

A M E R I C A N U N I V E R S I T Y S T U D I E S



Limits and Life

Meaning and Metaphors in
the Religious Language of Iceland

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Introduction

How does culture form and inform a nation? What shapes the approach of people? Has the meaning-system of the Icelanders helped in encountering forces of devastation? The struggle at limit throughout all centuries of their settlement in a dangerous habitat may have brought forth some wisdom, a message not only for present thematization for Icelanders themselves, but something which may be of help for others, when limitations of all sorts are sneaking upon those who have enjoyed better days, at least better weather. If ecological catastrophes like greenhouse effects strike the world, not to mention an even more devastating holocaust, the Icelandic experience may be a helpful example of how to react to disaster. With help of their system of meaning the Icelanders seem to have developed a toolbox to encounter their difficulties. In major crises in the past they normally have stuck together as a well trained rescue-team attempting the impossible at the limit, helping out, working almost like one being, balancing the shortcomings of each other and making a strong whole. The togetherness, hardly found in the industrial west, possibly with the exception of Israel, seem to be rooted deep down in what the Icelanders speak of as the national soul, a term symbolizing the dormant feeling of togetherness brought forth in times of exceptional crisis, like in the memorable events in the volcanic 1973-eruption in the Westman Isles.

What does this mean for interpretation of the religious dimensions of the Icelandic culture? My study of its devotional and theological literature has led me to belief that the post-Reformation Christian tradition in Iceland is primarily a “limit-tradition.” That implies that the religious texts of the tradition deal primarily with what may be called liminal issues, e.g. death, finitude, transience, threats to life, the futility of securing one’s own existence, helplessness, etc. These striking features of the Icelandic literature point beyond themselves toward awareness of strata of meaning at the base of that heritage. That there must indeed be such a shaping factor is indicated by the fact that

the struggle with liminal questions is the characteristic aspect of the corpus of the Icelandic theological literature from ca. 1650 to the middle of the twentieth century. I further think that these liminal issues may be retrievable and of importance for appropriation aiming at a contemporary theology of limit. One might also ask if and to what extent the culture of the Icelanders is a “limit-culture?” Do experiences and language of limit constitute the system of meaning from the early settlement to the present day? If so or partly so, then how? If my thesis were right, that would justify research of these issues of the Icelandic culture, the literary tradition, folklore and the arts.

What is the strategy for survival of people in a limit-culture? Are they a handy tool-box for global problems of the twenty-first century CE? This question arises in a very practical manner in the banking-crisis the Icelanders went through in 2008 and onwards. One may ask: Was the crisis a sign of that the care, ethics and wisdom of the limit-culture was weakened or even lost? Are the tenets of the older theology retrievable? Answering these questions will be out of the scope of this work but do point out the importance of the subject matter of the book not only for theology, Icelandic Christianity but social debate in Iceland in general. How should the Icelanders work out the crises, with what means and for what future? This, I think, may be very practical for those outside the Icelandic culture as well and become important for the whole of humanity when catastrophes strike. The meaning, which helped Icelanders to survive crises and warlike situation for eleven centuries, might be a treasure of meaning helping others, in face of some holocaust, to believe and hope. This might also become the needed wisdom to cope with all future struggles of the Icelandic nation?

This book was originally written as the final part of my doctoral program in religious studies in the Graduate School of Religion in Vanderbilt University. The defense was in December 14th 1989. The dissertation was published by the UMI, Ann Arbor, in 1989. The title was *Liminality in Icelandic Religious Tradition*. Because of the many requests and letters from scholars around the world I concluded that another and a more accessible publication was necessary. But the errands, duties and distractions of life have kept it in the shelf. Republication always poses some scholarly grumble and the question of how far one should go. Should the dissertation be cut to pieces and the whole thing done over again? Recent scholarly works also open up interpretative possibilities. Having scanned the book and the scholarly development I decided not to enter into a major operation and rather allow the flow of argument, the format, the topics and the style of the original to survive. What I did was cleaning,

improving the readability, toning down scholarly pompousness reflected in over-size footnotes and the like. This book is true to the tenets and style of the original dissertation but also introduces some of the most important recent scholarly works, primarily in Icelandic. In the relevant chapters I have added references to the relevant literature published after the doctoral defense of the dissertation, primarily concerning *Vidalínspostilla* and *Hymns of the Passion*. A more detailed discussion with this literature will be done in scholarly papers later.

In this book I will focus on several classics of the Icelandic tradition and aim at bringing forth their meaning. I will try to show that the literature teaches limit, the strong emphasis on limitations of humans, culture, and also of nature. Second, the referent of these texts needs to be stated. I will elaborate different modes of being-in-the-world. The analysis of these referents will primarily be found in the final chapter.

In the first chapter my approach and methods will be accounted for. In the following chapter I will briefly point out the possible reason for the strong emphasis on limit in the native tradition. I will discuss first of all the medieval literary tradition, the literary classics of Iceland remaining a major source for the formation of the Icelandic culture and hence modes of being for the Icelanders well into the twentieth century. Second, I will focus on relevant and impending issues for religious and theological meaning-seeking of Icelanders of the past, issues of nature, and third, the theological issues, primarily the Lutheran heritage. In the third chapter I will try to expose the type of Christianity reigning in Iceland in the post-Reformation period and relevant social factors. Then, in the third and fourth chapters, I will argue that there are two major classics of the post-Reformation tradition that deserve attention. These are *Hymns of the Passion* by Hallgrímur Pétursson and *Vidalínspostilla* by bishop Jón Vídalín. Both were widely influential until ca. 1850. *Hymns of the Passion* is still an important religious source for Christians in Iceland and a literary classic. Prior to a major theological turn in Iceland in early twentieth century, a time of preparatory twists preceded. Its social, cultural and theological dimensions will be discussed in two chapters. In the sixth chapter I will map the theology of Pjetur Pjetursson, an important intermediate figure in the theological history in Iceland. My contention is that he, quite unnoticed by all scholars, managed to prepare the way for the later dualistic model of theological liberalism, the theology of the “New theology” after 1900. The last decades of the nineteenth century were a time of rapid changes in Iceland. These will be discussed and their ramifications for theology and the life of the church. Considerable space

will be used for discussion of this background material. The reason is that simple that an analysis of the theological tradition in Iceland is long awaited and badly need for understanding theological development of the twentieth century and onwards. In chapter eight I will delineate the theological and cultural changes around 1900. I will show the dualism that was fundamental in the works of the most important theologians and the basic liminal issues that are disclosed in their thought. The towering figures of this era were Jón Helgason, professor of theology and later bishop of the ELCI, the national church of Iceland and Haraldur Níelsson, professor of Old Testament in the University of Iceland and a spiritualist thinker. Their theological constructions remained the standard for those pastors in the church who departed from the orthodoxy of Jón Vídalín and Hallgrímur Pétursson. Their writings and modes of theological construction will be discussed in chapter nine and ten. In the final chapter I will summarize and both discuss outdated elements of the tradition and what may be retrieved for use by modern theology. Then the new being referred to by the texts will be discussed.

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When returning to this work twenty years after the defence it feels like talking to oneself! Some of the discussion was forgotten, some of the feelings come back and some aha is uttered because of the insights. When returning and revisiting I am deeply struck by the basic thesis. I still find it forceful and enlightening. Given the time of the publication, in the aftermath of a collapse of banks in Iceland and its cultural repercussion, I must say that the wisdom if the religious tradition of Iceland knocks on our doors again. It is old and new wisdom that we have to know our history if we don't want

to repeat it, i.e. do the same stupid mistakes others have done before us. The Icelanders have a source, a fountain of wisdom that is highly practical in tackling limitation, disasters and the like, also a financial, political and cultural crisis of the twenty-first century. Local wisdom can also become global wisdom. 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.

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