

Tradition applied - Icelandic culture and religion

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In the latest issue of the New Yorker, on November 9, 2015, there is an interesting article on rescue teams in Iceland. Actually the system is unique in the world. Iceland has no army, and because police and the coast guard are underfunded and spread thin, Icelanders have developed a non-governmental task force for helping people in distress due to volcanic eruptions, avalanches, earthquakes, ocean gales, sandstorms, glacier bursts, and awful blizzards in both summer and winter. The non-governmental volunteer movement has almost ten thousand members in all, with four thousand of them on "callout-duty." Every town or community has a team. It is no scout group of youngsters but rather well trained, well equipped, self-funded and self-organizing groups of people on standby: 3% of the nation are members - volunteers!

Forces of nature have not only had an impact on people, they have also given birth to a culture with a view of the world and strategies for ways to live -- and also how to die. The reporter from the New Yorker did a fine job describing the truck-driving guardian angels but didn't understand or explain the underlying reasons. I think there are definite cultural and historical reasons for the formation of these teams. A look at the history of Icelandic culture has convinced me that the reasons are cultural, and more specifically religious-ethical. The type of Christianity practiced and preached in the country helped mold a society of togetherness and care for neighbors in need.

The rescue teams have been and are groups that confront the powers of nature. They have their litanies, their scriptures and services. Even though they have no religious affiliation, and the religious views of the members are highly diverse, they function in a religious style and on the foundation of a religious culture. In rescuing people, they perform the task of the Good Samaritan. In this they continue a strong ethical tradition in Iceland. Icelanders have in all ages lived out the theology of God caring for human beings, sensing that there is grace in nature - and that there is also a loving, divine presence in the midst of crises.

Nature and the struggle

First, a few words about the harsh nature of the country and the art and strategies of survival in Iceland. A comparison between Norway and Iceland is enlightening, illustrating how grim the struggle was in Iceland over the centuries. By the end of the 11th century, the Norwegian population came to roughly 250 thousand people. At the same time, some 70 thousand Icelanders lived on this island. The ratio was "more than 1 Icelander to 4 Norwegians." Both nations had their ups and downs over the next 600 years. Shortly after 1800 the Norwegian population was up to 883 thousand, whereas Icelanders were down to 47 thousand. What happened? Did some Icelanders leave, looking for a milder climate, emigrating to the Canary Islands, Brazil or North America? No, they were down from 70 thousand to 47 thousand due to catastrophes in nature. By 1800 the ratio was 1 Icelander to 17 Norwegians. This simple comparison sheds some light on the difficulties of survival. What strategies for survival were formed on this Mission Impossible. How did this struggle shape or mold religion?

Religious classics and literature

I would like to draw attention to two classics in the Icelandic tradition and point out their basic dimensions for liturgical inspiration and application. These are *Hymns of the Passion* and *Vidalinspostilla*.

Icelanders have been a people of letters. Both ordinary and educated people put events and emotions into words and text. Poverty did not prevent them from writing. Both women and men shaped their feelings, both joy and grief, into poetry which was memorized, and some of it was written down. Some Icelandic pastors were productive and took pride in publishing their theology,

sermons and meditations. This religious literature was not tied to the church; it was put to use in households all over the country. It was almost “the social media” of those times.

Collections of sermons were not only meant for “simple” pastors but also for reading in the homes of those who did not manage to attend church on Sundays. The collection of sermons by Bishop Jón Vídalín, *Vídalínspostilla*, published in the early part of the 18th century, was exceptionally important and had a lasting impact on discourse about issues of faith and society, the meaning of human life and of nature, and how to behave and act. *Hymns of the Passion*, first published in late 17th century, were learned by heart by many people from 1700 and well into the 20th century.

An astonishing amount of religious literature was printed in Iceland in the 19th and 20th centuries. There was a joke in Iceland that the number of religious books published in the country was enough to pave the road all the way to the pope in Rome, and publishing religious books was the most lucrative part of Icelandic publishers’ trade. They may have made money on religion in the past, but that has now come to a complete stop. Very few books of sermons, meditations or religious poetry have been published in Iceland for decades.

Icelandic Christianity

What are the characteristics of Icelandic Christianity? Of course Icelanders have always tried to import the best from all trends, fads and fashions abroad. Luther’s dramatic theology was a winner for some time. Baroque artistry won over some poets in the 17th and 18th centuries. Rationalism, romanticism and materialism had their protagonists in 18th and 19th centuries. In religion, classical theology was the main web into which all kinds of novelties and idiosyncrasies were woven or incorporated. But fundamental of course were the actual life-experiences of people in the country.

A striking aspect of Icelandic theology is the prominent, positive and important role that nature has played. The religious texts of this tradition deal primarily with what might be called limit or liminal issues, e.g. death, finitude, transience, threats to life, the futility of securing one’s own existence, helplessness, etc. And in order to explain and make the experiences of human life and development in the surrounding world intelligible, the writers of the past used metaphors and examples from nature. The human habitat was nature in her manifold forms. The country’s culture was a liminal culture, devising meaning, understanding and strategies for survival in harsh, unpredictable and dramatic nature. Nature was not only a threatening killer; it also proved to be a caring and nurturing mother, giving life to all creation - by God’s grace.

A common characteristic of the whole tradition of post-Reformation Icelandic preaching and theologizing is contextualization: the aim of correlating the Christian message to the situation and needs of the times. In *Hymns of the Passion* the portrait of Jesus Christ symbolized and thematicized people’s struggles, suffering, death and hope in such a way that the poems illuminated the meaning of human life and the nature of the world.

The same aim at correlation is also found in *Vídalínspostilla*. The penetrating discussion of human nature, social issues, the church, and options in human life struck Icelanders in a meaningful way, and not only gave real nourishment to the soul but also spoke theologically to the entire spectrum of life in this world.

Hymns of the Passion

The *Hymns of the Passion* had a lasting impact in Iceland for at least two centuries, from 1700 to 1900, because of the image of the suffering Jesus Christ depicted in them. The Jesus-figure, which was elegantly portrayed, grasped, united and expressed latent sentiments among Icelanders. Keeping in mind the ever-present threat of natural catastrophes, it comes as no surprise that it is precisely the most tragic moments of Jesus Christ’s career that stirred Icelanders. His struggle symbolized Icelandic suffering.

In *Hymns of Passion* Icelanders were told that the hidden secret of the world is that love - not

death - is the heartbeat of life, that light will overcome darkness, that warmth is stronger than cold, that human solidarity is more basic than solipsistic individualism, and finally that well-being is stronger than suffering. To a battered people, this seemed to be a message with meaning, and it provided food for thought as they struggled with disruptive developments in nature, human society, and in themselves. Jesus' vision of love and service to others as the potential new being is the conclusion of the parabolic drama of *Hymns of the Passion*.

A life of service to others is the way people should live and also how the church should function in the process of giving birth to an authentic humanity -- of making that which is fragile and broken a part of the life of Jesus, who intends all human beings for participation in life. And his love for others would - in a modern setting - also include nature as a neighbor.

Furthermore the *Hymns of the Passion* emphasize interrelationships in the world. That God is related to the world is strikingly testified to by Jesus' life in the world. Similarly, all human beings are mutually responsible for each other's humanity. The Icelandic and classical Christian attitude of "not too long and not too short" discloses a basic adherence to a world-view of balances. This view represents the ethics of moderation. The human being, in all of his or her actions and reactions, should strive not to break the eco-structure of the world.

Power

If *Hymns of the Passion* is the first of the classics of Icelandic Christianity, the second is *Vídalínspostilla*. Its basic vision concerns power - which comes as no surprise to anyone who has experienced a large-scale event in Icelandic nature. Anyone who has been in the vicinity of an erupting volcano has experienced something profound, perhaps even had a peak experience due to this manifest power. The trembling in the earth, the unsettling thunder that accompanies a crater vomiting lava, the visual effects -- all of these affect both the body and mind of the spectator. On such occasions, a strong sensation of this power is accompanied by an awareness of the minuteness of human life, of how fragile and precarious it is compared to such an awesome display. Icelanders have also known other powers at work: the gigantic strength of the ocean, the crushing jaws of glaciers, the total disregard shown by floods for human settlements and the scorn that blizzards often exhibited toward these tiny humans, trying to survive winter and darkness. By what power do you live -- your own, or that of the world? These are straight Lutheran questions, those of classical theology. Vídalín's dramatic and witty discourse was to the point, and people nodded their heads in agreement.

To this discussion of power, Vídalín always adds some qualifications. The right source of power in a human life will manifest itself in two ways. Faith is only one half of a person. The other half is work to benefit one's neighbor. Faith has to be praxis, lived in service to others. But the other qualification in Vídalín's thought concerns this stress on morality: the questioning of worldly lordships. Vídalín connects praxis and the question of power and preserves a highly dramatic and dynamic tension. Faith is rooted in God's power. Upright morality results from faith, but this then immediately poses the question of whether faith is rooted in the only true source of power, i.e., God. Hence, the dialectic of faith and praxis entails an examination of the powers one relies on. Upright faith and morality necessarily lead to a strong hermeneutic of suspicion, as an integrating bond of faith and morality. At every moment, the Christian needs to examine his or her source, and in consequence open up his or her life to creativity for the benefit of others. But a perspective of critique has to accompany the dynamic of openness to creation in order to expose the false idols, the internal, bodily, or politico-cultural objects that receive the worship due only to God. The emphasis on the limits of the human being, coupled with a theology of power, seems to allow for a potentially fruitful theology, that accents holism and combines a hermeneutic of suspicion with hermeneutic of retrieval.

That brings us to the end.

Tradition applied

In the Icelandic religious tradition there are powerful sources for contextualizing and revising theology.

Nature: First, the dimension of nature is an overarching one. Nature used to be the nexus of humans - threatening but also a source of nourishment: an interpretative framework, a source of

metaphors for the meaning of human life, experiences, dangers and hopes. The preachers of Iceland, as well as the hymn-writers, have exploited this vein extensively - but few have launched into experimentation in liturgy. I think we could do more there - given the fact that all over the Western world, more and more people find nature to be the face of God, and they tell us pastors that they experience something divine in nature - even more so than in the liturgy of our churches.

Jesus in nature: Secondly, the practical theological profile of *Hymns of the Passion* concerns *Imitatione Christi*. The basic vision of the hymns, the view that the intention of love is the welfare of all of creation, is vital in our present world, and it confronts us with serious questions. It just might be that the basic vision, coupled with the strong social awareness of the hymns, requires active participation by others, i.e. a divinization of the world or the ascendance of the kind of humanity that Jesus labored to create. Nature becomes not only a bearer of beauty and love, but also the suffering servant. What does it mean when we see Jesus' suffering in Nature?

What power? Thirdly, the vision of *Vidalínspostilla* seems to describe an antithesis to all worldly powers. Everything in the world is considered impotent but nonetheless capable of being energized, if structured in the proper way. The human being is portrayed as basically in need of the proper energy, namely the power of God, who remains the central power plant of absolutely pure cosmic energy. But the network is fragile. Whenever the human being tries to plug into the secondary order of power, the connection is broken, the balance is lost; the power system fails, with an insurmountable loss to all. First of all, the individual is paralyzed, and because of a cosmic interrelatedness, everyone is left in disorder. In conventional terms the question is one of idolatry and faith.

This basic vision seems relevant to our postmodern sentiments, where there are struggles not only between powers. By what source do we live as individuals, as cultures, as a world? Do we live from our own power or from the power that is the fountain of life?

In a world that has gone through an energy crisis, global warming, crises of limited resources and political failures, the question of power remains of interest. By what force do we live? What happens when our energy runs out? There are also experiences of powerlessness in our personal lives. We are also concerned about power in politics, oppression, and the struggle of the oppressed for liberation. How can we meaningfully put these into our prayers and worship?