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RELIGION AND STATE IN ICELAND

Abstract

The Icelandic constitution guarantees religious freedom and also obliges the state to support and protect the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the National Church of Iceland. This article focuses on how the position of religion in general and the National Church in particular has gradually been changing in the public sphere during the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st. The research questions addressed here are: To what extent do these changes mean an integration or differentiation of religion in general, and the National Church in particular, from the state and the public sphere? To what extent do the state and the National Church live up to the principle of religious freedom and equal rights of other religious associations? The research findings show a process of differentiation in many respects and that the National Church has participated in this process and adapted itself to increased pluralism and demands for equality in religious matters. Nevertheless polarization around religious issues has increased in the Icelandic society and the National Church still has a privileged position compared to other religious associations. In a previous study (Gustafsson 1985) of indicators of religious change in the Nordic countries during the period 1930–1980 the focus was on the composition of the different indicators as they applied to three years, each with an interval of two decades: that is 1938, 1958 and 1978. To some extent the following presentation is a continuation of this method, as it focuses on three years, each with an interval of one decade: 1988, 1998 and 2008. For this study data was gathered by the author through six interviews with key persons in religious associations and institutions.

Keywords: Religion, state, constitution, differentiation, public sphere, civil religion

Introduction

It could easily be maintained that until the first decade of the 20th century the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Iceland was the religion of the state. Since the mid 16th century reformation, the Evangelical Lutheran Church had been the established Church in this island country, which essentially was a Danish colony. Up to the 20th century, the aim of the nation-state building process in Iceland really was the liberation of the nation from the Danish Authorities, particularly the Danish Administration within in the country. The facts that the language of the church was Icelandic, and that the clergy in Iceland in practice represented the local parish people in their dealings with the authorities, were in this context decisive regarding the over-all role of the church in society

as a whole. Indeed, this state of affairs is the reason for the strong political position that the National Church maintained until the last decade of the 20th century. The golden age of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth and the literary heritage that flourished, because of the early adaptation of Christian culture to the Old-Nordic language, became the corner stones in the myth of the Icelandic nationhood and hence were immensely important, indeed, for the common civil religion of the nation up to the present time. The strong position of the National Church during most of the 20th century may be explained by both the homogeneity of the population and the social role of the National Church in the political nation-building process, which resulted in Iceland's becoming an independent state, though in a royal union with Denmark, in 1918, and then a Republic in 1944 (Pétursson 1990).

The acceptance of the constitution for Iceland in 1874 entailed that the Evangelical Lutheran Church maintained its privileged position as a *National Church*, but also the constitution introduced the concept of a freedom of religion. During the 20th century, different Christian denominations began to make their appearance in the religious landscape of the country. Roman Catholicism was re-introduced and has, since 1895, been continuously operational in the country. The Roman Catholics established a primary school, which they operated until 2008, and also they contributed extensively to the development of modern medical services in Iceland (Torfason 1997; interview with Ólafur Torfason).

The relatively easy surfacing of different Christian denominations in Iceland was made possible by the influence of liberal theology and the respect for religious freedom stipulated in the constitution. Because of immigration the plurality of the religious situation increased greatly towards the end of the 20th century. In its final decades Islamic and Buddhist communities emerged in Iceland.

This article deals with the changing position of religion in the public sphere and focuses on the relations of religion and state in Iceland. As previously mentioned, the Icelandic constitution requires the state to support and protect the National Church, but at the same time it guarantees religious freedom within the country. The research questions addressed here are: To what extent does this mean integration or differentiation of religion in general, and the National Church in particular, from the state and the public sphere? To what extent do the state and the National Church live up to the principle of religious freedom and equal rights of other religious associations? By analysing the Christian themes in the Icelandic civil religion, we also try to broaden the view on religious legislation within the Icelandic state. Civil religion is here understood as the expression of the national myth as it appears in the public-sphere and in legislation (Bellah 1967; Björnsson 1984; Pétursson 1984; Björnsson and Pétursson 1990).

The underlying theoretical approach is prompted by the sociological controversy on the issue of pluralisation and secularization within modern societies. In the Nordic project on religion and social change in the years from 1930 to 1980, which focused on specific indicators of religious change, it became obvious that theories concerning secularization, although they provided some helpful insights, were inadequate in accounting for religious change and the development in religion and state relations (Gustafsson 1985). The data used in this article is mainly legislation, official statistics,

media debates, and parliamentary debates, material from church meetings and surveys and the author's interviews with key people and players in the field in question. In the above-mentioned study of the indicators of religious change in the Nordic countries during the period 1930–1980 the focus was on the composition of the different indicators as they applied to three years, each with an interval of two decades: that is 1938, 1958 and 1978. To some extent the following presentation is a continuation of this method, as it focuses on three years, each with an interval of one decade: 1988, 1998 and 2008. For this study data was gathered by the author in June 2009 and in February – April 2011 through six interviews with key persons in religious associations and institutions (see list of reference).

The Structure and Legal Position of the National Church

In 1874, on the occasion of the celebration of the millennium of Nordic settlement in Iceland, the Danish Government (officially the Danish King) surrendered legislative power in internal matters of the country to the Icelandic Parliament, *Alþingi* – including matters concerning the church. Other registered religious associations, among them the Lutheran «free churches», which are more or less comparable to the Free Lutheran Congregations in Denmark (*Frimenigheder* and *Valgmenigheter*), were referred to in legislation passed in 1886 as «religious communities outside the national church». On December 1st 2010, the National Church counted 77.64 per cent of the population as its members. Additionally, 5.57 per cent of the population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Free-Churches working outside the National Church, while the majority of other registered religious associations defined themselves as Christians of various denominations (Bureau of Statistics 2011).

Until 1904, when Iceland's Minister for Icelandic affairs became responsible to *Alþingi*, the Bishop of Iceland played an integral role in the general administration of the state. Together with the local district officer (*amtmaður*) the bishop formed the so called District Authority (*stiftsýfirvöld*), responsible for schools and cultural and well-fare institutions, as well as pricing inspection. As a part of the independence movement there existed, until 1918, a wide-spread interest in the differentiation of the Icelandic Church from the Danish State. The Icelandic church leaders wanted a more independent church and asked for a separate Icelandic Church Assembly to discuss and decide on church matters within the country. An Advisory Church Council (*Kirkjuráð*) was founded in 1930 and a Church Assembly (*Kirkjuþing*) with authority in church matters, i.e. liturgy and church teachings, was established in 1957. These bodies were elected by the clergy and representatives of the local people. Since 1938, lay people have also participated in the elections of the bishops. Since 1997, the majority in the Church Assembly consists of lay people and the assembly's president must be one of them.

Since 1944, Iceland has been a Republic and the President of the country is nominally the head of the National Church, even if he or she, as the populace in general, enjoys the right of religious freedom. The same goes for the governmental minister,

who is responsibility for church affairs. Hence, neither the president nor the minister of church affairs has to be a member of the National Church (Pétursson 2000).

The Role of Religion in the Constitution

It is noteworthy that the established Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland is named *Þjóðkirkja*, which literally means the Church of the people or the nation. The Danish constitution has from the very first emphasized the communal aspect of the established Lutheran Church by naming it *Folkekirke*, whereas the Established Lutheran Church in Sweden was named *Swedish Church* (Svenska kyrkan), which was explicitly declared to be a state church until the separation of state and church in the year 2000. Article 62 in the Icelandic Constitution states: «The Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the national church of Iceland and, as such, it shall be supported and protected by the state. This may be amended by law» (Parliament 2011). The amendment, changing the Icelandic Constitution on this issue, was added in 1915, when the question of the relations of the National Church to the Danish administration was a hot, political subject. According to Article 79 in the Icelandic Constitution, Parliament can easily change the relationship of the National Church and the state. The article states: «If Alþingi passes an amendment to the status of the Church under Article 62, it shall be submitted to a vote for approval or rejection by secret ballot of all those eligible to vote» (Parliament 2011).

This addendum has put at ease some of those, who could not accept the privileged status of the National Church as it is expressed in the Constitution itself, and who have, for ideological reasons, maintained that religion is a private matter for each individual. Some opponents of the «national church system» have, therefore, left the National Church to become members of some of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church congregations (Pétursson 1990).

The Constitution assumes that other religious associations, than those that are registered, can operate within the country. Article 63 in the Constitution states: «All persons have the right to form religious associations and to practice their religion in conformity with their individual convictions. Nothing may however be preached or practised which is prejudicial to good morals or public order» (Parliament 2011).

Article 64 in the Constitution states: «No one may lose any of his civil or national rights on account of his religion, nor may anyone refuse to perform any generally applicable civil duty on religious grounds. Everyone shall be free to remain outside religious associations. No one shall be obliged to pay any personal dues to any religious association of which he is not a member.» Article 65 confirms the equality before law and the human rights of all irrespective of religion: «Everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of sex, religion, opinion, national origin, race, colour, property, birth or other status. Men and women shall enjoy equal rights in all respects» (Parliament 2011).

Financial Contributions of the State to the National Church

Religious community-membership taxes are collected by the state from every member of a religious association registered by the Bureau of Statistics (Hagstofan) and distributed proportionally to the registered associations. This is a personal tax (the amount is fixed by the state), but since 1989 this tax has been index-related so that it increases in accordance with the tax base. This index relation brought about a great change for the parishes, especially the more numerous ones, as they could afford more varied parish activities, employ more church workers and build new churches and congregation halls.

A certain percentage of the religious-community tax is set aside for the maintenance of cemeteries and towards the cost of funeral services. These matters still are for the most part the responsibility of the National Church, but in recent years they are not exclusively so. In 1932, the cemeteries and the funeral-service office of the Reykjavík Area Deaneries (including the two adjacent municipalities of Kópavogur and Seltjarnarnes) founded a company, the governing body of which includes representatives of the different parishes of the National Church within the municipalities in question. In 1980, when a new burial ground at Gufunes in Reykjavík was established, a part of the grounds was kept un-consecrated to serve the needs of people of other faiths than Christianity (Cemeteries 2011; Interview with Þórsteinn Ragnarsson). This consideration was further guaranteed in the law on cemeteries passed in 1993 (Parliament Law 36/1993 art. 6). A recent proposal put before Alþingi recommends that in every new cemetery, arrangements should be made for the burial of Buddhists, Muslims and Pagans.

Since 2002, registered religious associations with more than 1500 members, 16 years of age and older, have the right to be represented on the governing board of every cemetery. This means that the Roman Catholic Church and the Free Lutheran Churches have their representatives on the Board of the Cemeteries of the Reykjavík Deaneries (Kirkjugarðar Reykjavíkurprófastsdæma). In communities outside the Greater Capital City area, the parish councils have either automatically been in charge of the cemeteries or they have jointly elected a special governing board for that purpose. This means that since 2002, the principle of representation of other religious associations has been the same as for the capital-city-area cemeteries. Since that same year, all registered religious associations are allowed to have their own cemeteries.

Table 1: Financial contributions of the state to the National Church in 1988 in millions of Icelandic Crowns. (The cemetery tax and the church tax collected by the state are not included)

Bishop's Office, administration	28
Parish ministers (salaries mostly)	209
The Christian Fund (Kristnisjóður)	24
The Church Buildings Fund and maintenance of main churches	25
Total sum	286

Source: Parliament 1988 (Fjárlög (State budget)).

The total sum was 0,110 per cent of the GNP for 1988.

In 1997, the ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs handed most administrative functions of the National Church over to the Bishop's Office, the Church Headquarters, on the basis of an agreement of transfer of the land properties of the church to the state. This change in the position of the National Church in its relations to the state is apparent, when we compare the figures for 1988 in table 1 with the figures for the years 1998 and 2008 in table 2.

Table 2: Financial contributions of the state to the National Church in 1998 and 2008 in thousands of Euros. (The cemetery tax and the church tax collected by the state are not included)

	1998	2008
Bishop's Office, administration	739	1130
Parish pastors' salaries	5909	9062
Other projects of the Bishops Office	1024	1577
Church Fund (Kirkjumálasjóður)	1374	2228
Christian Fund (Kristnisjóður)	389	706
Equalization Fund for the parishes (Jöfnunarsjóður)	2203	2879
Total sum	11638	17576

Source: Parliament 1998; 2008 (Fjárlög (State budget)). The figures for 1998 are based on the 1999 currency rate.

The total sum in Euros in current rate 1988=1,74 million; 1998= 5,47 million and in 2008=13,6 million. In 1988, the financial contribution to the church was 0,153 per cent of the GNP and in 2008 it was 0,150 per cent. The official consumer-price index for the period 1988–2008 is 2.9417 and for the period 1998–2008 it is 1.6787 (Bureau of Statistics 1989, 1999, 2009). In 1988, the salaries for the clergy are 73 per cent of the total contribution of the state to the National Church, in 1998 they are 50,7 per cent, and in 2008 they are 51,5 per cent.

The legislation on the National Church (the National Church Law), adopted by Alþingi in 1997, on the status, government and operation of the Church (nr. 78/1997), brought about a major change in its legal regulations and consequentially in church and state relations. The Evangelical Lutheran National Church was defined as a specific and independent religious association, having special relations with the state. Both the state and leading church members favoured this new law. The state officials had progressively become more and more uncomfortable and uneasy with their responsibility for church matters, partly because they found themselves unqualified for the task and also because they found that the privileged position of the National Church was increasingly criticized on the base of the principle of equality among religious associations. However, most of both the state and church officials wanted to maintain the principle of state support and protection of the National Church. Some leading spokesmen of the National Church were eager to gain more independence from Alþingi and state authorities because they felt that these relations made it difficult for the church to adapt to new situations. They observed that some of the members of Alþingi, and

several officials in the state apparatus were either indifferent or hostile to the church. Moreover, they expected the church to be better placed to realize its role in society, if it became more independent and thus more favourably positioned to operate on its own terms (National Church of Iceland 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997).

In the National Church Law of 1997, the executive power in church matters was transferred to the Bishop's Office and the legislative power in church matters transferred to the Church Assembly. This new legislation, as previously mentioned, was based on an agreement between the National Church and the state concerning the land property of the Church. Previously, the Ministry of Agriculture had been responsible for the control of this property and there was an agreement that the profits would nominally be used to pay the salaries of the clergy, towards the maintenance of church buildings and to fund parish work. In the 1997 agreement, Church land, except the land that belonged to the pastors' residences, was officially transferred to the state, which in turn agreed to take on financial obligations concerning the salaries of the clergy, the maintenance of the Bishop's Office and some of the parish work.

According to the Icelandic church historian, Hjalti Hugason (2010:112), the new relations of the National Church and the Icelandic state are characterized by what he calls the «Collaboration Model», which in many ways differs from the Danish/Norwegian model, but is quite similar to the church and state relations in Sweden since 2000.

The state collects special religious-membership taxes, often called church taxes or congregational taxes, from everyone regardless of religious affiliation. This means that the religious-membership taxes are collected not only from every member of the registered religious associations, but also from members of unregistered religious associations or even individuals outside all religious associations. In the case of members of registered religious associations, the religious taxes are then paid by the state directly to the respective religious associations. However, in the case of members of unregistered religious associations and people outside all religious associations, the religious taxes were, until 2010, put by the state in a special cultural fund directed for a long time by a specially appointed committee within the University of Iceland. This cultural fund has now been discontinued and, instead, members of unregistered religious associations and people outside all religious associations are obligated to pay an amount equal to the religious-membership taxes directly to the state fund. The reason that the state still collects religious membership taxes for all registered religious associations is, implicitly or openly admitted, the positive evaluation of the authorities of the social and cultural contributions of religious associations. The official policy was to prevent people from denouncing their religious affiliation for economic reasons, not the least because it was expected that in many cases people would continue to ask for pastoral care and the religious services provided by the churches. In the year 2010, when the cultural fund was discontinued, the name of the ministry responsible for ecclesiastical affairs, *The Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs*, was changed to *The Ministry of Justice and Human Rights*.

Existence of Specific Church Legislation

The Ministry of Internal Affairs administers registration of religious associations and gives them certain rights and obligations according to law. There are several general requirements for registration stated in the law. A registered religious association must be a religious community with a core of practicing believers that can be recognized as a part of or related to a world religion that has historical or cultural roots. This community must also have regular gatherings, be rooted in the Icelandic society, and be composed of members that pay taxes to the Icelandic society (Parliament Law no. 108/1999, art. 3). The main reason for these requirements was that in previous years several applications had been made to the ministry referring to general or diffuse ways of religious practice.

For registration the following specific information is required by the state:

- 1 The name of the religious association and its address.
- 2 A list of members, their addresses and identity numbers.
- 3 Doctrines and connection with other religions or religious movements.
- 4 Laws and regulations concerning its financial matters.
- 5 The names of board members and the leader.
- 6 Activities of the religious association such as regular religious gatherings or anything confirming that it operates continuously (Parliament Law no. 108/1999, art. 3).

The ministry may also, if it considers it has reasons to, ask for further information regarding the organization and its operations, such as areas of operation or divisions into congregations or groups if these aspects apply. The religious association applying for registration must elect a leader responsible to the ministry for observing all stipulated requirements. As to the qualifications of the leader, the common laws pertaining to state officials apply.

Before the ministry grants registration, a special committee of three academics from the University of Iceland must give their approval: One is from the Faculty of Theology and Religion, one from the Faculty of Social Science and one from the Faculty of Law, the last one being the chairman of the committee. The committee is not allowed to take into consideration academic definitions on religion and must stick to a (rather unclear) definition provided by the state.

Until 2010, everyone was automatically registered at birth into the registered religious association of the mother or outside religious associations, if the mother was thus registered. Now the rule is that the parents or other custodians formally apply for the registration of the child. If the child is 12 years old or older, it must be consulted when a decision is taken concerning the registration of religious membership. Persons 16 years of age and older can decide themselves to change their religious registration. According to the letter of the law, nobody can be a member of more than one registered religious association (Parliament Law no. 108/1999, art. 8).

Since 1994, the National Church has had in its service a pastor offering special service for immigrants, mainly assisting them and their families in a new country, helping them to keep their cultural identities and establishing contacts with their faith communities. As such, he often works simultaneously with the Red Cross assisting refugees and the authorities giving advice and even helping prisoners of other faiths. This pastor, a Japanese convert from Buddhism, often engages in issues of human rights in the media, where he commonly discusses the cause of refugees and actively participates in public debates on such issues. He has also been active in politics and is one of the three representatives of the National Church within the Interfaith Forum, founded in 2006 (Interview with Toshiki Toma and Hreinn Hákonarson).

Laws on religious holidays have gradually become more liberal. The Law regarding the protection of holidays from 1997 refers specifically to the holidays of the National Church (Parliament Law no. 32/1997). The purpose of the law is to protect worship on the holy days of the Church year and to ensure peace, quiet, rest and recreation. The law places these holidays in three categories in regard to their sacredness. The most sacred are Christmas Eve and Christmas Day; next are the Good Friday, Easter Day and Pentecost and the least sacred are ordinary Sundays, the second day of Christmas, New Year's Day, Maundy Thursday, the second day of Easter, Ascension Day and the second day of Pentecost. On days in the first and the second category, various kinds of entertainment are prohibited, such as ball-room dances, private parties in restaurants or other public places, public exhibitions and public gatherings offering lotteries, bingos and other similar games. Exceptions for the second category holidays are given to hotels, drugstores, gas stations, taxis and airport services, flower stores, video stores and food stores under 600 square meters in floor space. Sports and outdoor activities are also allowed. Art galleries, concert halls, theatres, cinemas and exhibition halls presenting science to the general public, art galleries and libraries are allowed to open at three o'clock pm. Drug stores, taxis, airports and hotels are permitted to offer their services during Christmas.

The restrictions pertaining to amusements and commerce on the most important religious holidays have in recent years been criticized by a number of people, especially atheists. The atheist association Disbelief (*Vantrú*) has for some years held bingo gatherings in a public garden in front of the Parliament building, Alþingi, on Good Friday in protest against these restrictions. This has, however, hardly created any media attention and the police have observed these incidents without interfering.

Separation of Church and State

The leftist government that came into power in 2009 initiated a revision of the constitution of Iceland by a special constitutional council, the members of which were chosen in a national election. The constitutional revision is supposed to modernize the administrative and governmental structure of Iceland in order to prevent corruption and financial catastrophes similar to those that hit the country in 2008, when the Icelandic banks collapsed. The intention is also to create a foundation for a more democratic

political system and a legislation that is more in line with human rights and the rights of minorities as defined by the European Constitution and the United Nations charter on human rights. In the proposal of this council, presented in late summer 2011, the article on the state's protection and support to the National Church is excluded, and, indeed, the Christian basis of either the law or the state are not mentioned. This proposal has now been handed over to Alþingi, which might put it to a national referendum either altered or in the current form.

The demand for the separation of church and state (in one way or another) has become ever more vocal since the middle of the last decade of the 20th century. Some activists, not the least among atheists, vigorously propose an entirely secular society, where religious associations would not be allowed to operate in any way in the public sphere, especially not as pertains to kindergartens, schools, civil religious symbols and festivals. The Asa Faith Society sued the Icelandic state because of its financial contributions to the National Church, maintaining that they are in violation of the constitutional principle of equality of all regardless of religion. The Asa Faith Society lost its case before both the local court and the Supreme Court of Iceland in 2007 (case no. 109/2007), but has now appealed the case to the European Court of Human Rights at Strassbourg. Those working towards the separation of church and state commonly refer to opinion pools regularly conducted by Gallup in Iceland since 1994, which indicate that between about 51 per cent and 74 per cent of the population support separation in one way or another.¹

Law on Blasphemy

The existing law on «blasphemy», dating from 1940 with minor changes made in 1998, is a part of the criminal law. Article 125 states: «Anyone publicly mocking or insulting doctrines or divine worship of a legal religious association within the country can be fined or imprisoned up to three months. Only public prosecutors can bring such cases to courts» (Parliament Law no. 19/1940). Very few people have been sentenced and no one since 1983. All complaints or charges that have been brought forward within the period covered in this study have either been dropped or withdrawn.

Interestingly, article 124 of the criminal law focuses both on desecration of corpses and that of the holy service of the Church. The same penalties are stipulated for both these kinds of violence (fines or imprisonment for up to three months).

Economic Contributions to Religious Associations from the State

With very few exceptions, no religious associations, except the National Church, receive direct financial contributions from the state. Still, local communities occasionally provide financial support for important social contributions of various registered or unregistered religious associations, such as towards the youth work done by the YMCA and YWCA, and in support of independent Lutheran lay-people associations

within the National Church. The Ethical Humanist Association, *Siðmennt*, has received some financial support from the Reykjavík council, towards the cost of their annual «civil confirmation» classes for teenagers (City of Reykjavík 2009). In 2009, however, this support was temporarily terminated due to the economic crises within the country. In a number of cases other religious associations also get some financial support towards the operation of private nurseries or schools run by them. Within the period of this study, the Roman Catholic Church and the Seventh Day Adventists operated private Primary Schools (interviews with Eric Gudmundsson and Jakob Rolland) and the Pentecostal Assembly and the Ananda Marga operated nurseries. Perhaps the most interesting instance, where the state gave financial support to a religious association, was in the case of The Keep (Byrgið), run by a small, unregistered Neo-Pentecostal association that operated for more than a decade offering treatment for alcoholics and drug addicts, providing them with shelter and a temporary communal home in co-operation with the Ministry of Social Welfare. Even prisoners, showing good behaviour, were allowed to finish their sentences at this communal home. In 2006, however, accusations against the pastor of this association for sexual and financial misconduct received huge media attention, leading to his arrest and later to his imprisonment.

The Icelandic Civil Religion

Icelandic civil religion refers to rituals and themes that in one way or another underline the ultimate values and the ultimate concerns of the Icelandic people, as they are expressed publicly by the representatives of the nation on festive or special occasions. These are especially articulated on solemn occasions in the life of the nation and at public festivities that refer to national history and the social order, such as the National Day and on New Years Eve. On these occasions, sermons of the National Church are often a part of the festive programs. Such is the case at the opening session of Parliament (Alþingi) each year, which includes a procession of the Government and the members of Parliament from the Cathedral to the Parliament House, lead by the Bishop of Iceland and the President. Not all members of Parliament show up on these occasions, especially some members of the socialist parties tend to be absent, sometimes simultaneously and openly protesting the custom. The Ethical Humanists (*Siðmennt*) have recently started offering an alternative service for the members of Parliament on this occasion, but this has not been very successful, although some members of Parliament are sympathetic towards the Humanist.

In the summer of 2000, a big national festival was organized on the occasion of the millennium of Christianity in Iceland. The main celebrations were held at Þingvellir, a national holy place, where Alþingi held its open-air sessions from the year 930 up to the end of the 18th century. At that very place in the year 1000, more exactly at the Law Rock (Lögberg), Christianity was adopted as the official religion of Iceland through a majority decision of a general assembly of Alþingi, and simultaneously, as is stated in the old annals of the nation, accepted to be the ethical foundation of the laws and the social order of the people of Iceland. This celebration was the joint endeavour of the

National Church and the state, as the Government of Iceland financed the festivities (costing 365 millions Icelandic Crowns), which were attended by a number of distinguished foreign guests. The Church leadership and the Government put great store in this event. Unfortunately, other religious associations than the National Church, however, experienced themselves as more or less outsiders in these festivities, notably the Free Lutheran Church of Reykjavik and the Asa Faith Association (Interview with Hjörtur Magni Jóhannsson). That very same year Iceland celebrated two other major events, the millennium of the discovery of America by the Icelandic Viking Leifur Eiriksson and the election of the Capital City, Reykjavik, as one of the world cities of that year. The celebrations of these events were administered by a specially established office in Reykjavik under the auspices of the Prime Minister. This office carefully watched over the national and cultural image of the nation, as it appeared in the planning and presentation of the various cultural and religious events related to these celebrations. All this, however, did not progress without criticism, especially from members of the Asa Faith Association, the Ethical Humanist Association and the media. It was pointed out that the authorities had overestimated the number of people that would take part in the millennium celebrations at Þingvellir in June 2000, and this was seen this as a sign of the decreasing support for the National Church among the general public. Similarly, many criticized these festivities and the projects related to them as being too costly. Þingvellir is not only a holy place to the National Church and Parliament, but also to the Asa Faith Association, which has, since it was established in 1972, used the location extensively for its religious gatherings.

Both the Prime Minister and the President address the nation annually, the former on New Year's Eve and the latter on New Year's Day. In 1988/89 both ended their speeches by asking God to bless the nation and grand happiness and prosperity in the coming year. In 1998/99 neither did so. Again in 2008/09, just after the fall of the Icelandic banks, neither mentioned God in their greetings, but instead the President praised the victory of the Icelandic handball team in an international Olympic competition that summer. On all occasions, both the President and the Prime Minister referred to national poets and emphasised the importance of the beauty of Icelandic nature for recreation of the people and as an inspiration to the good spirits of the nation. On New Year's Eve 2008 the Prime Minister dedicated most of his speech to talking about the international financial crisis and the fall of the Icelandic banks, how this could happen, what it meant for the Icelandic society and how the nation could recover from the crisis. In his 2009 New Year's Day speech the President, also, dedicated a large part of his speech to the economic crises, but, unlike the Prime Minister, admitted that he had overestimated the leaders of the Icelandic financial expansion and regretted his unconditional support to their cause. Interestingly, these leaders seem always to dwell on the national culture; the importance of the national independence; the economic welfare; the importance of good education and on how they know exactly how Icelanders will be able to continue to be among the richest nations in the world.

On October 6th 2008, when the inevitable fall of the major Icelandic banks was announced, the Prime Minister, Geir Haarde, addressed the nation in a live television broadcast acknowledging this fact and explaining the emergency measures taken by

the Government. Even if the nation were aware of the difficult situation, they didn't realize until then how bad it really was. To emphasize how grave the situation had become, the Prime Minister ended his speech by appealing to God by saying: «God bless the Icelandic People.» This was an unusual ending indeed of a political address and brought emphatically home to people how utterly serious the situation actually was.

The basic themes of the Icelandic civil religion are national independence, the Icelandic language and culture, economic progress and the competitive power of the national character. Foreigners and international contacts are valued as long as they contribute to the national prosperity. Immigrants are welcome as long as they learn the Icelandic language and are good workers. Human rights are important, not the least because Icelanders value individualism highly, but these values are still secondary to the Icelandic civil religion as such. Judging from the festive speeches of the national leaders, the Christian Church and Christianity itself do not score high as civil religious values unless they are shown to contribute directly to the national culture and the history of the nation.

Concluding remarks

The increasing number of religious faiths and communities within the country and considerations concerning international agreements on human rights have, when everything is taken into consideration, furthered the process of differentiation of the state and the National Church to such an extent that one may pretty certainly expect further separation in the near future, although the possible extent of such separation will continued to be a matter of debate. The law on the National Church accepted in 1997 was a milestone in the process of differentiation of the established Church and the public sphere of the official society. Even if the National Church has gradually become an independent body and relatively autonomous in its relations to the state, it did not lose official, financial support and managed, to the contrary, to reach a favourable financial agreement with the state. The role of the Church in the nation-building process of the past is most likely of great importance in this respect. It was not until the economic recession hit, as a consequence of the fall of the Icelandic private banks in 2008 that the state decreased its financial support to the National Church, just as it was forced to do in the case of numerous other institutions within or outside the state.

The Church and state relations in Iceland have become more similar to the Swedish/Finnish model and more different from the Danish/Norwegian one, a result already presented in the Gustafsson (1985) project on religious change in the Nordic countries. During the first decade of the 21st century, the process of differentiation has become more rapid, and in some areas there have been conflicts and tensions about religion, religious education in schools and the role of the National Church. These have been particularly apparent in the mass media. The National Church seems to have lost some of its previous civil-religious functions, but Christian values are still accepted, when it comes to expressing national and cultural values. Differentiation and religious plura-

lism goes hand in hand with some tendencies towards polarization on religion, which does make secularism more outspoken, but this has also led to some concern about the Christian values and their function as the foundation of the Icelandic society and its culture (Pétursson 2005).

In some areas of social life the National Church has managed to co-operate with other religious associations and adapt to a more differentiated and pluralistic society. It has adapted itself to the principle of religious freedom and become more differentiated from various state institutions. It has, partly because of this and because of the democratization of its own institutions, continued to enjoy a privileged position that is legitimated by the constitutional article stating that the state is obliged to protect and support the National Church. But this privileged position has been increasingly questioned by politicians and human rights activists. To what an extent the Christian themes within the Icelandic civil religion will safeguard the privileged position of the National Church will most likely be seen more clearly in the near future.

Note

¹ Those replying by marking «don't know» or «not sure» are not included (Capacent Gallup).

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Interviews by the author with following key persons as a part of the collection of data for this article (notes kept by the author):

Rev. Eric Gudmundsson, pastor of the Seventh-Day Adventists. (February, 2011.)

Rev. Hjörtur Magni Jóhannsson, pastor of the Lutheran Free Church in Reykjavík. (June, 2009.)

Rev. Hreinn Hákonarson, prison chaplain. (April, 2011.)

Rev. Jakob Rolland, Roman Catholic priest. (April, 2011.)

Ólafur Torfason, a Roman Catholic. (April, 2011.)

Rev. Toshiki Toma, chaplain for immigrants. (March, 2011.)

Þórsteinn Ragnarsson, director of Reykjavík's Cemeteries. (April, 2011.)