Icelandic Spiritualism: Mediumship and Modernity in Iceland

by William H. Swatos, Jr., and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson
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Reviewed by Stefan Jonasson

Family tradition has it that my great-great-grandfather's farmhouse burned to the ground not long after he emigrated to Canada. Convinced that the fire had been the work of *huldafolk,* those who farmed the land in succeeding generations assiduously avoided tilling the plot where the farmhouse once stood, lest they raise the ire of its paranormal inhabitants. Icelandic lore is so full of accounts of spiritual and paranormal phenomena that a scholarly study of their impact on Icelandic religion is long overdue. In *Icelandic Spiritualism,* William H. Swatos, Jr., and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson relate the story of "mediumship and modernity" in Icelandic religion.

In their introduction, the authors indicate their desire to challenge and their "hope at least to wound" the Durkheimian model of religious development, which holds that pre-modern societies were communal in nature and held together by deep religious convictions, whereas modern societies are largely associational in nature with a corresponding rise in secularism. The result is a rather pretentious essay that bears little obvious relationship to their account of Icelandic spiritualism. While the introduction offers some interesting background material, including an account of the conversion of Iceland to Christianity and an argument for understanding Icelandic society as a "shame culture" rather than a "guilt culture," its thesis is essentially unnecessary and somewhat unconvincing. One of the more insightful observations, however, is the description of Icelandic religion as "a matter of the hearth" in which the church was "the pilgrimage center of family life." When understood in this light, Icelandic society may be far less secular than is commonly supposed, since the balance between home and church, when it comes to religious matters, differs from that which prevails thoughout most of Christendom.

Swatos and Gissurarson show that the Icelandic context offered fertile soil for the planting and growth of spiritualism. The Icelandic language itself is "rich in names for spirits of various kinds," identifying some two dozen varieties of ghost alone! In the apparent "naturalness" of the many stories of hauntings, they see "evidence for a continuing saga consciousness" among the Icelandic people. Yet while spiritualism

found a hospitable environment in Iceland, they assert that it was "a distinctly modern movement that appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century." They document the mutual interplay between the budding spiritualist movement and the evolving political life and proto-urbanization of Icelandic society during this period, showing how reaction to spiritualism was sometimes bound up with the competing interests of political parties and status groups.

In identifying the roots of Icelandic spiritualism, the authors overstate the significance of Unitarian influences in its development. None of the early Icelandic Unitarian ministers was much inclined towards spiritualism. Magnús Skaptason was a Christian Universalist who strayed from the historic creeds – but not very far. Björn Pétursson was a religious rationalist, as were the American-trained ministers of the succeeding generation. In fact, one is left to wonder how Swatos and Gissurarson define spiritualism when they suggest that S.J. Jóhannesson "clearly uses spiritualist language" in his poetic tribute to Björn Pétursson:

> Here I bid you farewell, my friend, for the last time;
>   We will meet on the other side,
> Where I will be greeted by your joyous spirit
>   As I come along the same road.

This verse reflects a sentiment that might be uttered by anyone from the most orthodox Christian to any mildly irenic atheist. It may reflect the sloppy sentimentality of a Hallmark card but it is hardly an expression of spiritualism!

It is true that many Icelandic Unitarians were inclined towards spiritualism, as were some of the liberal denomination's continental leaders. The Icelandic-trained ministers who came to North America to serve Unitarian congregations between the two world wars do appear to have been somehwhat more positive towards spiritualism and psychical research than their American-trained colleagues. But the spiritualists were never more than a small minority within Unitarianism, reflecting the broad tolerance of its congregations and their willingness to embrace people and points of view that were marginalized elsewhere. At no time in the history of Unitarianism has spiritualism ever constituted a mainstream theological trend. I suspect that the same is true for both the Church of Iceland and the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod, even though a few leading lights in both may have embraced spiritualism in some measure or other. In the English-speaking world, spiritualism was more or less a fashionable religious counterculture that flourished during the first two decades of the twentieth century across denominational lines – much like New Age thought flourishes today. While Iceland may have offered a receptive environment to spiritualism and psychical

research, it is difficult to escape the suspicion that Icelandic spiritualism was less an indigenous phenomenon than it was a religious fashion imported from abroad.

The authors document the role of several noteworthy literary, political, and religious leaders who figure prominently in the story of Icelandic spiritualism: author Einar Hjörleifsson Kvaran, prime minister Björn Jónsson, and theologian Haraldur Níelsson, to name the three most important individuals. The authors' most significant original research has yielded the story of the reputed medium Indriði Indriðason, accounts of several lesser mediums, the confict between Haraldur Níelsson and Bishop Jón Helgason, and the history of the Icelandic Society for Psychical Research. Unfortunately, Swatos and Gissurarson seem rather timid when it comes to evaluating the credibility of the spiritualists. They do present the critical reactions of skeptics like journalist Jón Ólafsson, who dismissed spiritualism as superstitious and fraudulant, philosophy professor Ágúst H. Bjarnason, who suggested that Indriði Indriðason was "hysteric and epileptic," and Bishop Jón Helgason, who described spiritualism as a "pseudoreligion" whose adherents "rejoice over its worthless messages from the other side as new revelations." For their own part, Swatos and Gissurarson mostly accept the accounts of the spiritualists at face value. Had they ventured to risk their own critical evaluation of the Icelandic spiritualist movement, rather than worry about refuting the Durkheimian model, a superior work would have been the inevitable result.

Given the scarcity of works on Icelandic religion available in the English language, *Icelandic Spiritualism* is a welcome contribution to understanding the distinct (even idiosyncratic) nature of religious life in modern Iceland. Swatos and Gissurarson have assembled an interesting collection of essays, the value of which is found as much in its digressions and footnotes as it is in its account of Icelandic spiritualism itself. While parts of their analysis and some of their conclusions are a matter for debate, they undertook an impressive research project and have presented a considerable amount of information that was not widely available before now. For this alone, *Icelandic Spiritualism* is an important addition to both Icelandic studies and religious scholarship – as long as it is read with a skeptical eye and a critical mind.

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