmundarson and B. Vilhjálmsson. Íslenzk Fornrit XIII. Reykjavík: Hið Íslenzka Fornritafélag, 1991, p.382.

²⁹ See S.N. Tranter, *Sturlunga Saga: The rôle of the Creative Compiler*. European University Studies: Ser. 1. German language and literature; vol. 941. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987; Ú. Bragason, “In the Scriptorium of *Sturlunga*’s Compiler,” in *International Scandinavian and Medieval Studies in Memory of Gerd Wolfgang Weber*, ed. M. Dallapiazza et al. Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 2000, pp.471-482.

³⁰ It is of course possible that the saga authors are misrepresenting to some extent the behaviour of their subjects according to their own biases. However, this is less of a problem in the *santiðar sögur* we are considering here, than in the family saga narratives, where anachronism and the portrayal of the past in terms coloured by the present are much more of an issue.

And if in the family sagas revenge is often condoned or exercised by Christians, in the *samtíðar sögur* (or ‘contemporary sagas’) contained in the *Sturlunga saga* compilation one finds numerous examples of priests and clergy taking part in revenge attacks, or killing opponents. In *Íslendinga saga*, chapter 21, for instance, a mass-priest deals an enemy a mortal blow, and the fight preceding this involves the deaths of clerics on both sides. One of the more notable unions of at least nominal Christianity and revenge, however, is found in chapter 44 of the same saga, in a verse attributed to Guðmundr skáld:

Stórlátr hefir Sturla,
– stend: hrafn á ná jafnan,
Kristr ræðr tír ok trausti –,
Tuma hefndir vel efnar.³¹

As Peter Hallberg comments: “The Prince of Peace has been assigned a place in the ideology of the blood-feud, and has been made to take over the old war-god Óðinn’s bird, the black guardian spirit of the battlefield.”³² Notably, immediately before this Bishop Guðmundr “bað guð hefna sín”³³ – that is, both parties are invoking God on their side, expecting divine aid in battle.

A more nuanced approach to revenge can be seen in *Þorgils saga skarða*. In chapter 17, when Þorgils asks Sturla for quarter, Hrafn interjects, saying that Sturla cannot give it, and will rather give him the same degree of quarter “sem þú ætlaðir Sturlu, frænda þínum.”³⁴ The narrator continues:

Í þessu settist upp Óláfr Þórðarson ok mælti: “Þat skuluð þit vita, Hrafn ok Sturla, ok allir þeir menn, er í flokki eru með þeim, at öll sú skömm, er þér gerið staðnum ok mér, skal ek á leggja slíka reiði, sem ek vinnst til. Skal ek þess biðja almáttkan guð ok inn helga Nícolausum biskup, er staðinn á, at hann hefni yðr sinni misgerða...”³⁵

Here, God is being invoked in a feud between kinsmen, and not just on one side. Later in the same chapter, Þorgils muses:

“Ek hugsa þat... hvé illt mér þyckir, ef engi skal saga ganga frá mér, áðr en þýrtr líf mitt, svá at ek geta ekki á hefniléið róit um svirvirðing þá, er mér er nú ger.”

That is, he wishes to take vengeance lest, in not doing so, his life be unworthy of posthumous fame. However, Þórðr replies:

“Ger eigi þat í hug þér. Ger þá sem þér sýnist, ef þú þiggir líf, en ef þú skalt nú deyja, þá er þér því betra. sem þú átt færnum ábyrggðum at svara.”³⁵

³¹ ‘Proud-minded Sturla has – the raven always stands on the corpse: Christ rules over glory and protection – fulfilled vengeance well for Tumi,’ *Íslendinga saga*, in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. J. Jóhannesson et al. 2 vols. Reykjavík: Sturlunguútgáfan, 1946, I, p.293.

³² Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, p.113.

³³ ‘asked God to avenge him,’ *Íslendinga saga*, p.293.

³⁴ ‘you intended for Sturla, your kinsman,’ *Þorgils saga skarða*, in *Sturlunga saga*, II, p.130.

³⁵ ‘At this Óláfr Þórðarson raised himself up and said, “You will both find this, Hrafn and Sturla, and all those men who are with them in the host, that all that shame, which you have done to the church place and to me, I shall repay with such anger as I can achieve. I shall pray to Almighty God and the holy Bishop Nícolaus, who holds the place, that he avenge upon you your misdeeds...”’ p.130f.

³⁶ ‘I was thinking... how ill! it will seem to me, if no saga shall be current about me before my life runs out, such that I cannot set out upon the way of vengeance for that dishonour which is now done to me’; ‘Do not have that in your mind.

There is a consciousness that present actions of revenge, however satisfying, may have eternal consequences – even thinking about revenge or wishing one could take it is a dangerous indulgence when one is about to die. Nevertheless, the implication of Þórðr's advice is that, if Þorgils in fact does not die, he can then resume thoughts of revenge, and even carry them out, presumably with the intention of repenting later, a pragmatic approach to religion which can seem characteristic of much secular medieval Christianity to modern sensibilities.

That Icelandic religious leaders were not supposed to take revenge seems to be implied in chapter 44, where Þorgils is planning to help Þorvarð attack Hrafn and Eyjólf, and asking Abbot Brand's advice as to how he should proceed. He at once makes it clear that: "mér er þat bannat at eiga nökkurn hlut í mannráðum eða nökkurs kyns ófriði."³⁷

Nonetheless, it is very evident how hard he finds it to obey the church's constraints on clergy, both in his careful omitting to command Þorgils *not* to act, and in his demeanour as he leaves the scene:

Spratt ábóti þá upp ok það, at verða skyldi guðs villi. Mæltu þá sumir menn, at honum hlypi kapp í kinn, – því at hann dreyrauðr á at sjá ok mælti þetta, er hann gekk í brotu: "Hart er þat, at vér ákulim bera frændr vára göfuga bótalausa fyrir bóndasonum, ok svá myndi þykkja Ormi, bróður mínum, ef hann lifði."³⁸

This seems to indicate at least in some areas a policy whereby clerics themselves were not supposed to countenance or become involved in violent feuds and revenge, but had a certain amount of leeway to turn a blind eye to the actions of laymen.³⁹ Nevertheless, zealous churchmen (such as Bishop Friðrek in *Þorvalds þáttur víðfjalla*) might still take a hard line on even secular revenge – perhaps citing Christ's non-violent stance of forgiveness in support of their exhortations, as in *Homilubók*.

Finally, the office of priest has a double implication in chapter 18 of *Guðmundar saga dýra*, where Snorri Snorrason and Þorsteinn, who is his brother and a priest, are about to be executed. They are both ready to die, but Snorri makes a request:

Do what you think fit if you receive your life, but if you must die now, then it will be the better for you, the less responsibility you have to answer for.' p.132.

³⁷ 'It is forbidden for me to have any part in plots against men's lives or any kind of hostilities,' p.174. Cf. Ælfric's *Life of St Edmund*, referred to above, where it is said that canon law (*de holigan canones*) forbids clerics' involvement in judgements which lead to executions, but the source of the rule is again not cited.

³⁸ 'The abbot then sprang up and bade that God's will should be done. Some men said then that zeal overcame him [lit. leapt into his cheek, i.e. flooded his face] – for he was blood-red to look at and said this, when he walked away: "It is hard that we must bear our noble kinsmen [being] without compensation before the sons of farmers, and so it would seem to Orm, my brother, if he lived,"' p.175.

³⁹ See, however, Marlene Ciklamini's article "The Christian Champion in *Íslendinga saga*: Eyjólf Kársson and Aron Hjörleifsson," *Euphorion* 82 (1988), 226-237. Here she argues: "In describing the life of Eyjólf Kársson and the youth of Aron Hjörleifsson, *Íslendinga saga* has set the champion into a Christian context. The narrative exemplified the lawlessness, pride, and vengefulness to which champions inclined and which disrupted community life. Nevertheless, by the mercy of God and with the aid of his vicar, the two champions were tamed to serve a purpose higher than that dictated by selfishness or pride... The end of their roles in *Íslendinga saga* thus coincides with their attainment of spiritual magnanimity or insight." (p.237)

"Þat vilda ek... at ek væra fyr: af lífi tekinn en Þorsteinn, því at ek treystumst honum betr, at hann mundi fyrirgefa yðr, þótt hann sjái mik af lífi tekinn."⁴⁰

The implication is evidently that, because Þorsteinn is a priest, he will forgive even the person whom he sees slay his own brother. Snorri, on the other hand, might not be able to endure this sight, and, presumably, wishes to die with a clean conscience and not with a thwarted desire for vengeance. The saga audience is then told:

Nú var Snorri fyrir höggvinn. Þat gerði Hámundr Ónundarson. Vigfúss Ónundarson kvað þat makligast, at hann vægi at Þorsteini, en talðist líla til fallinn, er hann var prestur. Fálki Dálksson kveðst fá mundu mann til þess, ok vá at honum Starkaðr inn seki.⁴¹

Thus, the office of priest at this time is such that only an already marginal and ostracised criminal is willing to shoulder the responsibility for killing one. Significantly, in the same chapter, Þorgrímr prevents the killing of a woman and her male child (*sveinbarn*), saying:

"Hvárki skal hér vinna á börnum né konum, þótt sjá sveinn verði oss öllum at bana."⁴²

Revenge is portrayed here as somewhat unpalatable, the avengers owing to scruples, and the threat of future vengeance or a feud is not a sufficient incentive to kill children. Although space forbids it here, the progressive entrenchment of religious attitudes and, to employ a well-known anthropological concept, the shift from a shame to a guilt culture, would repay close scrutiny in the historically transitional narratives of *Sturlunga saga*.

Conclusion

It is, of course, impossible to say exactly what *did* happen with regard to the taking of revenge by the historical clergy of Iceland. None of the written sources we have provides unadulterated historical evidence: the family sagas are, of course, primarily literary works based on historical events, and even the contemporary sagas betray literary shaping and ideological biases. Sources such as the laws, homilies, and archiepiscopal letters deal with the subject only sporadically, and they are predominantly normative, rather than descriptive. Moreover, the texts come from different geographical and temporal spheres, and the historical practices are likely to have varied according to place and time. The main consideration, however, is that practice (as opposed

⁴⁰ "I would wish... that I were put to death before Þorsteinn, for I trust to him better that he will forgive you, even if he sees me put to death." *Guðmundar saga dýra*, in *Sturlunga saga*, I, p.198.

⁴¹ 'Now Snorri was killed first. Hámundr Ónundarson did it. Vigfúss Ónundarson said it was most proper that he should strike down Þorsteinn, but he declared himself ill-disposed for it, since he was a priest. Fálki Dálksson said that they would be able to get a man for this, and Starkaðr the outlaw struck him down.' *ibid.*

⁴² "Neither women nor children shall be harmed here, even if this boy should become the slayer of us all." *ibid.*, p.199.

to intention, or duty) most certainly will have varied from individual to individual, according to the degree of religious zeal, socio-political ambition, and personal circumstance.