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Haraldur Hreinsson, *Force of Words: A Cultural History of Christianity and Politics in Medieval Iceland (11th–13th Centuries)*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. xiv + 328 pp. ISBN 9789004449572.

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Reviews

Haraldur Hreinsson, *Force of Words: A Cultural History of Christianity and Politics in Medieval Iceland (11th–13th Centuries)*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. xiv + 328 pp. ISBN 9789004449572.

As Haraldur Hreinsson rightly emphasises at the beginning of *Force of Words*, the first few centuries of Christianity in Iceland have been studied largely from the perspective of the practical uses of religion in the multifaceted contexts of political and social life. The early system of proprietary churches, what Haraldur calls the ‘Chieftain Church’, has been the core interest of scholars, particularly the value of these churches to the secular interests of Icelandic chieftains. *Force of Words* aims to remedy this situation by reading the earliest religious writings in Iceland — particularly the *Icelandic Homily Book* and translated hagiography — as a reflection of religious discourses, and interpret the historical period in light of these writings. Despite a number of flaws, the book manages to effectively highlight the gap in a conception of history that does not account for personal piety and the full corpus of religious writings to explain the worldviews of historical agents.

The first chapter of *Force of Words* effectively situates the book in both the historiographic and theoretical context. Orri Vésteinsson’s seminal 2000 monograph *The Christianization of Iceland* is, unsurprisingly, a major focus. *Force of Words* presents itself in part as a supplement to Orri’s work, layering cultural and religious elements over political and economic factors. The chapter presents the overall goal of the book as elucidating religious discourses through a close reading of neglected source texts, and in understanding this discourse from the perspective of empire and imperialism. These theoretical concepts of imperialism do come into play at several points in the rest of the book, but are never used quite as effectively as might be desired. More convincing is the identification of ‘new cultural history’ as a major starting point for the book, in its aim to more fully understand the cultural background and motivations of political actors.

The second chapter, ‘The Roman Church in Free State Iceland’ is massive in scope, and surveys many components of the history of Christianity in and around Iceland during the period in question. It begins by setting up the broad context, addressing the growth of papal power in the High Middle Ages, then the Christianisation of Scandinavia and Iceland, before proceeding to particular aspects of the Church and religious life in Iceland: monasteries, education, churches and their inventories, Latinity and literacy, and the make-up of Icelandic clergy and the relationship between different types of priests. The sheer breadth of this chapter is its biggest weakness; there is little room for much analysis on most subjects, and

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Haraldur must often depend on summaries of past scholarship. In places this provides a good opportunity for updating dated conclusions: the emphasis on the practical needs of clerical education and the variety of levels of Latin literacy (pp. 95–101) is very insightful, as is the reminder of the need for new scholarship on early Icelandic hagiography and its sources (pp. 68–72). However, in other places, gaps in the research are apparent: the main source for the church book collections is Orri Vésteinsson's 1990 BA thesis, rather than either the church charters themselves or Tryggvi Oleson's classic series of articles on the subject, and the interpretation that these church libraries were unusually small and poor thus comes off as problematically simplistic (p. 68).

The third chapter, 'Force of Words: Constructing a Christian Society', is arguably the core of the book. Here *Force of Words* presents both its most original work and its most thorough and close primary-source analysis. Grounding itself in hagiography and sermons, above all the Old Norse-Icelandic translations of the lives of the apostles, the book describes the key themes and concepts of the religious discourses that informed and helped drive the history of medieval Iceland: authority and hierarchy, 'others' and the enemies of the church, and 'peace' as understood by a church concerned with hegemonic, universal dominion. The only limitation of this chapter is that the discursive ideas Haraldur draws forth are fairly basic, and the main argument of each section is often that medieval Iceland was largely conventional in its religious worldview and ideology. This is, of course, valuable foundational work, but at the end of the chapter the reader is left longing for a deeper reading of the sources, and more exploration of how these stories were adapted or changed in their Icelandic versions.

The fourth chapter, 'Rome Goes North', gives a brief diachronic historical view of Christianity in Iceland from the missionary period to Bishop Guðmundr Arason in the early thirteenth century, attempting to make use of the insights of the previous chapter to reinterpret some events of this period. It maintains some of the primary-source focus of the third chapter, and among the highlights is the use of eleventh-century poetry to explore how Icelanders of the time might have conceptualised and responded to Roman and papal authority (pp. 237–41). In places, however, the drive to find historical reflections of religious discourses results in some uncritical reading of sources, notably the attempt to reconstruct the personality of Bishop Gizurr Ísleifsson and use it to interpret the alleged peacefulness of his tenure (pg. 242–46). The book finishes with an appendix of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscripts of religious texts, a potentially valuable reference tool for students and non-specialists.

Force of Words is based on Haraldur Hreinsson's 2019 doctoral dissertation from the University of Münster. The book gives the impression of being a minimally-altered version of this dissertation, and the reader is left wishing for a bit more care in its adaptation. Small grammatical and stylistic errors appear that may have been addressed with more thorough editing, but these are minor and overall the language and proofing is excellent — though in one footnote six Icelandic monasteries are said to have been founded between 1130 and 1150, when in fact only the Benedictine house of Þingeyrar was founded during this time (p. 55, note 71). The bibliography alphabetises Icelandic authors according to their patronym, which can be frustrating for readers used to the standard convention of alphabetising by first name. More problematic is the fact that the bibliography does not distinguish between authors and editors, which can be very confusing.

Despite these issues, *Force of Words* is written with an extremely valuable goal in mind: improving our conception of medieval Icelandic history with a better understanding of the

religious discourses of that place and time, and it achieves that goal, at least in part.

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