

Iceland - The Land of Fire, Ice, and Equal Rights: How Icelanders in Reykjavik Have Shaped Their Society Outside of the National Church

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Abstract

It is not a secret that Iceland is one of the leading countries when it comes to gender equality and LGBTQ rights around the world. Media and current academic literature have demonstrated the progressive policies and social attitudes that are openly displayed throughout the Icelandic landscape. However, what some may be surprised to learn is that Iceland lacks the fundamental factor in what is supposed to be the basis of progressiveness in the United States - the separation between church and state. Iceland's syncretic way of thinking about religion and politics have allowed the Icelandic people to step outside of the ideas of traditional Christianity and pass laws that protect historically marginalized groups. However, the question remains, how has Iceland, a country overtaken by Christianity in the 11th century, created an inclusive and progressive environment despite the presence of a national church? To answer this, I reflect on my experience during a research expedition in the summer of 2022 where I researched religion in Reykjavik, Iceland. In the months leading up to the expedition, my preliminary research produced an outstanding number of resources that proclaimed Iceland to be a predominantly Christian nation. However, throughout my conversations with the people of Reykjavik, I quickly learned that religion in Iceland was not as it appeared. Through a week-long process of informal interviews and exploration, I came to find that Iceland's national church was not as important to the social climate of Iceland as it had been presented in the media. Throughout this paper I seek to examine how Iceland's history has had an impact on their inclusive society within the city of Reykjavik as well as how religion is seen as a custom or culture, rather than a set of rules that should be followed. Additionally, I explore how the idea of secularism has impacted the attitude surrounding the church and state relationship.

1. Introduction

On a cloudy day at the end of July, pride flags can be found dancing in the Icelandic summer wind around the pathway of Tjornin. This waterfront, affectionately known as 'the pond', is located in downtown Reykjavik and is a common place for tourists and locals alike. In the distance sits the Frikirkjan, an independent Lutheran free church that was established in 1899, and just beyond the line of rooftops, the tower of the Hallgrímskirkja peeks out. The striking imagery of Reykjavik's many churches against a sea of colorful flags is just the beginning of the preparations for the upcoming Hinsegin dagar í Reykjavik, or loosely translated as "queer days in Reykjavik," meaning the annual pride festival. Started in 1999, the Icelandic Pride Festival is known as one of the biggest events in Iceland. This week-long extravaganza is packed with social events, concerts, and of course a parade that includes the variety of the LGBTQ spectrum.

This annual event is emblematic of Iceland's celebrated tolerance; Iceland has been recognized as one of the safest countries in the world for gender and sexual minorities. Women's and LGBTQ rights are prominent aspects of the Icelandic parliament, the Alþingi. Citizens of Iceland enjoy freedoms such as the right to privacy, the right to vote, access to abortion, freedom of religion, and laws ensuring equality for all citizens, despite gender or sexual orientation. However, Article 62 of the Constitution of the Republic of Iceland, states that "The Evangelical Lutheran Church shall

be the State Church in Iceland and, as such, it shall be supported and protected by the State.”⁴ This means that financially, the national church of Iceland is supported and politically protected by the state. Despite this protection, the church does not hold the power to create laws, nor would the Icelandic population be keen to follow them. The Icelandic attitude about inclusivity and gender equality is far too progressive and outspoken that the creation of laws that stifled individual freedoms would be met with great resistance and disobedience. Nothing less would be expected from such a forward-thinking country. Historically, Icelandic women gained the right to vote in 1915, and gay marriage was legalized in 2010. Both rulings came years before the United States’ government made the verdict for their own constituents. Additionally, Iceland is high on the leaderboard when it comes to things such as equal pay and abortion rights, social concerns that other nations, such as the United States and Japan, are struggling to address.

Throughout my research, I was able to see that the irenic past of Iceland created a social climate that does not condone an overzealous attitude toward religious persecution. In general, their desire to keep their Icelandic folklore and heritage alive has always found a way to permeate their beliefs and practices throughout the conversion to Christianity. Over the last fifty years, the revitalization of pagan practices and the introduction of humanist associations have reintroduced true opposition in the form of legal organizations that have begun to rival the church not only for their congregation members, but for their tax dollars as well. This systematic change in the fiscal breakdown and allocation of funds has created a conundrum for the National Church. On the surface it appears that the open mindset of the contemporary citizen within Reykjavik has infiltrated the church, and this may hold some truth. However, looking at this from a financial point of view, to ensure survival in the coming years, the National Church of Iceland needs to appeal to the younger, more progressive generations within the country and beyond. This has led many religious organizations to adopt open-door policies that encourage diversity amongst their congregations, as well as offering support to political movements surrounding the rights of women and people of the LGBTQ spectrum, as well as immigration policies. This is made clear by the recent actions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, or the ELCI. In 2021, the ELCI adopted a policy that pledged to improve enrichment and expand accommodations for services offered to include those who have immigrated to Iceland in more recent years, as immigration into a small country can be challenging. This change was brought on by Reverend Toshiki Toma, who immigrated to Iceland in 1992 from Japan. This approach to immigration work is said to “create ‘opportunities for immigrants to participate in the life of the congregation,’ but does not specify precisely how that should happen”²⁰ However, Reverend Toma believes that “the church should take on the responsibility for these people.”²⁰

Immigration is only one aspect of the efforts of Icelandic church programs. Gender and age equality are also prominent aspects of the contemporary Icelandic clergy. To continue to commit to an age-inclusive environment, the church hopes to bring younger members into leadership positions. Their goal, overall, is to keep up with the ever changing social and cultural environment within their fiery lands. Bishop Solveig Lára Guðmundsdóttir, head of the diocese of Hólar, stated in an interview for The Lutheran World Federation that she believes “...the church needs the opinions of young people so that we can really relate to what’s happening in society.”¹⁷ Her proposal, “... to include at least 20 percent of young people in leadership positions...”¹⁷ was accepted, along with ensuring gender equality by “encouraging congregations to have quotas of 40 percent women and 40 percent men”¹⁷. Many members of the Lutheran church agree with Bishop Guðmundsdóttir, and they are encouraged to offer their opinions. Rather than allowing power dynamics that are commonly found within the Christian congregational setting to become a stifling force, the church is open to many discussions from its members. In fact, it is common to find that Icelanders hold a more theoretical outtake on biblical scripture. Some find that the Bible is more of an invitation for discussion than a rule book, leading to open conversations about topics that other countries still struggle with today.

2. Historical Background: The Rise of Christianity in Iceland

2.1 In the Beginning

Prior to 870 CE, Iceland’s volatile landscape kept many wandering souls from settling on its mystic shores. The land, composed of volcanoes, hot springs, geysers, and glaciers, was infertile and unwelcoming, unable to sustain much of the farming culture that the Scandinavians were accustomed to during this time. However, in 874 CE, as Ingólfr Arnarson was outcasted from his home in Norway after being convicted of murder, he set two pillars out into the sea and declared that wherever they landed would be his next home. From this venture, the city of Reykjavik was born.

Over the next sixty years the population of Iceland continued to grow, and with the growth came growing pains. Viking-age conflict-resolution, much like the medieval age, usually consisted of bloody battles and preventable deaths. As a way of keeping the peace and ensuring that all clans could be heard, the Alþingi was created. This parliament-style, democratic governing system was implemented in 930 CE and is still known as the world’s first, and oldest,

parliament today. In practice, the Alþingi was a more organized and egalitarian manner of handling disagreements among the clans that inhabited the desolate terrain of the Icelandic countryside. Essentially, chieftains or lawmakers were selected from each clan to represent their respective populations, and once a year the council would meet to discuss the laws that were to be created. This system, for the most part was sustainable, and gave clans an outlet to express frustrations or wrongdoings that took place in between families.

For a time, Pagan and Christian practices coexisted in spaces together without turmoil concerning religious affiliations, and in some cases, a mix of the two faiths created a culture that told a story of the land and its entities (religious syncretism). However, when the Norwegian crown set their sights on the Icelandic territory, things began to change. Their strategy was to coerce Iceland into converting to Catholicism, making it easier for the Norwegians to infiltrate the lands and gain the trust of the Germanic pagan tribes. Their first efforts were negligible as groups of missionaries were sent in to convert and baptize Vikings that they had come across, hoping that they would in turn bring the gospel back to their clans. Subsequently, this led to the pagans chasing the missionaries off Icelandic soil. This dance continued for a few years until the rise of King Olaf Tryggvason. King Tryggvason, a dedicated monarch, wanted the glory of the unification of the Scandinavian countries under one faith. He used the converted Icelandic population to continue to spread the word of the gospel to the heathen clans. Alas, a large part of his efforts included burning down pagan temples and shrines around the island, which eventually prompted the parliament to pass legislation in 997 CE that outlawed religious intolerance. Unfortunately, despite the political call for peace, it seemed that the damage had already been done. Eventually, after gaining the favor of a few powerful chieftains, the topic of a national conversion was brought to the attention of the Alþingi around 999/1000 CE. Clearly socially divided and stuck at an impasse, the people of Iceland turned to one man, Thorgeir Thokelsson. Thorgeir was pagan chieftain who had earned the trust of many attending the meetings of the Alþingi. After careful deliberation through meditation, Thorgeir concluded that Iceland was to be a Christian nation. This decision effectively ended all disputes and led to the baptism of the remaining population.¹¹ This quick decision to convert to Christianity was more focused on keeping the Icelandic people together, rather than a true belief in the ideas behind the religion. Nevertheless, Christianity infiltrated Iceland and impacted how the Icelandic pagans practiced their traditional customs.

2.2 Medieval Iceland

From the declaration of Iceland as a Christian nation in 1000 CE, Icelanders began to integrate Christian practices into their everyday lives, many still preferring to practice their pagan rituals alongside their new-found religion. Along with the changes that overtook the island during its slow transfiguration into Christianity, the culture of Iceland also saw some major changes. Prior to the introduction of organized religion, stories of pagan deities and spirits had been passed down orally. However, in order to properly learn and teach biblical scripture, Icelanders were encouraged to focus their attention on reading and writing. This influence on the written word encouraged them to document their own stories and led to the creation of the Prose Edda and the King's Sagas. Despite the positive impacts that Catholicism brought to Icelandic literature, it made the nation more vulnerable to annexation from Norway and Denmark. This was because Catholicism had opened channels of communication with the Norwegian king, who had promised to ameliorate the social disparities that had begun to arise throughout the country. In 1262 CE Norway took control of Iceland and in 1384 CE, Norway and Iceland fell to the Danish crown. Unexpectedly, though things were constantly in political upheaval, Iceland held fast to Catholicism until the Danish Crown introduced the Protestant Reformation to the population. Surprisingly, the Icelandic Catholic clergy was not so keen on the idea of another conversion. Rallying together, two bishops decided to take matters into their own hands. In 1540 CE they started a small revolution that gained some traction, which appalled Denmark. This went on for eleven years until the Danish crown decided to act and executed all parties involved. It is documented that Iceland officially adopted Lutheranism as the new national religion in 1550 CE. The Bible was translated into the Icelandic language 34 years later.

2.3 Contemporary Iceland

In 1874 the Danish crown relinquished control over Icelandic internal affairs to the Alþingi, and freedom of religion was introduced in the Icelandic constitution in the same year. Following the second world war, Iceland gained its full independence from Denmark in 1944. After this period, Iceland started to recreate its national identity as a constitutional republic. At the turn of the 20th century, faiths outside of Christianity began to make their way onto the island and when Icelandic immigration policies opened up, cultures and faiths from around the globe entered Icelandic society. World religions such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism started to gain momentum in Reykjavik. Yet, even as the acceptance of other theological beliefs came into the picture, Iceland continued to keep their

relationship between church and state. The Evangelical Lutheran Church is currently the national church of Iceland and is commonly called Þjóðkirkja, which translates to “the church of the people.” Despite this influx of new theological ideas coming into the nation, or rather, because of the new clashing of ideologies, many individuals have moved into the realm of agnosticism, or even atheism. This movement away from organized religion has opened space for conversations surrounding the separation of church and state. Many of those polled said that they would prefer that their tax dollars did not fund an organization that they held no belief in. According to a 2018 poll by the National Secular Society, 72% of those surveyed approved of a separation in church and state.¹⁰ In the following years, as the gears shifted into recovering from a global pandemic, the movement to separate church and state lost traction. However, during my visit this summer, many locals expressed an interest in continuing the effort.

Thus, literature and historical evidence have shown that the history of religion in Iceland is complex and has created a syncretic religious identity that eludes straightforward, familiar definitions. Though it is nominally Lutheran, and despite the status of Lutheranism as a state religion, traditional religious beliefs and practices persist, and the commitment to Lutheran scripture is at best lukewarm; meanwhile, Icelandic Christianity has not resulted in conservative social policies, as it has elsewhere (including, of course, the United States). I went to Reykjavik during the summer of 2022 to research religion under the wing of Global Treks and Adventures to create an anthology that will aid in the mission of respectful tourism. However, I found that my experience held more than just simple statements about religion in Iceland. By using a combination of firsthand observation through church attendance, informal interviews of citizens throughout the city of Reykjavik, and analysis of primary and secondary source documents such as museums, magazines, and literature, I explored the apparent contradiction between a national religion and the lack of separation between church and state, on the one hand, and Iceland’s celebrated tolerance of diversity and heritage, on the other. In the remainder of this paper, I discuss my fieldwork over my brief period in the city Reykjavik and the common themes that were present throughout. Furthermore, I discuss how religious syncretism, animism, and isolation have led to the progressive social climate that is common in Iceland today.

3. Eight days in Reykjavik

Keflavik, or Driftwood Bay, is home to Iceland’s major airport. Built in 1943 during the United States’ occupation of Iceland, the airport is nestled on a lava field next to a few, recently active volcanoes. In fact, a mere 34 kilometers away from the airport is Fagradalsfjall, a volcano that erupted on August 3rd of 2022, just days after my departure. My time in Iceland was brief and beautiful, and impacted by the forces of nature that dictate everyday life for Icelandic citizens. It is through this experience that I was able to understand the Icelandic attitude firsthand. My preliminary research in preparation for this trip had led me to believe that Iceland was a predominantly Christian nation, and that church services and events would be a prominent aspect of my time there. However, despite the fact 80% of the Icelandic population is registered Lutheran, I discovered that the attitude of the average individual found walking the streets of Reykjavik is more agnostic than religious. As I began to talk in earnest with friendly shopkeepers and tour guides, I learned that religion in Iceland was far more nuanced than is portrayed in the Icelandic National Church registry. The more they talked about their beliefs, the more it became apparent that theology truly was up for debate within Icelandic culture - and more often than not, similar themes were present in their ideologies.

3.1 Iceland’s Hidden Folk

The influence of the natural landscape on Icelanders was clear from the start of my journey. Every corner of Reykjavik is a constant reminder of the presence of mysticism. In neighborhoods, elf crossing signs were a common sight, and small elf villages could be found around gardens and trails. Whether expressions of a true belief in elves and spirits or just whimsical decoration, these elves and other mystical entities are shrouded in local lore that chaos is found wherever they roam. Prior to my expedition, I had read that elf culture continued to impact construction on the island, and that even in recent times activists demanded the protection of the elf population. One story stood out to me. In 2015, the formation of a road to connect the Alftanes peninsula to the suburb of Gardabaer was put to a halt. Unfortunately for the city of Reykjavik, elf activists warned that they would be disturbing an elf habitat and that the large rock that they planned to cut through was an elf chapel. After some time, authorities found that their best course of action was to relocate the chapel, which turned out to be a 70 metric-ton lava rock. After its relocation construction was allowed to continue, but the city never disclosed the cost of the chapel’s removal. This is not the only case of the elf council’s involvement in construction plans, and it certainly will not be the last.

Elves have been a part of the terrain of Iceland since its settlement - and each religion has their reasonings behind their existence. According to traditional pagan beliefs, elves were a lesser race of gods and goddesses who could be

called upon during fertility rituals for both the land and the body. Despite their trickster personas, it was - and sometimes still is - common for Icelanders to leave offerings for these entities in hopes of striking a deal for their earthly desires. Nor are elves confined to the realm of traditional animistic folklore; they have made their way into Icelandic Christian beliefs as well: *Huldufólk*, or hidden people, are said to be the unkept and unruly children of Eve that she hid from God because they refused to comb their hair. As a punishment, God decided to make these children invisible to the human eye, thus explaining why they are hidden.

Beyond the realm of religious belief, elves are also the subject of beloved family stories that have been passed down over the years and are the center of holiday regalement. The infamous Yule Lads are thirteen unruly elves that come down from the mountains before Christmas and cause chaos throughout the city. Their stories are often paired with warnings of the *Jólakötturinn*, the child-eating Yule Cat, and are commonly told throughout the season to keep families entertained, and in some circumstances - unruly children in line. Missing from this narrative, are scenes of a baby in a manger and depictions of three wise men bearing gifts. In saying this I do not mean that these images are not found in some Icelandic homes, but rather that the popular stories and decor items hold less religious significance and focus more on the whimsical nature of the pagan Yule-tide traditions. Despite this being one of the biggest Christian holidays of the year, Icelanders have created a normalcy around a more secular, family-oriented holiday season that aligns more with their pagan ancestry.

The idea that Christmas is inherently ingrained into the Icelandic social calendar hints at their unique ability to think syncretically about religion overall. Christmas is not celebrated because of its relation to Jesus, or God for that matter, but rather because it is a time away from everyday expectations to spend with family and friends. It is also a time to foster and expand the Icelandic love of literature and mysticism. The presence of the Yule Lads embodies both their relationship to elf culture, and their relationship to their ancestors who struggled to survive during the long Icelandic winters prior to modern comforts. Yule in general pays homage to pagan holidays of the past and present. Overall, the Icelandic relationship to Christmas is a prime example of how traditionally religious holidays can be objectivated into society as a cultural normalcy outside of the objectively strict viewpoints presented throughout Christianity. In this, it is also apparent that if Icelanders can objectivate holidays into societal expectations outside of religion, then other practices in life, such as gay marriage, can be objectivated into religion. This makes their ideas around religion and religious practices a reciprocal relationship. Rather than enforcing the laws of a theological text onto their social climate, the church has found that adopting the beliefs of the public works better for society as a whole.

3.2 The New Old Ways: The Resurgence of Asceticism (Ásatrú)

When I asked locals to tell me about Ásatrú, an Icelandic neo-pagan practice, I never imagined that I would receive so many conflicting opinions surrounding an Icelandic belief system. The comments ranged from tax evasion to historical preservation - and covered a vast gray space in between. While touring the Settlement Museum in downtown Reykjavik, a tour guide told me that the followers of the Ásatrúarfélagið have long been ridiculed as “Viking-enthusiasts” and that many people did not perceive them as a real religious organization. Conversely, another local in another conversation informed me that Ásatrúarfélagið was keeping Iceland’s colorful past alive.

As it turns out, in 1972, a revitalization of the Germanic Pagan practices began to rumble through the Icelandic landscape. *Ásatrúarfélagið*, or the Ascetic Society, is an organization that claims to focus on advocating for the “respect for ancient cultural heritage and nature.”¹³ Additionally, they “desire to increase understanding and interest in folklore and old traditions...”¹³ “...without disparaging other religious customs, old or new, or the culture of other nations.”¹³ Due to their recognition as a legal religious organization, the Ásatrúarfélagið are obliged to offer services for marriage, consecration or confirmation, and funerals, however, due to personal beliefs, they also offer naming rituals and yearly swears, sometimes called vows or oaths, that celebrate historical days for Iceland or the old deities. Nevertheless, these are not the only times that the association gathers. Much like the community one would expect from a church, the Ásatrúarfélagið offers reading groups, craft nights, and other social events that encourage community engagement. However, unlike the narrative of Sunday school, those who are a part of the Ásatrúarfélagið have agreed to a by-law that implies that while education is encouraged, evangelism is not welcome. Participants may openly talk about their beliefs, but should avoid an overzealous attitude, or preaching, about their personal gods or goddesses.

As an outsider looking in, the webpage of the Ásatrúarfélagið shows that this organization is an established religious practice that holds legal ceremonies and has created a system of laws that members are expected to follow. However, when analyzing the laws that are listed, it becomes more difficult to classify the association as doctrinal, as they are more concerned with respecting tradition and keeping the civility between beliefs. Of course, despite the Western and particularly Christian emphasis on the role of belief in religion, religion is also an eminently social practice, as first

proposed by Emile Durkheim: [Religion is] "an eminently collective thing"²⁶ For the Ásatrúarfélagið, the focus on community certainly holds more power than the focus of the belief. In fact, within the Ásatrúarfélagið, there are many beliefs, and not one is considered to be more important, or more correct than the other. Furthermore, to make a generalization about the validity of personal beliefs would be directly going against the by-laws of the community. Despite the weight that the legal standing of the Ásatrúarfélagið holds, it seems more likely that this association is dedicated to their mission of protecting and educating the public about the traditional and ancestral belief systems of the past.

3.3 Humanism

While speaking to a local Icelander who maintained a permanent residence in Reykjavik, Siðmennt, a humanist organization that was founded in 1990, made its way into our conversation. It was during our dialogue surrounding marriage rates and burial practices in the city of Reykjavik that she mentioned that much of the younger generation was leaning towards humanist ceremonies to replace the social component that religious organizations typically offer. These humanist services focused more on morality and humanity rather than more theoretical, spiritual beliefs. The Siðmennt organization was born out of the need to offer support to individuals shifting away from traditional religious services, but still wanting to participate in common cultural activities like marriage and confirmation. Just as with Christmas, most of these customs have become such an ingrained part of the social scene in Iceland, that completely removing the possibility was more painful than seeking out an alternative. From this discussion, I found myself more curious about the nature of Siðmennt. Upon further research I discovered that they also focus on government policy and national politics - and that they have been one of the largest supporters advocating for the total separation of church and state within the nation. Their name, Siðmennt, translates quite literally to 'civilized' in English. This means that essentially, they are a civilized organization. With beliefs that align with neutral governing principles, it is no question that this organization prides themselves on ensuring ethics and fairness within the practice of law and believes that religion holds no place in politics, or general education. As it turns out, Siðmennt is adamant about monitoring religious presence within the school systems of Reykjavik. Their intention with this surveillance is to ensure that diversity is not threatened, and children are not victims of proselytization.

3.4 Atheism or Agnosticism?

To my surprise, atheism was perhaps the most commonly used terminology when discussing religious beliefs throughout my experience in Reykjavik. Any time my questions moved toward theology; I was met with a nonchalant attitude about the future of the Icelandic religious landscape. Some attribute this change to be the result of the internet's introduction to the island, as viewpoints and experiences are available on a more global scale and have the ability to move faster than books. Others credit this change to the Icelandic love of reading. However, it is not quite clear why atheism is on the rise in Iceland, only that there is a correlation between the introduction of the internet, and the decrease in financial support of churches through tax dollars and attendance.

Conversely to how Icelanders have described their current relationship with theology, their description of the land around them holds more meaning. In Iceland, there is no question that the land is alive and a force to be reckoned with. The terrain is constantly changing especially when it comes to seismic activity and volcanic eruptions. On a random afternoon during a phone conversation with a local informant, they asked me if I had paid attention to the earthquakes that were happening near the southwestern coast of the island. Obviously, the spout of activity that had accumulated over two thousand earthquakes had worried me as an American, especially because my flight back home was scheduled in the coming days. Hearing the calmness in their voice as they explained that the land was the true Icelandic religion soothed my frazzled nerves instantly. It was clear to me at that point that true Icelandic culture was to be at peace with the volatile nature of their home. At that moment, I found my worry to be insignificant in the grand scheme of things. As my trip came to a close and I was packing to leave, I tried to embody a bit of the respect that the Icelanders show their natural elements and I thanked the land for hosting me. A few days after I arrived home that mountain in the beautiful valley, Fagradalsfjall, erupted.

4. Discussion/Conclusion

When I came home at the beginning of August, I was eager to look over my notes and reflect on the experience that I just had. Iceland was filled with friendly people who adapted to and changed the world around them, just as their ancestors adapted to the harsh climate of the island. As I started to think about religion in Iceland from settlement to

present day, I came to a few realizations. Despite the fact that Iceland currently has no separation of church and state, they are able to maintain progressive policies that protect marginalized groups such as women and members of the LGBTQ community. Furthermore, Iceland has been consistently more liberal in legislation surrounding equality than the United States, whose own legislature dates four to five years after Icelandic policies. The progressive nature of the National Church can be credited to a multitude of reasons, however, the main two seem to be the progressive climate of the population of Iceland and the tax dollars that are collected from registered members of the church. With the desire to keep funding higher, the church is willing to meet the needs of the people more readily. Policies on immigration, gender and age inclusivity, and acceptance of LGBTQ persons are just a few of the changes that the church has made to keep their members happy and participating in the social aspects of the community.

Historically speaking, Icelandic religion has never been a straightforward concept. As Christianity took over the land in 1000 CE, pagan practices were not entirely abandoned. This intermingling of beliefs and practices created a syncretic culture that continued to follow Icelanders into the present day. This is commonly seen in how citizens in Reykjavik participate in elf culture and celebrate traditional holidays like Christmas and Easter. Additionally, Icelandic religion can also encompass pagan beliefs through the *Ásatrúarfélagið* and humanist beliefs through *Siðmennt*. In thinking about these new age spiritual and social systems, I am reminded of Emile Durkheim. In his work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he states, “There are no gospels which are immortal, but neither is there any reason for believing that humanity is incapable of inventing new ones”²⁶ I believe that the Icelandic religious landscape is a perfect example of Durkheim’s thought. Much like a puzzle with missing pieces, organized religion has never truly come together for Iceland. However, the Icelandic population seems to have created something entirely new from the pieces that they have been given. Furthermore, Durkheim’s ideas of solidarity and community through religion also hold some truth.²⁶ Iceland’s conversion to Christianity was said to have come from the desire to keep the Icelandic people unified. Rather than fight amongst themselves over the accuracy of one belief, it was decided that they should collectively accept this new religion, making their conversion mostly peaceful. In more recent times, the social pressure that coerced the National Church into more progressive beliefs displays that Iceland is intent on making space for everyone, despite the written rules of scripture. I find that Durkheim’s thoughts on his research on totems translates to the idea of religion overall. The idea that the ‘clan’ is represented by the religion, and the religion is represented by the clan is displayed by Iceland’s ability to mold their religious affiliations to reflect their communal identity and the religion’s ability to do the same to the Icelandic population during times such as Christmas.²⁶ It is my theory that Icelanders view religion in a different light than what is presented in the United States. Rather than allowing a religion to bend them into conformity, Icelanders have decided to make religion conform to them. Through what Berger and Luckman would call the cycle of subjectivation and objectivation, the Icelandic have created a society that is uniquely their own, including their religious beliefs. Religion in Iceland may be defined by global labels such as Lutheranism and Paganism, however, there is a complex dialectic here that cannot be ignored.

As for the future of Icelandic religion, namely their advancement toward a separation of church and state, I cannot imagine what changes will occur if the article is overturned. Iceland has shown the world that it is possible to both claim a national religion and be inclusive in the legislature surrounding marginalized populations such as women and the LGBTQ spectrum. As discussed throughout this paper, churches have implemented immigration support programs and offer a space for people to feel safe and be heard within the city of Reykjavik. What is unclear is what will happen to these programs if federal funding is no longer an option and religious affiliation continues to decline. The general attitude of citizens in Reykjavik is to move forward with the separation of church and state, however, it was made apparent through my interviews that they only cared about the allocation of their tax dollars. The push for a more secular nation is not a one-way path toward more liberal ideologies, but more like a double-edged sword that will take more thought and planning.

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