

*Ice and Fire: The Broad Church of Old Iceland:
Iceland, Icelanders, and their unique religious history.*

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Iceland is where the world is being born, where the great tectonic plates diverge and wrench apart one cataclysmic inch per year at the Mid-Atlantic Ridge: volcanoes and earthquakes, glaciers and geysers and rivers of melt-water and lava flow. Iceland rumbles and airplanes flee the skies for fear of volcanic ash. Iceland shudders and a new island lifts its head above the waters.

My intrigue with Iceland begins with a story from the Second World War. My father's ship was moored in Hvalfjord—Whale fjord, near Reykjavik, waiting for the convoy to form up that they would escort to Murmansk, in Russia. It was a nice day, so they lowered a lifeboat and they went sailing. I like to think of those young men having that good day.

Iceland is a large island, far out in northern waters, where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Arctic Ocean, just south of the Arctic Circle. The Viking settlements begin roughly around the year 800. The pagan settlers had fled the growing power of Norwegian kings. But the kings caught up with them. Being poor in essential resources like wood and iron, the islanders depended on mainland shipping for vital imports.

When the King of Norway adopted Christianity, compliance and conversion were demanded of the Icelanders also. Accordingly, Christianity was adopted in Iceland around the year 1,000, with accommodation for continuing private worship of the pagan gods. People lived mostly by herding, farming, and a little fishing; so one might pray to Christ ashore, but to Thor when at sea.

Deforestation, erosion of the fragile soil, volcanoes, and mini ice ages impoverished the population further, those who survived the Black Death. Salt fish and sheep kept them going.

Around 1550 the King of Denmark imposed the Protestant Reformation on the people of Iceland, not without violence; Lutheranism became the established church of Iceland. Rule from Denmark also meant a royal monopoly, which further impoverished the Icelanders.

Following the Napoleonic wars, Iceland remained a Danish dependency. The climate got colder. More volcanoes. By the end of the nineteenth century almost one fifth of the population had emigrated, many to the wheat fields of North America. Danish rule relaxed; by 1918 Iceland was its own sovereign Kingdom, joined with Denmark; ultimate authority still rested with the King of Denmark. In the years following the Second World War, Iceland achieved independence, and took its place among European nations.

The piece I want to lift up here is the religious history in the nineteenth century. Danish governance meant that higher education for Icelanders involved a trip to Copenhagen. Copenhagen meant exposure to German Biblical scholarship—known as “the higher criticism”. The “higher criticism” was building the case that scripture was a record of the human search for the holy, not the literal word of god, and not sufficient basis for theology or religion.

Theological study in Copenhagen would have meant exposure to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), an early leader in modern liberal theology. Schleiermacher argued that religion came from a feeling of utter dependence upon the holy, and not from rationalizing scripture.

Another German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), continued the argument that religion and theology were more about feeling, and more about human nature, than about a biblical god. Feuerbach essentially argued: that people shaped their sense of God as a psychological projection to compensate for our suffering; that humans had imposed upon the creator god the ability of understanding; and that we shaped our god from our own human nature.

An Icelandic scholar studying in Copenhagen would also encounter Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55), arguably the father of existentialism. Kierkegaard emphasized feeling, and the exercise of religion as an individual experience. He condemned the accommodation between civil and religious power embodied in the state church. He condemned efforts to ground theology on reason, preferring trust, and the leap of faith.

This would be the heady brew that an Icelander would have met, studying in Denmark.

I rely on Valtyr Emil Gudmundson’s book, “The Icelandic Unitarian Connection” for three examples of what it would look like then, to be a broad church with some latitude for free thought. Emil had Icelandic, and grew up in a Canadian Icelandic church community. I do not have Icelandic—only an enthusiasm for *vienerterta*. I have never been to Iceland, except in dreams.

I am quite sure that some folks took a hard line, that not all Icelanders always played well with others. But sometimes there was a little leeway.

So—Three examples from Emil, of liberalism and latitude in the old Icelandic broad church: one, an Icelander doing theology in Denmark; one, a minister who trained in Denmark, then went home to Iceland; and one wandering poet who wound up in Red Deer Alberta.

First, we have Magnus Eiriksson (1806-1881), called by some “the first Icelandic Unitarian” and “the most original of all Icelandic liberal religionists and scholars” (*veg 6*). He grew up poor in rural Iceland, got some schooling, got a benefactor, and got on the boat to Copenhagen, where he became a skilled biblical scholar.

He had a passion for religious tolerance, and wrote in defence of some Baptists who rejected infant baptism for their children. He advocated for Christian charity, for political liberties, and for the rights of women. He based his arguments for social justice on his sense of the unity of God. Despite his liberal ideas, Eiriksson saw himself first as a scholar, and as a scholar working within the Lutheran church.

Next, a priest, Matthias Jochumsson (1835-1920), more influential than Eiriksson for Icelanders, at home and abroad. Jochumsson remained in Iceland, though he travelled to Denmark and England. He was influenced by the writings of New England preacher William Ellery Channing, also English scholar and preacher James Martineau, another leading Unitarian thinker.

Even so, Jochumsson remained within the Icelandic Lutheran Church: scholar, poet and priest, fostering liberal views throughout a long career. Emil Gudmundson describes Jochumsson as “first an Icelander, a passionate nationalist, and a Romantic traditionalist which of course included the Lutheran tradition”. Sectarianism—religious division—was as repugnant to Jochumsson as it was foreign to the Icelandic tradition.

And then there was Stephan G. Stephansson, (1853-1927). He emigrated from Iceland as a young man, settling and resettling from Wisconsin to the Dakota Territory, then north into Alberta. Stephansson was a farmer, largely self-taught. If you find yourself near Red Deer, you can visit the historic site that preserves his home.

Stephansson has been called the greatest poet in the Icelandic language, ever. Apparently he didn't sleep much, so he spent the time reading independent magazines and writing poetry. “He accepted no consistent label, but among those given him are freethinker, atheist, humanist, materialist, and unitarian” (small u) (*veg 15 ff*). Stephansson served on the boards of local Lutheran churches, and was accommodated there despite his refusal to accept those teachings to which he took exception. He particularly took exception to restrictions on the rights of women.

That was a hot issue at the time. In a letter home, Stephansson suggests that the issue of female suffrage might have been a surface issue that signified deeper divisions, that the real issue might have been “modernism or higher criticism, which in essence is the refutation that the Confessions or scripture are infallible” (*veg 18*). Stephansson's path, in North America, took him amongst free thinkers and cultural societies; he never joined a Unitarian church, but he did ask to be buried with a Unitarian funeral service.

Speaking of funerals, there was an incident in Iceland around 1900 that wraps up my argument about the broad church. I'll let Emil tell the story:

A prominent farmer and chairman of the township board [in eastern Iceland] died at a relatively early age. Being an avowed Unitarian, having been an early member in the 1890's of the Winnipeg church, he had requested that the burial would take place without reference to the Trinity. The pastor of the parish refused burial in the church cemetery. When the widow, also a Unitarian, persisted and laid the body to rest in unhallowed ground on their farm, the pastor brought suit against her for violating both the health and religious laws of the country. The widow fought the case and finally got the ear of the King of Denmark [Iceland's constitutional monarch at that time], who sided with her. Subsequently the highest court of the country ruled in her favor, making a landmark decision for religious toleration and freedom. (*veg 4*)

That farmer may have been a Unitarian, but he was an Icelandic Lutheran Unitarian, and he was dead, so the priest's job was to get him buried, and not make a fuss about it.

The point I have been trying to make is that the Icelandic Lutheran church was a "Broad Church". You might have been an atheist, but in the old country you were an Icelandic Lutheran atheist. The broad church held all and sundry under the same tent. It would not necessarily be so in the new world. But that's another story, for another time.

To conclude, the question I ask when considering various religions or ethical cultures is—what difference does it make? How is your life different, how are your actions and choices different, because you live that faith?

Here's something else that happened in Iceland more recently. I can't prove that the Icelanders chose this option because of their tradition of the broad church. Maybe just living on an island was enough to convince folks they were all in the same boat. Here's what happened.

I lift up the words of New York Times columnist and Nobel Prize-winning economist, Paul Krugman. Economics—the study of the allocation of scarce resources, morality in action....

Krugman's article dates from 2011. Krugman is condemning the doctrine that "in the aftermath of a financial crisis, banks must be bailed out but the general public must pay the price", or that "fiscal austerity would actually create jobs".

Not so much. Ever expanding austerity measures pushed some European economies ever deeper into the abyss of mounting unemployment and shrinking economies. There was one outstanding exception—the path not generally taken. But Iceland took that path.

Paul Krugman writes:

Iceland was supposed to be the ultimate economic disaster story: its runaway bankers saddled the country with huge debts and seemed to leave the nation in a hopeless position.

But a funny thing happened on the way to economic Armageddon: Iceland's very desperation made conventional behavior impossible, freeing the nation to break the rules. Where everyone else bailed out the bankers and made the public pay the price, Iceland let the banks go bust and actually expanded its social safety net. Where everyone else was fixated on trying to placate international investors, Iceland imposed temporary controls on the movement of capital to give itself room to maneuver.

So how's it going? Iceland hasn't avoided major economic damage or a significant drop in living standards. But it has managed to limit both the rise in unemployment and the suffering of the most vulnerable; the social safety net has survived intact, as has the basic decency of its society. "Things could have been a lot worse" may not be the most stirring of slogans, but when everyone expected utter disaster, it amounts to a policy triumph.

And there's a lesson here for the rest of us: The suffering that so many of our citizens are facing is unnecessary. If this is a time of incredible pain and a much harsher society, that was a choice. It didn't and doesn't have to be this way.

Thus Paul Krugman, witness to the gulf between privilege and poverty; there is a better way, the path not taken, except in Iceland.

Spirit of life and love, the whole planet earth is one small island in the enormity of space. And it's the only one we've got. Some parts need a little work, but it's a nice little fixer-up-er, as planets go.

May we find the wisdom to recognize the unique and precious splendour of our home, this blue pearl in space, third rock from the sun. May we learn we are all in this together.

May it be so.

Amen

Our Closing Hymn, the Huron Carol, recognizes the part played by First Nations people in Manitoba, whose gracious and generous outreach to their new neighbours sustained the Icelandic immigrants through that first dreadful winter.

Bibliography

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Gudmundson, V. Emil. "The Icelandic Unitarian Connection: Beginnings of Icelandic Unitarianism in North America, 1885-1900", 1984. Especially the first three chapters. [This book is out of print, and difficult to lay hold of; if you should trip over a copy, please do consider it gold!--fd]

Hewitt, Phillip, "Unitarians in Canada", 1978, rev 1995. Hewitt was constrained by lack of access to the early Icelandic records, most of which are written down in Icelandic well into the middle of the twentieth century. Gudmundson could read Icelandic and access the records.

Horton, Linda Weaver, ed. "Guarding Sacred Embers: Reflections on Canadian Unitarian and Universalist History", 2011. See especially Part 3 "Prairie Fires and Northern Lights: Sagas from the West", including several articles by Stephan M. Jonasson re Icelanders in Canada, also p.313 Wayne Arnason on early travel north of Winnipeg.

Krugman, Paul. Op-ed, "The Path Not Taken", *New York Times*, October 27th, 2011. How, in response to the financial crisis of 2008, Iceland refused to put banks ahead of people, strengthening its social net instead.

Re online searches, with the usual caveats to verify by other sources, I would recommend contributions from Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Stephan M. Jonasson, who writes extensively of his Winnipeg, Manitoba, and Icelandic roots. Also see articles pertaining to the Icelandic immigrant poet Stephan Stephansson, whose home is an historic site near Red Deer, Alberta. The Canadian Encyclopaedia is also a source for information re Icelandic immigration.

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