

Anderson, Joel D. 2023. *Reimagining Christendom: Writing Iceland's Bishops into the Roman Church 1200-1350*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. VIII + 240 pages. ISBN 9781512822823.

As is frequently reiterated in *Reimagining Christendom: Writing Iceland's Bishops into the Roman Church 1200-1350*, the concept of Christendom is open to interpretation, debate, and reinterpretation, a fact key to understanding the relationship between periphery and centre in the medieval Latin Church. Anderson introduces his discussion of this dynamic of reinterpretation and reimagining with the example of Icelandic hagiographers grappling with the apparent flaws of their local saints, particularly the fact St. Jón Ögmundarson had remarried after the death of his first wife, which made him a bigamist in the eyes of the contemporary Church. *Reimagining Christendom* explores the ways in which the very levers of papal power were used to contrary purpose by Icelandic churchmen, to write their own conception of Christendom. Local practices, customs, and bishops were given dispensation and exception via the same textual tools that the papal court was using to centralize and consolidate its power in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Through this argument, the book aims to nuance narratives about the institutionalization of the Church in the North and describe the agency employed by local churches and churchmen in their relationships to papal authority.

Among the core strengths of *Reimagining Christendom* is its use of a variety of scholarly discourses and ideas to contextualize how Icelandic authors imagined a papacy which accommodated their needs on the periphery. Anderson's effective situating of his own arguments within the larger scope of medieval studies discourses is something often not effectively done in Old Norse studies and medieval Icelandic history. For example, in the introduction, the concept of "imagined community" and the work of Benedict Anderson provide a very useful frame to the discussion of medieval concepts of Christendom. Throughout the book, the extensive body of scholarship on the development and effects of textual authority on the medieval world is used to great effect in interpreting the limited sources for this same dynamic in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Iceland.

Chapter 1 of *Reimagining Christendom* situates the ecclesiastical problems and conflicts of the Icelandic and Norwegian churches at the end of the twelfth century within the context of papal history, specifically the activities of Innocent III after his election in 1198. It closely examines the local Icelandic accounts of *Páls saga* and *Sverris saga* as well as the writings of Innocent III

regarding the ongoing conflict between King Sverrir and Archbishop Eiríkr of Niðaróss over royal authority and the Church. During this dispute Sverrir was excommunicated, yet continued to rule, and was the source of many divided loyalties among local churchmen. Bishop Páll Jónsson of Skálholt, the protagonist of *Páls saga*, represents the Icelandic perspective on this conflict, as a successful and seemingly uncontroversial bishop who nonetheless was a supporter of Sverrir. Anderson highlights how the same documents and resources were used by both sides of this dispute to make opposing arguments. Even as the papal curia exercised power and established its authority on the periphery through authoritative documents, the possibility of forgery, misuse, and misrepresentation of papal bulls meant that they could be readily used for the opposite purpose, notably with Sverrir himself claiming to have obtained papal bull declaring support for his rule. Icelandic writers could characterize the papacy as a passive source of authority, legitimization, and exception to the customs and laws of the Church—no problem or flaw in a respected or venerated Icelandic bishop or Norwegian king was insurmountable when papal dispensation was an option, even if that dispensation had to be “imagined” or acquired by dubious means. This double-edged quality of the textual authority exercised by the papacy and the Church as a whole continues as the major theme throughout *Reimagining Christendom*.

Chapter 2 turns to the two Icelandic saints, Þorlákr Þórhallson and Jón Ögmundarson, and the negotiation of the problems and difficulties in legitimizing their sanctity. Anderson emphasizes not only how canon law shaped Icelandic views of their place in the world and the Church, but also how the law was perceived of as full of exceptions which made a place for local distinctiveness and individual needs. The chapter explores the stories of people doubting Þorlákr’s sanctity and changing their mind after miraculous punishment, and it emphasizes how this could reflect real doubt within the archdiocese of Niðaróss, and a pressure for the followers for St. Þorlákr to defend his legitimacy. St. Jón’s remarriage after the death of his first wife represented a major sin, that of bigamy, which almost certainly could not have received dispensation at the time he was alive or the time he was accepted as a saint in Iceland, yet his hagiographers presented him as having received papal dispensation in Rome. Anderson spends a significant amount of time discussing the wider discourses around bigamy and their relevance to Jón’s situation; the example of a bigamist in Sicily c. 1200 is used to great effect to highlight how issues with enforcing clerical celibacy were prominent throughout the Christian world, not only in Iceland. Here, as elsewhere, Anderson’s arguments are strengthened by the scope of *Reimagining Christendom* and the repeated use of examples from outside Iceland to show the shared discourses and dynamics across the Latin West.

Chapter 3 turns to the case of the early thirteenth-century bishop Guðmundr Arason, whose tenure as bishop was full of conflict not only with the secular leaders of his diocese but also many of his fellow churchmen. With Guðmundr's distinctly controversial life and activities, Anderson argues that the efforts to use and manipulate papal authority to defend his legacy, as well as to promote his sanctity, are still more clear in the sources than in the cases of Jón and Þorlákr. Special focus is placed on a story in the late C and D redactions of *Guðmundar sögur*, concerning a delegation being sent to the papal curia to obtain a suspiciously vague dispensation for Guðmundr. This story is contextualized in fourteenth-century Icelandic efforts to canonize Guðmundr, in comparable literary narratives, and in more historical accounts of petitioners at the papal court—including the fascinating observation that petitioners actually did sometimes attempt to physically throw their petitions at the pope. Further emphasis is placed on the materiality of papal bulls and their status as floating, independent sources of authority, easily detached from their original context and reused for other purposes.

Chapter 4 moves on to the activities of the late thirteenth-century reformer Árni Þorláksson, bishop of Skálholt, as seen in *Árna saga*, and the effects of and response to the collection of crusades' taxes in the archdiocese of Niðaróss. Even more than previous chapters, this chapter effectively presents the perspectives and activities of Bishop Árni and his direct superior, Archbishop Jón rauði of Niðaróss, in a wider historical perspective, and it charts their role in the development of new networks of authority through the development of more regular papal taxation. It also argues convincingly that Árni and Jón rauði had opposing perspectives: Árni, the Icelandic bishop, is presented in his saga as dutifully attempting to channel and apply papal authority, while Jón rauði, unlike earlier archbishops of Niðaróss, appears to have been more concerned with his local and personal needs than his Icelandic subordinate. The conclusion of *Reimagining Christendom* argues that the views of Bishop Árni as presented in *Árna saga* represent a minority, but still important, view among Icelandic churchmen. Andersson emphasizes the size of the Niðaróss archdiocese and the difficulties that communication and travel across such long distances caused for the complex process of tax-collection, which had a profound impact on the relationship between local churchmen and the papacy.

The fifth and final chapter turns to the early fourteenth century and the northern Icelandic diocese of Hólar in *Lárentíus saga*; an earlier version of this chapter was published in the 2019 issue of *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* as "Ecclesiastical Government, *Carte Blanche*: Filling Out Forms in *Lárentíus Saga Biskups*." What previous chapters explored from a wider view, chapter 5 examines from the immediate perspective of the protagonist, Lárentíus Kálffson, in the years before he became bishop of Hólar, trying, and frequently failing, to transmit archepiscopal authority via documents. The story of

Archbishop Jörundr sending Lárentíus on a visitation to Iceland with blank documents already affixed with the archbishop's seal, which eventually led to Lárentíus being charged with forgery, is discussed in terms of the wider medieval discourses around forgery and differing medieval views on the legitimacy of sealing blank documents.

As with any work of this scope, *Reimagining Christendom* is not without minor errors. At the beginning of chapter 2, it is stated that St. Þorlákr studied at the University of Paris in the 1150s, well before the university existed. And while the writing, style, and structure of the book is overall a strength—*Reimagining Christendom* is certainly more entertaining to read than many books of ecclesiastical history—the unwavering focus on its core thesis throughout all 240 pages can make the book feel repetitive in places. Such quibbles aside, *Reimagining Christendom* is an impressive work which makes very persuasive and valuable arguments; it will undoubtedly shape future scholarship on the development of the church, textual culture, and the interaction between different worldviews in medieval Iceland.

Ryder Patzuk-Russell
The Centre for Nordic and Old English Studies
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