

Sigurður Árni Þórðarson, *Limits and Life: Meaning and Metaphors in the Religious Language of Iceland* (Peter Lang: American University Studies, 2012)

Today about 320.000 people still live on this island with its contradictory name Iceland. But are they aware of their limits? According to the news in the past few years, some thought that everything could be possible if you had enough money. Yet, all of a sudden, Iceland was a country that stood on the verge of national bankruptcy. Many realized the following: We are limited! Þórðarson's book gives exactly the kind of food for thought that is needed in today's transformation of Icelandic society.

Limits and Life, Meaning and Metaphors in the Religious Language of Iceland is in that context an appreciated 200-pages long, revised English version of the authors' dissertation, first published in 1989 with the title "Liminality in Icelandic Religious Tradition". The author states that this revised version is in line with the original publication, but additionally it addresses some of the most important recent scholarly work, primarily concerning his two major fields of study: Vídalínspostilla and the Hymns of the Passion, leaving a detailed discussion with this literature open for scholarly papers yet to be written.

Sigurður Árni Þórðarson [Sigurdur Arni Thordarson] is a pastor in one of the biggest parishes within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (ELCI). He holds a Cand. Theol. from the University of Iceland and a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. His 30 years of work within the ELCI has brought him a wide range of expertise as a manager, community leader, scholar, teacher and writer. Therefore his further publications on this matter will be of great value for the contemporary discussion in Iceland. A discussion that is among other things reflecting the youngest history of the ELCI; a church that, at the beginning of the 20th century, could still be proud of almost a 100% membership of the inhabitants and a close link to the state. At the end of the same century, it enjoyed still a 90% membership, whilst already in 2010 it only had an 80% membership; the tendency is clear: declining. As regards the status, it is not closely linked to the state any more.

Social Change

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Chapter six might be the one to find most interesting among Iceland's population today. Solely the title itself cries out to the reader: "Social Change, Theology and Critique". On his search for a meaning behind the travel of the Icelandic nation through the ages, Þórðarson here looks into the time of the birth of modern Iceland with its new capital Reykjavík in the late 19th century. He reminds the reader that this was the time when Reykjavík became the centre for Iceland's parliament as well as the centre of education. Further the District Court was moved to Reykjavík and the society took new steps in strengthening the democracy along with human rights and new means of power for the working class. At the beginning of the 20th century, Þórðarson states, a new society was born requiring a new system of meaning. Its theological counterpart was the so-called "new theology".

In a powerful way Þórðarson shows how this new theology was interrelated with one of the contractions that were a part of this gestation of this new society during the last two decades of the 19th century. For the first time the Icelandic church was confronted with a major critique which, so argues Þórðarson, included a many-fold challenge: All of a sudden the discussion around theology in Iceland was flavoured with challenging inputs from abroad, having counterparts in Canada explaining how boring church life in Iceland seemed to be; at the same time as the Danish Brandesian realism found more and more followers in Iceland and theosophy, spiritualism and other religious movements inspired people. And this all at the same time as Catholics, Mormons and different non-Lutheran groups grew in strength and number in Iceland. This historical review leads Þórðarson to the conclusion that the entire message of traditional theology needed re-evaluation; a statement that could stir today's discussion on the (missing) fundament of Icelandic society.

The cry of the time

Quoting the poet and politician Hannes Hafstein "The cry of the time is the life of the person", Þórðarson continues the discussion around the new theology in a new era in chapter eight, having given some insights in the life and work of bishop Pjetur Pjetursson (1808-91) in chapter seven. Þórðarson researches show that bishop Pjetursson had the role of an intermediate figure, a link between the old tradition and the upcoming new theology.

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According to Þórðarson, this new era was a time where the nation changed their thinking about the fight between good and evil into the question on how negative aspects of the world were to overcome. Analogously he analyzes the main themes of two liberal theologians, Jón Helgason (1866-1942) and Haraldur Níelsson (1848-1928); themes that are very much interrelated to today's discussion around the National Forum 2010 "Þjóðfundur". According to Þórðarson, Níelsson speaks of life, power, faith, love, humility, beauty and peace, and Helgason of similar values, adding joy, freedom and firmness. All values of great importance, 100 years ago and hopefully today as well.

Those two men, Jón Helgason and Haraldur Níelsson, seem to be a kind of role model for pastor Þórðarson, remaining as he states "the standard for the Icelandic pastors in the early twentieth century who wanted to modernize church and theology" (page 131). For the reader it is obvious that Þórðarson is enchanted by their work, their individualistic, even privatistic approach that results in actual consequences for church, ethics, politics and the world as an interwoven reality of both Mother Earth and the spiritual world. The interested reader is given a holistic picture of the life and work of those two gentlemen on almost 40 pages in chapter nine and ten.

Foundation for the 21st century

Only two other names have as great an importance in Þórðarson's book (next to Luther of course). Those are the names of Iceland's most adored spiritual poets, writers and Lutheran theology scholars: Hallgrímur Pétursson (1614-1674), the author of the Hymns of the Passion, and bishop Jón Vídalín (1666-1720), who is the man behind a collection of sermons called Vídalínspostilla. Even today the Hymns of the Passion are widespread literature in Iceland, while Vídalínspostilla has become less known during the last century, but both were used in homes and churches for centuries after their first publication. To understand the broad use of those books one has to imagine almost a whole nation sitting together, each at their own farm, night after night, week after week, year after year, every evening during the long, dark winters, listing to the head of the farm reading from one of those two great spiritual books. No wonder that many people knew those books by heart.

Those two men and their works mark the point of departure for Þórðarson as he steps into his research to undertake an analysis of the theological tradition in Iceland, something that is, as he states, “long awaited and badly need for understanding theological development of the twentieth century” (page 4). And he is definitely sure that the history is a needed teacher: “If people do not live well connected to history they are doomed to a series of disasters. But when wisdom of well worked crises is heard the healing is in the making. The wisdom about limits is a wisdom and a practical orientation for life.” (page 5)

Dialogue and background

Þórðarson’s book appeals to every human being to engage into dialogue with the primary goal to team up for an analysis of human nature and culture. Such a task is, according to Þórðarson, of primary importance in our pluralistic world, and he states that it will help us to understand the limits of the human being as we realize where our ground, our foundation is or might be missing. Referring to Mark Kline Taylor and Richard Bernstein, Þórðarson stresses the importance of valuing experiences and struggles made by us and others working towards a genuine mutual participation, which includes reciprocal wooing and persuasion.

This book can be understood as Þórðarson’s statement that it is very likely that the Icelander will engage in such a dialogue marked by his/her post-Reformation, Christian tradition that is primarily a “limit-tradition”, but at the same time coming from a society that is leaving behind the model of the monarchic-fatherly God, while questioning too a whole cluster of images and concepts given by the church through the ages. That leaves, so claims Þórðarson, the question open concerning whether or how the contextualization, with its aim to address the meaning of central Christian issues into the situation of each and every inhabitant in Iceland, really was a success: “There is always a need for a reconstruction of theology, a new theology and even a new paradigm. [...] The achievements of past generations and individual theologians need to be cherished, but particularly their concern for a better and more realistic critical correlation of the Christian message with the contemporary situation.” (page 179-180).

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Limits and Life, Meaning and Metaphors in the Religious Language of Iceland is in itself a journey through the landscape of 300 years of theology, looking in the back-mirror of some of the gems of old Icelandic literature, heading towards a new era of non-dualistic theology. The question will remain open though, that is, whether the inherent human limits are to be accepted, although authentically reacted to – as done in the Hymns of Passion and Vídalínspostilla – or if the limits are to be seen as characteristic of this world and its human beings, yet giving us the task to find an escape route – as done perhaps by the scholars behind the new theology. For Þórðarson there is no question that further research is needed in order to reflect more deeply on the limits that we face / our forefather faced, how their concept of limits looked like, and how we understand our limits today. Among others things, he mentions further research on the folklore of Iceland, the 20th-century theology of Iceland, especially the one of bishop Sigurbjörn Einarsson, as well as the meaning of today's challenges, like for instance ecological changes and nuclear catastrophes. One might be attempted to add the assumption that research on ethics of modern Iceland should be included as well, having the recent challenges of Icelandic society in mind. So, there is still work to be done. Let's face it in our limits!

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