



## CHAPTER 1

# The Setting



Due to its stark geological contrasts of active volcanoes, vast ice fields, and glaciers, Iceland has become known as “the land of fire and ice.”<sup>1</sup> Located on a North Atlantic island not far from Greenland’s western coast, Iceland consists of nearly forty thousand square miles. About 25 percent larger than Scotland and almost the size of Cuba, it was left uninhabited for several centuries while people settled in lands they deemed more favorable.<sup>2</sup>

Concealed by glacial Greenland and the vast Atlantic, it was not until the eighth century AD that Irish monks began to establish themselves in Iceland in order to avoid dwelling with pagans.<sup>3</sup> However, during the century that followed, aggressive Norsemen penetrated the Icelandic realm, carrying with them their Viking sagas filled with pagan poetry as well as their heathen mythology. But in spite of their formidable influence, Christianity soon gained the upper hand in the land of fire and ice.





## *Fire on Ice*

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Photograph of Þingvellir Parliament's Field, May 2005. *Courtesy of David A. Ashby*

### *The Adoption of Christianity*

In AD 1000 the Icelandic National Parliament (the Althing) held its annual two-week summer session in Þingvellir (Parliament's Field), a remote area of southwest Iceland where it had convened every year since AD 930. Here, amidst lush plains, lava cliffs dramatically evidence an earlier time when fire and molten rock encountered ice, an encounter symbolic of the spiritual confrontation that occurred when the fire of Christianity collided head-on with the frigid forces of paganism. It was here that the parliament officially adopted Christianity as Iceland's national religion.<sup>4</sup> This development proved to be the most consequential religious event in the history of Iceland.

The official adoption of Christianity was, in large measure, politically influenced. One contributing factor was sitting on the throne in Norway. Ólafr Tryggvason, a Christian convert



and then king of Norway, was serious about bringing the country of Iceland into Christian subjection. Another determining influence was the reasoning of parliamentary speaker Þorgeirr, who persuaded his colleagues of the Althing that it was better to have Icelanders embrace one religion than to have the country divided over this primary theological matter. As a result, all pagans were to be baptized as Christians, although the denominational division between the Catholics and the Lutherans would later become a contentious issue which this Scandinavian country would have to deal with.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Catholicism Loses Its Grip*

During the five centuries that followed, Catholic ecclesiastical institutions were erected throughout Iceland. Michael Fell writes: “By the early sixteenth century the Icelandic Church had been under the jurisdiction of Rome for five hundred years. Politically, Iceland had been under the control of the combined kingdom of Denmark-Norway for over a century.” Further, “bishops-elect for the two Icelandic dioceses [in Skálholt and Hólar] had to be approved by the Danish king and consecrated by the archbishop of Niðarós in Norway.”<sup>6</sup> However, by the mid-sixteenth century, the hand of Rome and the fingers of Catholicism were losing their ecclesiastical grip as the Reformation reached the land of fire and ice. But the loosening did not occur without a struggle. Bishop Jón Arason (1484–1550) fought doggedly to preserve Catholicism from his position as the ecclesiastical head of the Hólar diocese.

With the death of Frederick I, king of Denmark-Norway in 1533, Catholicism began to take her last breaths. King Christian III, who succeeded Frederick, was a devoted Lutheran. Christian issued an ordinance that restructured the Catholic Church to align with Luther’s teachings. Five years

later, his decree reached the banks of Iceland, but Lutheranism did not fully take root until Bishop Arason and two of his sons were beheaded in the fall of 1550. This act severed the last remaining advocates of Catholicism.<sup>7</sup>

During this transitional period (1538–50), the country was divided: Bishop Gissur Einarsson served as the first Lutheran bishop of the Skálholt diocese, while Bishop Arason strongly advocated Catholicism from his Hólar diocese until he drew his last breath. Ironically, it was Arason who brought the first printing press to Iceland (about 1530), which provided the reformers with a translation of the Bible into Icelandic as well as an Icelandic translation of Luther's *Lesser Catechism*.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Age of Learning*

During the next two centuries (1550–1750), known as the “Age of Learning,” a deepened desire to learn the word of God brought an increased longing for literacy among the peasants and other common folk. Fell argues that “since the country’s only printing press was under the control of the [Lutheran] Church, almost the only books printed in that period were of religious and devotional character.”<sup>9</sup> Further, he states that it was certainly not coincidental that the invention of the printing press and paper was immediately followed by the Reformation: “Its success depended on the ability of the Reformers to broadcast their views through multitudes of books and pamphlets. It is not surprising that *the Lutheran Reformation led ultimately to an almost universal literacy among Icelanders*.”<sup>10</sup>

A century later, a catalytic event further strengthened the position of the Lutheran Church. In 1847 the Theological Seminary was established in Reykjavík, which then made it possible for applicants for priesthood leadership to obtain a local theological indoctrination without leaving their homeland. Furthermore, the following year absolutism was finally re-



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Þórður Tómasson, founder, owner, and curator of the Skógar Folk Museum in the Skógar Museum Church, 2004. *Courtesy of Fred E. Woods*

voked by the Danish king Frederick VII,<sup>11</sup> opening the door to secularization and religious pluralism. Into this door stepped Jón Sigurðsson (1811–79), who commenced his lengthy and passionate political crusade for home rule. In the early years, his campaign included a convening of the National Assembly in Reykjavík in the year 1851 for the purpose of determining what kind of relationship Iceland's sixty thousand inhabitants should have with Denmark.<sup>12</sup>

With all of these important developments shaping Iceland's fabric and design, the introduction of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter cited as LDS) in 1851 was yet another thread woven into her unique tapestry. Perhaps the same spirit which lit a fire in Sigurðsson to advocate home rule at this National Assembly ignited a similar flame in the hearts and minds of a few Icelanders who became the first in their country to embrace the LDS Church in the mid-nineteenth century.



Notes

1. La Nora Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah* (reprint, Spanish Fork, UT: Icelandic Association of Utah, 1998), 2, notes that Iceland is 194 miles wide and 298 miles long and that it contains 107 volcanoes and about five thousand miles of glaciers and snowfields.

2. Gunnar Karlsson, *The History of Iceland* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 9.

3. Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 9–10.

4. Michael Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil: A History of Christianity in Iceland* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 1. However, Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 34, sides with Ólafía Einarsdóttir, *Studier i kronologisk metode i tidlig islandsk historie-skrivning, Natur och Kultur* (Stockholm: Bibliotheca Historica Lundensis XIII, 1964), 72–82, 103–4, who reckons the year of the Christianization of Iceland as AD 999 instead of 1000.

5. Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 33–34. Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil*, 24, notes that the diehard heathens were permitted three concessions: “The expoure of unwanted newborn babies and the eating of horse-meat were to continue; and heathen sacrifices could still be performed in private.” On Iceland’s embracing Christianity, see Dag Strömbäck, *The Conversion of Iceland: A Survey*, vol. 6, trans. Peter Foote (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, Univesity College London), especially pp. 25–37.

6. Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil*, 89

7. Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil*, 90, 97.

8. Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil*, 94–98, 105.

9. Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil*, 107.

10. Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil*, 105; emphasis added.

11. The term absolutism refers to absolute control of the monarchy, which was imposed on Iceland by the Danish king Frederik III in 1662. Karlsson, *The History of Iceland*, 149, notes that by 1665 “the absolute monarchy acquired its formal constitution in the Royal



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Law, which granted the King of Denmark the most absolute power that any sovereign in Europe was ever to attain.” Thus the door of opportunity for religious pluralism was completely shut for nearly two centuries.

12. Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil*, 207, 224–25.



