

Some impressions after a quick visit to Iceland

I begin by stating what may seem a truism but is part of my first impressions. Iceland is not a place hanging somewhere between the main known continents, some remote place near the North Pole, somehow (to mention a place by name) like the island of Svalbard. It belongs to Europe and is an important part of the European continent historically and culturally and for long a period of its existence, also politically. Which means that when one goes to Iceland one does not leave Europe, but simply discovers a part of it, very peculiar indeed and certainly graced with its own individuality but in the last instance quite European. And as European most of us are in some sense, one does feel necessarily at home in Iceland. On the other hand one does not feel completely at home, however "globalized" this world may be for better or worse, in Kazakhstan or in Mongolia.

Having said this one should immediately register the peculiarities of this Island in the North Atlantic. Some are in a true sense exclusive: which country has in a relatively limited space volcanoes, glaciers, geysers, "fumarole" with wells of boiling water at your feet, gigantic waterfalls, huge mountains with eternal snow, lakes with floating icebergs which you can touch, while at same time, extensive farms with domestic animals and products of the earth? Hot and cold, fire and ice in extreme vicinity. And of course beautiful modern cities, well and orderly built, with gardens full of flowers private and public. (It was summer when I travelled there and one would wish summers everywhere were like this). Cities by the way, of which the largest are still within a livable human measure: Reykyavik and Akureyri and some other one perhaps. The rest are but villages. One does not certainly miss our Babels everywhere. You breathe more freely. The Island has 130.000 square kilometres and is inhabited by less than 300.500 people. A blessing in itself. But happens to have, so I was told, the highest birth rate in Western Europe. It is then Europe but lacks many of the negative notes of the European continent. May I add that every village and even many places outside human settlements have a church very visible and well kept. Lutheran of course and, from what I read, scarcely visited by worshippers. But, according to my own observation, for what it is worth, presiding over a churchyard with crosses and other signs of Christian burial. Seemingly, at least, people wish to be buried with some kind of service and in some kind of special place. In some of these churches I found with some surprise visible rests of the old Catholic faith, images for instance, a Saint Peter, a Saint Jerome and even a Blessed Virgin. Apparently Puritanism and Calvinism with its destruction and despoiling of everything with a Catholic flavour did not find a place in the religious history of Iceland. I will perhaps return to such religious history later on.

In the meantime, the visitor is duly impressed by what he is shown of the past of Iceland. Even this past is peculiar and different from what one sees and is expected to see in other places. No great monuments or works of art at every turn of a corner. But instead the quite

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unique rests well kept and ready for the tourist visit, of the ancient living quarters of the Islanders, built with turf on foundations and a solid basis of stone in the midst of a field of lava, cosy enough, the domestic beasts being lodged in the same way and in the same building. Churches were also built this way and one or two are kept and still used. Therefore we have, glaciers, the deposit of ancient and recent volcanic explosions (some must have been terrible) and the intense green of fields and trees. Unfortunately most of them recently planted. One is told that the land in former times was covered with trees, birches among others, but the needs of heat, construction and farming space was the end of many of them, if not the great majority. Now wood, corrugated iron and normal building material have taken the place of turf.

The visitor (more or less ignorant as the present writer) should learn very much from the present Iceland about the Viking past, present still in a certain way. One recalls the pirating and desolation brought by these sailing people along the coasts of continental Europe not the mention the islands to the West. And not only the coasts: Tours in France (then Neustria) and its monastery created by Alcuin of York for Charles the Great was raided (so it is said) by the Vikings. And the same fate fell on the monasteries with their riches cultural and otherwise in North Eastern England. One of the famous Bibles copied and illustrated there ended up in what is now Sweden in Stockholm. If not the text, the magnificent cover attracted the greed of the invaders from the North. The list could be continued without end.

But one tends to ignore the qualities and virtues of this people. Iceland helps you have a very different picture. Vikings not only destroyed: they also built and even created. It is said that the first parliamentary assembly in Europe (Iceland, I insist is part of Europe) is said to have taken place in a place called Thingvellir in southern Iceland (the *Althingi* so called). And this still in the first millennium: 930 is the date usually given. It is of course not for me to say anything decisive about their discovery of what is now Northern America (Canada and the United States), but there seems to be even some archaeological testimony of their presence in what is now Canada (the excavations at the Anse of Meadows). However difficult and ambiguous the interpretation of such remains may be. Anyway, it was they who apparently put their foot in what is now Greenland. For whatever reason much less developed presently than Iceland is. And nobody can but admire their courage and audacity in defying the seas with ships and sails and oars which we would normally use today only for adventures. Like the raft used by Thor Heyerdahl for crossing the Pacific and then the Indian Ocean. By the way, he was a delightful gentleman whom I met and whose presence and conversation I enjoyed when he was living in the Canarias at the end of his days: he paid me more than a visit when I was in charge of the Library and Archives of the Roman

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Church in the Vatican. It was like meeting a living Viking. He was keenly interested in the Catholic presence in the extreme Northern countries including Greenland and in what our documents could tell him about the firsts Bishops there and about King Olaf the Great, now venerated as a Saint (feast day in our official Calendar the 29th. July). I have now run again on St. Olaf a propos the Christianisation of Iceland.

Let me say a word also about this subject which may seem a bit like “talking shop” as the American saying goes. On the other hand under some other aspect it belongs to the cultural history of Iceland.

The Vikings found a home in what is now the great island in the Northern Atlantic and thanks to what can be called their “parliamentary” tradition, they one day voted, after careful reflexion and personal consideration of their speaker (it is said he spent a night “under a hide” in his tent thinking on the subject) the introduction of Christianity in Iceland. So the story goes. It was the Catholic tradition of Christianity.

However, well before the Viking , the Irish monks from the islands east of Scotland (the St. Columbanus community) and from the Faroe, part of whose vocation was to leave for remote places, unassisted and almost barehanded to preach the Christ. To travel anyway was an end in itself: to leave behind even the security and partial comfort of the monastery to go anywhere. Thus St. Bonifatius (formerly Winfridus an English monk) went to central Europe which he evangelized and when he had enough disciples founded the monastery at Fulda hence a centre for culture. Some of these monks certainly went North and their means of transport, rafts or canoes or whatever were much less secure and prepared for the ocean than the Viking ships. There is no rest or trace (at least to my knowledge) of their presence in Iceland but what I believe is a firm tradition of their presence there and of their efforts for evangelization. But when other missionaries came after (British or Norwegian or whatever) and the formal common decision to become Christian and Catholic was taken, there was, I am sure, something to build upon and not just a religious void or mere paganism whatever its values and culture.

It is very impressive and I made the experience myself for many hours, going through and admiring the testimonies of Medieval Catholicism at the National Museum, carefully chosen and remarkably well shown. An example in itself of how objects should be kept, illustrated and helped to be understood in any Museum anywhere. Unfortunately, without a catalogue.

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But pictures can be obtained and I got for myself some very helpful to get an idea of how deeply Catholicism had been lived and translated (if a may use this word) into the local culture. This can be seen for instance in the beautiful liturgical vestments, some perfectly conserved, really works of art of the Icelandic way of using whatever instruments they had for exquisite needlework. A medieval wood Crucifix from the early Middle Ages should not pass unobserved as well as the model reconstruction of a rather large church perhaps a cathedral. There were in fact two Catholic dioceses in Iceland: one in the North in Holar, the other one in the South in Skalholt and a lot of monasteries for monks and nuns. One can still see the excavated foundations of what is held to be an Augustinian monastery in some place in Eastern Iceland. The Catholic Church was under the supervision, at least after some time, of the Archbishop in Nidaros (today Trondhjem in Norway) with what is left of its monumental Gothic cathedral and afterwards of the Archbishop in Lund (Sweden).

As I said since the beginning, Iceland is Europe and followed in this particular field the fate of the Catholic Church in Europe: some form of corruption and infidelity to its true vocation and then the imposition (not certainly the choice) according to the axiom "cuius regio eius religio" (meaning religion follows the place where you live) of Northern Lutheranism. The true sense of such an axiom was really then: the political head of the country decides which religion (in this case which form of Christianity) you are allowed to profess. Iceland after the middle of the fourteenth century became part of Denmark. The King of Denmark Christian III was a stout Lutheran after the Reformation and all his countries had to follow suit. There was some resistance and even some fighting but not even remotely what happened in continental Europe with the wars of religion. The last Catholic Bishop Jon Aranson (not a model of Bishops: he had a mistress and four children but he believed in his Church), fought, was caught, considered a traitor, then had his head cut off without trial. It must be admitted it was one of the first Lutheran Bishops (the hierarchy was kept there at least for some time) who translated the Bible into Icelandic and had it printed. I am told the first book ever printed in that language was the Icelandic translation of the New Testament by a Lutheran of the first time by the name of Oddur Gottskalksson in 1540. Printed of course in Denmark to avoid Catholic negative reaction. For what regards the complete Bible, the publication with designs done by the Bishop himself, is a splendid volume a facsimile of which I happened to see and admire. I could not help noting that what are now called the Apocrypha (the Catholic Deuterocanonical, never published since in Protestant Bibles) were all there in their proper place. The Bishop name, which ought to be retained, was Gudbrandon Thorlakson and his Bible bears the date 1584. It bore, as it should, the approval of the King of Denmark both in Icelandic and indeed in Latin. The irony of the fact is that the printing press then used had been brought to Iceland and installed by the last

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Catholic Bishop just mentioned in his Episcopal city Holar. The Catholic hierarchy was reinstalled in 1929 and the Catholic Church is active and present. And apparently in good relation with our Lutheran brethren. In fact the present Lutheran Bishop of Holar had the ashes of his beheaded Catholic predecessor somehow found in the churchyard nearby and buried again in the Cathedral in front of the main altar.

Literacy seems to have been fairly common and early in Iceland. I was privileged to visit in a so called House of Culture, which indeed does earn its name, in Reykjavik an outstanding exhibition of Icelandic manuscripts, more than one, as it often happens, coming from libraries abroad. Two things are to be mentioned. First, the writing (and indeed apparently from the beginning) used an adapted Latin alphabet in some form of what paleographers call the Carolingian minuscule, while at least there were (at least exhibited) no manuscripts in that language, which must have existed sometime, liturgical or otherwise. And secondly many of those manuscripts were illustrated. My attention was caught by a remarkable representation of what looked very exactly like a ceremony of adult Baptism, with the neophytes stark naked standing on a kind of tub before the Bishop who with his mitre on and his crosier in his left hand, administers them the sacramental unction which is part of the Baptism of adults still today. And I could see other notable miniatures. There was also in the same exhibition the reconstruction remarkably true to fact of the whole process of the creation of medieval manuscripts since the very beginning with the preparation of the parchment, through the writing and illumination with the colours used right up to the ways of binding the finished book. Most of the texts exhibited, I could read in the catalogue (there was a complete catalogue there signed by two editors: Gisli Sigurdsson - Vesteynn Olsson, Reykjavik 2004) came from the early periods, carefully transmitted first by word of mouth and then in writing: the "sagas" so called. Later on collected and saved from destruction by a scholar in the seventeenth century by the name of Arni Magnusson. An Institute in the same city bears his name. Those texts, I daresay, are less known and appreciated in our world than they should be. I can only think of the Ossian poems written (really rather created) in the eighteenth century in England by James McPherson and put into pictures by William Blake. And for what regards the version of the ancient German mythology inspiring Richard Wagner in his Tetralogy, one may wonder how far such texts and those at their origin really reflect the authentic figures and vicissitudes of the ancient "sagas"

Be that as it may, my conclusion is that there is much to be learned in a place like Iceland present and past. And I should add here a toponomastic note or note regarding the name of the place. The name used for that country does not at all reflect its reality and I am afraid it

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does not help to attract visitors: it is certainly not a place of “ice” or where ice is predominant. But neither has Greenland anything “green” about it. It is in fact much more of an “iceland” than the beautiful island in the North Atlantic I was happy to visit where indeed there is much more to be seen, learned and admired than those notes written “currenti calamo” (“with a running pen” or I should now say “with a running PC”) may even suggest. It manages to give I hope at least some pale idea.

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