

Tolerance, Intolerance, and Fanaticism:

W. D. Valgardson's Reaction to the Religious Debate in New Iceland

By

Erla Louise Colwill Anderson

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree of**

Master of Arts

Department of Icelandic Language and Literature

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Manitoba

© Copyright by Erla Louise Colwill Anderson 2000



National Library
of Canada

Acquisitions and
Bibliographic Services

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale
du Canada

Acquisitions et
services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file *Votre référence*

Our file *Notre référence*

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-53082-5

Canada

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

COPYRIGHT PERMISSION PAGE**

Tolerance, Intolerance, and Fanaticism:

W.D. Valgardson's Reaction to the Religious Debate in New Iceland

BY

Erla Louise Colwill Anderson

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

of

Master of Arts

ERLA LOUISE COLWILL ANDERSON © 2000

Permission has been granted to the Library of The University of Manitoba to lend or sell copies of this thesis/practicum, to the National Library of Canada to microfilm this thesis/practicum and to lend or sell copies of the film, and to Dissertations Abstracts International to publish an abstract of this thesis/practicum.

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither this thesis/practicum nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Chapter 1: Religious Debate in New Iceland.....	3
1.1 Introduction.....	3
1.2 A Brief History of Settlement in New Iceland	5
1.3 Reverend Páll Þorláksson	12
1.4 Reverend Jón Bjarnason	16
1.5 Lutheranism in Iceland.....	20
1.6 Lutheranism in North America	21
1.7 Religious Controversy in New Iceland	23
1.8 Related Religious Dissent	29
1.9 Conclusion	30
Chapter 2: Valgardson’s Treatment of Tolerance, Intolerance, and Fanaticism.....	32
2.1 Introduction.....	32
2.2 Definition of the Themes	33
2.3 Valgardson’s Works.....	33
2.3.1 The Novel <u>Gentle Sinners</u>	33
2.3.2 Short Stories.....	34
2.3.3 Poetry	35
2.4 The Themes.....	36

2.5 Tolerance.....	36
2.5.1 Rebirth.....	36
2.5.2 Spirituality.....	38
2.5.3 Acceptance.....	40
2.5.4 Nurture.....	44
2.5.5 Eden.....	45
2.6 Intolerance.....	46
2.6.1 Killing and Death.....	47
2.6.2 Organized Religion.....	49
2.6.3 Judgment and Rejection.....	53
2.6.4 New World Values.....	55
2.6.5 Hell.....	57
2.7 Fanaticism.....	59
2.7.1 Religious Extremism.....	59
2.7.2 Abuse of Power.....	59
Chapter 3: The Author’s Reaction to History: Valgardson and the Aftermath of the Religious Debate.....	62
3.1 Introduction.....	62
3.2 Valgardson’s Themes Reflected in the Religious Debate.....	62
3.3 Ethnicity, Language, Culture, and Religion.....	64
3.4 The Attempted Banning of <u>Gentle Sinners</u>	65
CONCLUSION.....	68
WORKS CITED.....	72

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout my journey in writing this thesis, I have been indebted to several people, who have, with generous support, helped me to achieve my goal. I thank Dr. Daisy Neijmann, my initial advisor. I have been inspired by her wealth of knowledge, valuable insight, and thoughtful encouragement. To Dr. David Arnason, I extend warm thanks for adopting the role of my advisor. His expertise, insightful criticism, and mastery of style have been of great value to me. Thanks go to Dr. Dennis Cooley and Dr. Barry Ferguson, my committee members, whose interest in my topic was encouraging and whose insightful suggestions were invaluable. I thank my husband Ármann for his patient advice, his love, and his daily encouragement. To my parents I give thanks for their unconditional belief that I could achieve my dreams. I dedicate this thesis with love to my grandmothers, Pauline Colwill and Ásdís Anderson. I have always admired their thirst for learning. They have helped me form my identity.

Tolerance, Intolerance, and Fanaticism: W. D. Valgardson's Reaction to the Religious
Debate in New Iceland
By
Erla Louise Colwill Anderson

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts in Icelandic Language and Literature

ABSTRACT

In the 1870s, religious controversy and its resulting dissent created a division in the immigrant community of New Iceland. The heart of the religious debate centred on Páll Þorláksson's orthodox teachings of the Norwegian Lutheran Synod and Jón Bjarnason's liberal views espoused by the Lutheran State Church of Iceland. The debate resulted in animosity between community members to the point that the community split. Although poor living conditions played some role, rancour over religious dissent was the primary dividing force, leading, in 1879, to a migration to North Dakota in the footsteps of Þorláksson.

This thesis will focus on the writings of Icelandic-Canadian author W. D. (William Dempsey) Valgardson and the religious events that took place in New Iceland long before his birth. It will show how Valgardson, drawing from this religious heritage, creates themes of tolerance, intolerance and fanaticism.

Valgardson claims that a moral quality exists in his writing, a concern with Christian and non-Christian behaviour, and the use and abuse of religious power. This thesis will examine these themes in his novel, short stories, and poetry, in light of the historic events of religious strife and bonding in New Iceland.

INTRODUCTION

The religious events that occurred in New Iceland and the effect of these events, over a century later, on the writings of William Dempsey Valgardson are the topic of this thesis. The religious past of this community and resulting attitudes towards Lutheranism and religious fanaticism are reflected in the author's works. He explores themes of religious fanaticism and religious and social tolerance and examines the destructive effects of organized religion on his characters. In this thesis I will show how, drawing from his Icelandic-Canadian religious past, Valgardson creates those themes in such a way that they can be related to acceptance and rejection from mainstream society, which his characters experience. Valgardson examines issues of ethnic identity, drawing most of his subject matter from his Interlake Manitoba experience.

Beginning in the 1870s about a quarter of the population of Iceland migrated to North America – approximately 15,000 people in all. A group of these immigrants settled in the Gimli area on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg. A reserve, New Iceland, was formed with its own constitution, government and laws.

In the latter part of the 1870s, a religious debate and the dissent resulting from it created a paradoxical situation in New Iceland: Community values were cemented and at the same time community members were divided.

Dissent between Jón Bjarnason and Páll Þorláksson, the two pastors in New Iceland, came to a head in the spring of 1879. The resulting debate created animosity between settlers, when they formed two opposing factions: Jónsmenn (“Jón’s people”) and Pálsmenn (“Páll’s people”). Eventually, the community split, when one group

migrated to North Dakota with Þorláksson in the fall of 1879. Although poor living conditions played a role, rancour over the religious debate was the primary dividing force.

The central argument of this thesis is that attitudes arising from the religious dissent in New Iceland in 1879 filtered down over generations of Icelandic-Canadians to find expression in Valgardson's work. Valgardson is an ethnic-Canadian writer who is well aware of his cultural past. The themes of religious bigotry that he expresses are first found in the attitudes at the time of the religious dissent in New Iceland in the late 19th century. Although these themes appear in many of Valgardson's writings, they are most notable in his first novel, Gentle Sinners (1980), in which the protagonist Eric is abused by his parents' restrictive religious attitudes.

Those issues are symbolic of broader feelings – those of Icelandic immigrants in Manitoba's Interlake area – of alienation from a majority host culture (English Canadians), an acceptance into minority culture (other ethnic groups) as well as a strengthening of common ties within the Icelandic-Canadian community.

Throughout many of his writings, Valgardson explores the effects of organized religion. This thesis will examine these themes in his writings in light of the historic events of religious strife and bonding in New Iceland.

Chapter 1: Religious Debate in New Iceland

1.1 Introduction

In this opening chapter, I address the historical background of immigrant Icelanders from the time of their emigration from Iceland to North America around 1870, to the beginning of the 20th century, a time when several religious upheavals occurred within the Icelandic communities of Manitoba. I focus on the debate between Reverend Jón Bjarnason and Reverend Páll Þorláksson over Lutheranism in New Iceland: on the preaching of Þorláksson, who followed the teachings of the Norwegian Lutheran Synod, and on Bjarnason's views, which were in keeping with the Icelandic Lutheran State Church. Þorláksson's views appealed to people seeking a literal interpretation of the Bible but were seen by detractors to be inflexible. By contrast, Bjarnason's Lutheranism required a more personal interpretation of scripture and was more traditionally Icelandic in its liberal policy (Lindal 316). In the end their diverse perspectives resulted in a division of the Lutheran congregations and a physical split in New Iceland.

The role that these two pastors played in the formation of Lutheranism in New Iceland has been of crucial importance to the history of the settlement. The debate between Bjarnason and Þorláksson is notorious in the Icelandic-Canadian community even today. The pastors' names are still household words among Icelandic-Canadians, and issues of language attrition and nationalism, as well as religion, are addressed whenever the New Iceland reserve is discussed. These issues were central to the argument, if only in retrospect.

The New Iceland settlers likely cemented their religious views during the debate. Indeed they took sides, forming two opposing groups: Jónsmenn ("Jón's people") and

Pálsmenn (“Páll’s people”). The debate generated by the pastors’ religious discussions not only sparked public interest, but also exerted a profound influence on community life when one group followed Páll Þorláksson to North Dakota, resulting in a significant depletion of the population of New Iceland.

Conflict between differing doctrinal opinions appears to be a rare occurrence in the history of the Icelandic people. The Icelanders left a country where Lutheranism was a cohesive force for over 300 years and before that Catholicism had reigned peacefully for 550 years. It is difficult to imagine how apparently small differences in theological outlook could create enough tension in a community to physically divide its members, with repercussions for several generations of Icelandic-Canadians to come.

Although religious conflict was rare in Iceland, political conflict was not. Iceland had been ruled by foreign powers from the time that it first lost its independence to Norway in 1264. In 1397, Denmark replaced Norway as the ruling power. In the mid-19th century, driven by the Romantic Movement in Europe with its nationalist credo, Icelanders worked toward a government responsible to all people, and self-government in domestic affairs was granted in 1874. During this period, nationalism found expression in patriotic poems, a national anthem, and a language purification movement (Gjerset 208, 246, 410-11).

Icelanders who wanted to establish a separate colony in the New World were concerned with the preservation of their language and culture. Since saga times, Icelandic culture and identity has been closely linked with language. The possibility of losing their language amongst an English-speaking majority in North America was a reality. However, the immediate concern for newly arrived immigrants in North America was

survival. It was only after the first few hard years in the colony of New Iceland, that settlers thought of the preservation of their language and culture in a foreign land, with the establishment of Icelandic newspapers.

The importance of maintaining cultural traditions in Iceland was carried over to the New World. The leaders in the Icelandic community in North America eventually secured an exclusive settlement for Icelanders, away from multicultural centres like Winnipeg. Since, at the time of emigration to North America, Denmark ruled Iceland's affairs, the New World, oddly, was perhaps a better place than Iceland to preserve Icelandic language and culture. Furthermore, nationalistic sentiments may have been compounded by economic hardship at home. Denmark had secured a monopoly over the Icelandic fishing industry, and many Icelanders wanted to reject all Danish influences on their society. It was therefore an easy task for Canadian immigration agents to capitalize on the Icelanders' desire to be free of Danish rule by persuading them to immigrate to North America. Potential immigrants were likely enticed by the prospect of free land, secure employment, financial prosperity, and for some, the prospect of adventure. However, the dire straits in which they found themselves during their journey to North America and after their arrival, must have eliminated the sense of útþrá among many.¹

1.2 A Brief History of Settlement in New Iceland ²

There were several reasons for the migration from Iceland to North America. Between 1856 and 1860 an epidemic killed 200,000 sheep, the country's staple food and

¹ The term útþrá refers to a longing to go abroad. Kristjanson, among others, uses it to explain the sentiment with which some Icelanders emigrated.

² Kristjanson (pp. 10, 11, 15, 17-20, 23-26, 29, 30, 32-34, 43, 49-51, 71, 85, 129) is the source for this section unless otherwise noted.

main source of livelihood. In a series of harsh winters, pack ice extended further and for a longer period than usual, causing climatic changes that prevented access to fishing and led to crop failures. The winter of 1858 to 1859 was particularly cold, which led Icelanders to explore the possibility of emigrating to secure a better way of life. In 1859, a society was established for Icelanders interested in settling in Brazil (Þorsteinsson 2: 71); however, it was not until July 1863 that a group of some 40 Icelanders migrated to Brazil (Þorsteinsson 2: 79).

In 1872, the first group of Icelanders emigrated. Páll Þorláksson joined this initial group of 22 people and proceeded to Wisconsin with 20 immigrants. Sigtryggur Jónasson, who arrived in Canada in September of that year and would later join a delegation to explore a permanent Icelandic colony, remained in Canada to explore the possibility of the immigrants settling in Ontario (Jónasson 5).

Icelandic immigrants searched for an area in North America large enough to establish a permanent, self-governing colony and to find better opportunities for work than existed in Iceland. Letters from Icelandic settlers such as Páll Þorláksson, who was already established in North America, spoke favourably of the possibility of retaining Icelandic language and culture, and of job opportunities. Þorláksson expressed his view that Icelanders could best retain their language if they had their own newspaper, supported teachers and priests in their communities, and maintained correspondence with newspapers in Iceland (Þorláksson 61).

By the 1870s, plans for a permanent Icelandic colony in North America were underway. During the last quarter of the 19th century, Iceland, along with the rest of the world, was in economic depression. Domestic products, such as meat and grains, were

scarce due to the harsh climate, and imported goods were beyond the means of most Icelanders. Job prospects were probably the most enticing factor in the migration of Icelanders during that period.

The New World was a place of ample employment opportunities and land. And this was certainly the case in Canada. In 1867, the British North America Act created the Dominion of Canada, and in 1870, with their purchase of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company, Canada began promoting immigration to the west in earnest (Morton 81). Prime Minister John A. Macdonald further encouraged western settlement during this decade by putting the wheels in motion for the development of the Canadian Pacific Railway coast to coast (Friesen 166, 181, 184-5, 261).

Meanwhile, the collapse of many European banks saw Canada facing an economic crisis in 1873 (Morton 89). The Dominion government responded by encouraging the immigration of agricultural workers and sent two agents to Iceland to promote Canada as a permanent destination. In 1875, the cause was aided by the eruption of the volcano Askja, which destroyed farmland and livestock (Þorsteinsson 1: 41).

In 1873, 165 more Icelanders emigrated, landing in Quebec. Although some moved to Wisconsin where Þorláksson had secured work for them, others travelled to Ontario (Þorsteinsson 2: 191-92). The immigration authorities offered free transportation to a bloc of 200 acres of land in Rosseau in the Parry Sound district of Ontario, as well as temporary housing conditional upon a three-month stay (Lindal 92). Employment in this area was scarce and temporary, consisting of farm and government work; this settlement was for the most part abandoned by the spring of 1874, when some Icelanders moved to better land elsewhere in the district (Þorsteinsson 2: 204).

In September 1874, 365 Icelanders from Northern Iceland arrived in Canada, where Jónasson, who was then an immigrant agent of the Dominion government, met them. The immigrants were advised to settle in Ontario (Jónasson 7). They agreed to remain in Canada rather than to migrate to the United States on three conditions: 1) that they have the same liberties as native-born citizens, 2) that they receive ample land for a colony, and 3) that they keep their personal, linguistic, and national rights in perpetuity. The majority of this group settled in Kinmount, Ontario, where Jónasson had found work for many immigrants on the railway, and they were soon established in permanent housing (Jónasson 7). However, there was insufficient land to maintain a colony and a lack of proper food supplies resulted in illness and several deaths. Although work was scarce in the district as a whole, a group of settlers moved to a nearby community to work when employment on the railway dwindled.

An incentive to settle in Nova Scotia came from that province's government, which offered one hundred acres of land to everyone over the age of fifteen, a settlement allowance, a house, and provisions for a year. Intrigued by this offer, part of the group of Icelanders who arrived in Quebec in 1874 settled in Mooseland Heights, Nova Scotia, which they later named Markland. They were utterly destitute upon arrival and, although the provincial government was generous in its donation, Markland was a thick, rocky forest, unsuitable for farming. The Icelanders stayed until 1882, when the majority left in search of better prospects in the west. With the ease of travel afforded by the re-routing of the Canadian Pacific Railway through Winnipeg in 1881 and its connecting lines to North Dakota, the economy and population of these areas exploded (Friesen 205-6).

In the spring of 1875, a new settlement was discussed among the Kinmount residents. That summer four delegates, among them Sigtryggur Jónasson, were chosen to explore an area proposed for the Icelandic colony in the District of Keewatin (Porsteinsson 2: 326). Situated some 100 miles north of Winnipeg, just north of the new postage-stamp province of Manitoba – so called because of its shape and size – this area seemed ideal for a permanent Icelandic settlement. The Red River Valley provided fertile land and there was the possibility of work on the Canadian-Pacific railroad, which was to be constructed across the Red River at Selkirk (Friesen 178). A large area of undeveloped land was offered to the Icelanders by the Dominion government in 1875, which the immigrants named New Iceland (Friesen 261). The next step was to ask the Dominion government to help finance the move of the settlers from Kinmount. Lord Dufferin, Governor General of Canada, who had been impressed by Iceland and its people during his 1856 visit to the island, aided them in their request (Morton W. L. 162).

The promise by the Dominion government of a self-governing colony had community-wide appeal as a solution to the hardships faced in Kinmount. The New Iceland colony extended from the Northern Manitoba boundary to the White Mud River (presently the Icelandic River). It comprised an area sixteen kilometres west of the shore of Lake Winnipeg, and included Big Island (presently Hecla Island). The soil was fertile and there were trees for shelter and game and fish for sustenance.

In 1875, Icelanders left Kinmount for New Iceland. They boarded a steamer in Sarnia, Ontario, destined for Duluth, Minnesota. From there, they travelled by train to Fisher's Landing, Minnesota, and by steamer to Winnipeg, where they learned that no preparations had been made for their arrival in New Iceland. A plague of grasshoppers

had stripped much of the arable land around the city (Þorsteinsson 2: 326). Some single people stayed in Winnipeg to work as domestics or to find seasonal employment, as immediate prospects in New Iceland seemed slim. The settlers were to travel on flat boats to their destination, but the captain of the Hudson's Bay company steamer agreed to transport the women and children as far as Willow Point five kilometres south of what is today Gimli.

Finally, on October 21, 1875, 285 settlers, including the group from Ontario and other interested settlers from Minnesota, reached the settlement that was to become New Iceland. They named the area Gimli, in reference to the hall where the Norse gods would live in the reborn world after Ragnarök – Norse mythology's equivalent of doomsday.³ When the group arrived, the reality of their situation soon became apparent. The heavily wooded land made grain farming difficult, and it was too late in the season to make hay to feed livestock. Food was scarce and because they had not yet received the cows they had been promised, even milk was not available. The first winter was bitterly cold, leaving many sick. More settlers arrived the following summer and the situation worsened. A smallpox epidemic ravaged New Iceland in the winter of 1876 - 1877, killing over 100 immigrants and many local Aboriginal people. By November 1876 the outbreak had become so severe that the Manitoba government imposed a quarantine on New Iceland. A few doctors were dispatched and food supplies were provided, but the

³For a contemporary translation of the Norse name "Gimlé", described in the Edda poem, "Völuspá," I have relied on Völuspá: The Song of the Sybil. Trans. Paul B. Taylor and W. H. Auden. Iowa City: Windhover, 1968.

quarantine lasted for seven months, cutting off opportunities for employment outside the colony during the winter (Friesen 261).

When the first settlers arrived in Canada, their ideals of a self-supporting colony clashed with the harsh reality of living in the New World. In a foreign land, where they had to clear trees and rocks and farm and fish using unfamiliar methods, their primary concern was survival. The Icelanders attempted grain farming, but were unsuccessful due to inexperience; livestock- and fodder farming was the basis of Iceland's socio-economic structure and the main source of livelihood (Pétursson 25). The harsh climate, unfamiliar land, and the Icelanders' ignorance of grain production rendered the Icelanders less than successful as grain farmers.

Yet in spite of their many hardships, New Icelanders established themselves in the lake-fishing industry, and many lived to tell about the smallpox epidemic. In January 1878, the Dominion government passed New Iceland's constitution. The provisions of this agreement allowed for the division of the colony into districts, the building of schools, and for closer political alliances with the government in Ottawa (Morton, W. L. 177). Indeed alliances were kept with the Governor-General of Canada, Lord Dufferin, who visited the colony in 1877. During New Iceland's existence, the prevailing attitude was one of self-sufficiency.

By the summer of 1876, when a new wave of 1190 immigrant Icelanders settled in New Iceland, the population rose to over 1400 (Kristinsson xx). However, in the years following, several migrations from the colony led to the near disintegration of New Iceland. In 1879, Þorláksson left with a group for the Dakota Territory, as I will discuss later in this chapter. A series of floods occurred in 1879 and 1880, prompting some New

Icelanders to settle in nearby Selkirk and Argyle (Friesen 261; Þorsteinsson 3: 159). By 1881, the population had decreased to some 250 inhabitants. That same year the boundary of Manitoba was extended to include New Iceland (Morton, W. L. 197). Yet it was not until 1887 that New Iceland became a municipality of Manitoba, acquiring the privileges and responsibilities of any municipal government. Two major groups of immigrants arrived in 1883 and 1887, bringing 3162 Icelanders to Manitoba (Kristinsson xx; Morton, W. L. 223). In 1897, the Dominion government again promoted the immigration of Europeans, when Manitoba's economy boomed due to increased wheat production and favourable prices (Morton, W. L. 273-74). This time, however, Icelandic immigrants were outnumbered by their European counterparts, especially Ukrainians. When New Iceland was opened to settlement in 1897, the colony ceased to be. Thus the dream of an exclusively Icelandic settlement in the New World had come to an end.

1.3 Reverend Páll Þorláksson ⁴

Páll Þorláksson was born in Húsavík in Northern Iceland on November 13, 1849. He left for America on June 13, 1872, with his brother, Haraldur, and his sister-in-law, María, arriving in Quebec on July 15 and settling in Milwaukee (Þorsteinsson 2: 125). He entered the Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, in November of that year, destined to become a Lutheran pastor.

Þorláksson's concern for Icelandic immigrants was shown in these early years. In August 1873, he arranged temporary lodgings for newly arrived Icelanders in the homes of Norwegian settlers. He met a shipload of immigrant Icelanders as they landed in

⁴ Houser (pp. 6, 30, 76, 78-80, 82, 83, 92, 120, 121, 123, 124, 126, 128, 130, 136, 190) is the source for this section unless otherwise noted.

Quebec, escorting some to the United States. Biographer George Houser presents a different angle on Þorláksson than that of other Icelandic-Canadian historians, who often focus on the pastor's strict religious views. Houser paints Þorláksson as a caring man, dedicated to his vocation and helpful to those in need.

Þorláksson urged prospective immigrants to learn as much as they could about effective agricultural practices and to apprentice on established Norwegian farms once they settled in America (Þorláksson 60-61). He suggested that Icelandic immigrants had much to learn from the Norwegians, whose endurance he applauded: they had built a Lutheran college in Iowa from their own funds and had created a secure environment for further immigration from Norway (Þorláksson 60). Þorláksson was pragmatic about prospects in the New World in letters to his father. He stressed the need for English fluency to conduct business and warned Icelanders of the toil that lay ahead of them in making a living in North America. He claimed that, although no settler could remain idle and that the land must be worked for profit, immigrants could be successful (Þorláksson 60).

The year 1874 saw the celebration of two events for Icelanders at home and abroad. This was the year that Iceland gained home-rule and celebrated its one-thousandth anniversary of settlement. In Milwaukee, Þorláksson sat on a committee to plan the celebration, at which Icelanders and a group of Norwegians gathered to hear speeches and to celebrate their heritage.

In a speech given in Norwegian, Þorláksson encouraged co-operation between people of Nordic origin, stressing the advantage to Icelanders of fostering open communication with the Norwegians. He also acknowledged the help given to Icelandic

immigrants by Norwegian farmers, who had already gained experience working the North American soil. They were successful in grain farming, he claimed, and could teach the Icelanders how to survive in the New World. They would be helpful allies in a strange land, as they knew where to find jobs and could converse more readily in English than could the Icelanders.

By 1874, Þorláksson's father, Þorlákur Jónsson, had joined him in the New World and had settled in Shawano County, about 250 kilometres north of Milwaukee. Þorláksson explored the possibility of more Icelanders settling in the area, which was inhabited by Norwegian farmers, as jobs were scarce in Milwaukee in the 1870s. In spite of his efforts, Shawano did not become a permanent Icelandic colony; the Icelanders dispersed by 1880 (Þorsteinsson 2: 230).

In 1875, Þorláksson graduated from and was ordained by the Concordia Seminary, which was operated by the German-Lutheran Missouri Synod. He then began to serve the Norwegian Lutheran Synod. He was instrumental in organizing the first Icelandic Lutheran congregation in North America from the parishes he served in the United States.

Meanwhile, the influx of 1200 Icelanders to New Iceland prompted the leaders of the settlement to consider the future of the colony. Þorláksson, hearing of the migration, travelled to New Iceland to offer his services. On August 23, 1876, after arriving in Gimli, he delivered the first Icelandic sermon in the Dominion of Canada. He remained for only two weeks, baptizing 14 children and performing weddings and funerals. Although the Norwegian Lutheran Synod offered to pay Þorláksson's salary for him to remain in New Iceland, he received no offer before he left the colony.

Þorláksson went to Minneapolis to visit Jón Bjarnason, who was settled there with his wife Lára, and met Sigtryggur Jónasson and Halldór Briem. While there, Jónasson, Briem, and Þorláksson discussed theology, only to discover that their views differed significantly. A classmate of Þorláksson's from the Reykjavík Grammar School, Briem had accepted a place at the Norwegian Lutheran Synod, but had not completed his studies, having formed negative views of the Synod leaders and their teachings. Þorláksson held a different view, claiming that the Missouri Synod's Lutheranism was in the purest tradition of Luther (Houser 62).

Jónasson, the other guest of Bjarnason's, was chairman of the council presiding over New Iceland. Along with his brother-in-law Jóhann Briem and Friðjón Friðriksson, he had established the Prentfélag Nýja Ísland ("Printing Company of New Iceland"), which published Framfari ("Progress"), the first printed Icelandic newspaper in North America. Both Jónasson and Halldór Briem edited the newspaper and would soon become important players in the religious debate that unsettled New Iceland. Years after they first met, Briem wrote editorials questioning the presence of a Norwegian Synod-trained pastor in the community, and the beliefs espoused by the Synod.⁵

After the hardship of the first few years, the New Icelanders expressed their desire for religious leadership, and in April 1877 a committee was struck to search for a permanent pastor for the colony. The goal of many settlers was to establish an association of congregations that had no ties to other church bodies in North America. Meetings were held in the districts of New Iceland and Þorláksson's offer to preach in

⁵ For example, on 24 Jan. 1878, p. 34-35; 12 Feb. 1878, p. 43; and 20 Feb. 1878 p. 46-7 Briem responds harshly to Þorláksson's articles explaining the religious position of the Norwegian Synod.

New Iceland was formally declined. However, the committee conceded to the request of 120 families in the Arnes district for Þorláksson's services, and Þorláksson arrived in the settlement on October 19, 1877. The majority of New Icelanders welcomed him, although some remained sceptical about the Norwegian Lutheran Synod's conservative attitudes and its literal interpretation of the Bible.

Since his last appearance in the colony in 1876, Þorláksson had returned to Iceland during the summer of 1877. The reason he went to Iceland seems to have been to establish whether his proposal of marriage would be accepted. According to Houser, Þorláksson's loved one may have been Elína Sveinsdóttir, whose mother opposed the marriage.

I will examine the details surrounding the religious debate in section 1.7 and in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say at this point that Þorláksson returned to New Iceland and engaged in discussions of theology, which led to the debate in 1879. Shortly after this religious upheaval, he migrated to North Dakota with the congregation he had developed in New Iceland. He lived there until his death from tuberculosis on March 12, 1882, at 32 years of age.

1.4 Reverend Jón Bjarnason⁶

The second main participant in the religious debate was Jón Bjarnason, who was born on the farm Þvottá in Iceland on November 15, 1845. He was a friend and schoolmate of Þorláksson, who was four years his junior. The son of a rural clergyman, Bjarnason first attended the Reykjavík Grammar School, and later, from the ages of 16 to

⁶ Marteinsonn (pp. 3, 9, 14, 69) is the source for this section unless otherwise noted.

23, the Theological Seminary in Reykjavík. After the completion of his seminary studies he assisted his father in his spiritual work (Eylands, Lutherans 161). Bjarnason was ordained in 1869 by the State Church of Iceland, and taught school in Reykjavík after his ordination. In 1870, he married Lára Pétursdóttir Guðjohnsen.

Bjarnason and Pétursdóttir departed from Iceland on September 5, 1873, and arrived in Quebec City on September 27, settling in Milwaukee. They later moved to St. Louis, where they renewed their acquaintance with Þorláksson, then at the Concordia Seminary. In 1874, Bjarnason was offered a professorship at the seminary's Luther College in Iowa, by the Norwegian Lutheran Synod.

In 1874, Bjarnason was invited to Milwaukee to deliver the first church service in Icelandic in North America, at the millennial celebration of Iceland's settlement (Houser 78). In his sermon, he spoke about preserving the Icelandic language, warning Icelanders not to let their language disintegrate as the Norwegian-Americans had. In a letter to an Icelandic newspaper in the fall of 1874, Bjarnason recalls his warning to his compatriots that day:

Later, the author spoke some words of admonishment to Icelanders to hereafter maintain their interest in the preservation of their father tongue, Icelandic, in this country. He mentioned the inevitable necessity for Icelanders, as any other nations in this country, to learn English well enough to manage in their daily lives; but that it was the sacred and sublime duty of every Icelanders not to forget their own language, nor to blend it with Hrafnamál⁷, as our friends from the Nordic countries have been so exceedingly guilty of, once they arrive here. Among other things, it was thought necessary to warn Icelanders not to do what many Norwegians have done, to change their names or take completely new ones, to present to the English-speaking people of this country, while their original Norwegian name still dangles off them among their Norwegian compatriots; they

⁷ Literally "raven language." A derogatory term, comparing the mixture of English and Icelandic to the croaks of a raven.

claim they must make it easier for Americans to pronounce their names and engage therefore in this foolishness (Bjarnason, Þjóðólfur 41).

In the first Icelandic sermon delivered in the New World, Bjarnason drives his point home with religious emphasis:

I do not wish to suggest that anyone here is careless enough about his native land or unloving of the only society that he has associated with and lived in all his life until very recently. We should not have arrived here to avoid our duties to the nation that the Lord has connected us to with sacred and sublime nationalistic ties. Anyone, who forgets his native land or thinks he is above having to preserve that of his nationality that is good and godly, for the reason that he is in a foreign country and has to earn a living, that is akin to forgetting God. It is a short step, quickly taken, from throwing away one's nationality to throwing away one's native religion (Bjarnason, Rit og Ræður 216-17).

Bjarnason's views expressed during the millennial celebration may have struck a chord with the would-be leaders of New Iceland, who wanted to establish a colony where Icelandic language and culture could flourish. While Bjarnason was teaching at Luther College, he was asked by a committee representing some 650 settlers to organize a congregation in New Iceland (Bjarnason 18). He responded to this call and moved to Gimli on November 8, 1877. Between 1877 and 1880, he preached in several Icelandic-Canadian settlements that lacked church buildings: Víðines ("Willow Point"), Breiðuvík ("Wide Bay"), Gimli, Icelandic River, Mikley ("Big Island" – now Hecla Island), Riverton, Hnausa, Arnes, Argyle, and Steinkirkja söfnuður ("Stone Church congregation") (Jónasson 40). Bjarnason's congregations in 1879 formed the Icelandic Synod of America, which lasted for one year, and Bjarnason was made President (Eylands, Lutherans 172-3).

In 1880, Lára and Jón Bjarnason (Lára, it seems, had adopted the Canadian custom of taking her husband's last name) returned for four years to Iceland, where he served a congregation in Seyðisfjörður (Eylands, Lutherans 166). In the winter of 1883 to 1884, he was asked to accept a position with the newly founded First Icelandic Lutheran Church in Winnipeg, where he remained until 1913, when illness forced him to retire (Eylands, Lutherans 185; Jónasson 40).

The Bjarnasons were strong supporters of education. They were instrumental in establishing the first school in New Iceland, where Lára was the principal teacher (Eylands, Lutherans 163-64). In 1901 they helped found an Icelandic chair at the University of Winnipeg, then Wesley College. In 1913, helped by Bjarnason's \$100 donation, an Icelandic school was established in Winnipeg. Upon his death in 1914, it was named the Jón Bjarnason Academy (Kristjanson 391-93) and operated until 1940, when the Winnipeg school board began offering free instruction (Kristjanson 396). In addition to elementary school, high school, and religious instruction, the Academy offered courses in Icelandic (Kristjanson 392). The Academy was perhaps the culmination of Bjarnason's work in the preservation of the Icelandic language in North America.

Bjarnason expresses his views on Icelandic nationalism, and the preservation of Icelandic language and culture, in many of his writings. It is clear from his speech here, that he equates a national identity with language and ethnicity, and that he is adamant about the importance of maintaining ties with Iceland in the New World. In his letter to the Icelandic newspaper, Þjóðólfur, he reflects on the nationalistic attitudes of Icelanders in the United States, in 1874.

There is, as one might expect, little to tell of nationalistic⁸ endeavours of the few Icelanders [here in North America] so far. All of them have, naturally, been fully occupied by providing for themselves and their families, especially this year when acceptable employment has been scarcer than for several preceding years, as I have mentioned previously. Still, the Icelanders that have moved to the US have shown signs of nationalism by assembling in Milwaukee to celebrate Iceland's thousand years on August second this summer. . . . This national celebration began with an Icelandic mass, which started an hour after noon in a Milwaukee church belonging to a Norwegian Lutheran congregation. The author [Bjarnason] preached at this occasion and attempted in his sermon to turn people's minds to praising the Lord for the thousand-year struggle of the Icelandic nation and to pray for every sign of Icelandic life in the centuries to come. This was the first Icelandic mass in North America and the audience was large and included, in addition to Icelanders, many Norwegians, so the church was completely full (Bjarnason, Þjóðólfur 19).

Bjarnason edited several publications in Icelandic and Norwegian and founded the Icelandic Lutheran Synod's paper, Sameiningin ("Unification"), which he edited from 1885 until his death. During his lifetime he wrote a multitude of sermons, essays, and addresses. At the time of his resignation from his post at the First Lutheran Church, he was made Pastor Emeritus. He died on June 3, 1914 (Bjarnason xii).

1.5 Lutheranism in Iceland

Lutheranism was adopted in Iceland in the mid-16th century. For centuries, first as Catholics and later as Lutherans, the clergy in Iceland were educated at two bishoprics: Hólar in the north and Skálholt in the south. Danish influences on Icelandic theological training, most notably from the University of Copenhagen, were evident in the Icelandic Church; however, the leadership of the Icelandic Church was exclusively in the hands of Icelanders (Pétursson 37). It was not until 1847 that a Lutheran seminary was established in Reykjavík.

⁸ Bjarnason uses the Icelandic word þjóðlegur, which can mean either "nationalistic" or "ethnic" throughout this speech. Here, I have translated it as "nationalistic."

The Icelandic clergy was instrumental in creating an educated public. It is estimated that literacy in Iceland reached 90% by the end of the eighteenth century, as a result of a clerical policy of teaching children to read the Bible before they were confirmed. Students who wished to enter the clergy were required to graduate from the Latin School at Bessastaðir, Iceland or the University of Copenhagen, and Bessastaðir also became an institution of higher education for Icelandic government officials. However, the training at Bessastaðir was thought to be inferior to education obtained in other Nordic countries, a view that was voiced openly by critics of the school (Pétursson 34-5, 49, 55). It is possible that these judgments later formed the basis for the religious conflict among Icelandic immigrants in North America.

1.6 Lutheranism in North America⁹

Iceland's history has long been characterized by religious pluralism. Even after Christianity had been adopted in the country, people still worshiped the Nordic gods. That propensity did not always sit well with Lutheran factions in North America. It is illuminating to read in Lutherans in Canada, that Valdimar Eylands claims that other Protestant religions viewed Lutheranism as reactionary and conservative. Meanwhile, it is important to note that most Icelandic Lutherans prided themselves on their liberal religious practices and that early Icelandic immigrants in Canada considered strict adherence to the scriptures to be fanaticism. As a result, immigrant Lutheranism, too, was comparatively liberal - characterized, not by strict codes of conduct, but by a moral

⁹ Valdimar Eylands' Lutherans in Canada (pp.14, 15, 18-20, 23-24) is the source for this section unless otherwise noted.

code based on the experience of God's love, by what Martin Luther called moral transformation.

Due to the large and varied influx of European immigrants to Canada, Lutheranism consisted of a series of independent congregations, separated by distance and by language. However, no uniform Lutheranism existed in New Iceland. There, Lutheran congregations formed two distinct bodies, whose membership was determined by the personalities and partisan views of Bjarnason and Þorláksson. However, in 1885, the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America (the Icelandic Synod) was established, incorporating all Lutheran churches in North America under one governing body for the first time.

United Empire Loyalists who defended the British Crown during the American Revolution and emigrated from the United States to Canada during and after the war of independence in 1775-1783 introduced Lutheranism to Canada. Migrations of European and American Lutherans came to Canada during the first decade of the 1900s, part of a wave of seven million European immigrants. By 1910, over a dozen Lutheran synods were operating autonomously in North America. Immigrant Lutherans represented a variety of religious upbringings, cultures, and languages, but were bound by one governing belief.

Identity for Lutherans stemmed from their ethnic background. Icelandic Lutherans, for the most part, were better able than other Europeans to integrate heritage with religious beliefs (Leske qtd. in Threinen Search: 73). This was certainly the case with congregations in New Iceland. Many immigrants supported the language purification movement, at least at the outset of emigration to North America. Within this

movement, begun in Iceland in the mid-19th century, many wanted to retain their Icelandic customs in the New World. Patriotic feelings were displayed in the communities of Icelanders in Canada, such as in the founding of Íslendingadagurinn (“The Day of the Icelanders”) and in the proliferation of Icelandic-language publications.

As congregation members assimilated into Canadian society, European-trained pastors were hampered by a lack of English, as compared to their Lutheran peers from Britain and Ireland. Pastors like Þorláksson were at an advantage, having been schooled in the English language. The English language may have constituted a problem for Bjarnason, who was schooled in Iceland. However, although it would have been an asset to be able to speak English in Canada, there may have been little advantage in New Iceland, where the language of choice tended to be Icelandic.

1.7 Religious Controversy in New Iceland

Both Bjarnason and Þorláksson came to New Iceland in the fall of 1877. Bjarnason represented the Icelandic Church, while Þorláksson preached according to the doctrine of the Norwegian Lutheran Synod. Soon after their arrival, the different religious views of Bjarnason and Þorláksson became a topic of intense discussion, and the two pastors found themselves in the midst of controversy.

By the spring of 1878, Bjarnason and Þorláksson’s congregations had formed themselves into two separate associations, and their constitutions were printed in the local Icelandic paper, Framfari, for all to see. Þorláksson’s congregations formed the Icelandic Lutheran Congregations in New Iceland, and Bjarnason’s parishioners established the Association of Icelandic Churches in America. Congregation members asked Bjarnason and Þorláksson to meet with them publicly and clarify the issues that confused them.

New Icelanders were familiar with Icelandic but not Norwegian Lutheranism, and no doubt wanted clarification on Þorláksson's religious views.

The meeting was held in a Gimli warehouse, on March 25, 1878, where 300 men and women gathered for two days of discussion and debate. Þorláksson was faced with an awkward moment when he was asked to start the proceedings with a prayer. He refused on the grounds that he and Bjarnason were not in complete agreement on doctrine, and suggested a hymn instead.

So the meeting began. Bjarnason and Þorláksson raised issues of importance to them and explained their views to the congregations. For example, Þorláksson argued that every word in the Bible was directly inspired by God, whereas Bjarnason conceded that the Scripture was inspired by God, but insisted that it was written by people who were capable of error. Further, Bjarnason held the position that there was one true universal church of Christ, incorporating all religions that preached salvation through the Gospel, and that no doctrine was without flaws. Lutheranism was the only true church of God, Þorláksson claimed, and salvation was possible for some individual Catholics and members of reformed churches, but the Norwegian Lutheran Synod churches were the purest. Furthermore, whereas Þorláksson claimed that Christ was physically present at the sacrament of the altar, Bjarnason held that Christ attended in spirit only. The only point on which they agreed was the need for infant baptism (Houser 157-58).

It must have been clear to the immigrants when the meeting ended that neither of the pastors was likely to sway from his conviction. The training Bjarnason received in Iceland was clearly different from that to be had in the Norwegian Synod, and this point

was driven home during the meeting. The theological points made by the two pastors during the meeting indicate that their beliefs had been firmly established.

After this meeting, Þorláksson left New Iceland in April 1878 to look for better land for his congregations to settle in North Dakota and Minnesota. There was already a settlement of about 600 people in Minnesota, but Þorláksson favoured land in the Pembina Hills area of North Dakota. He returned to New Iceland to discuss a move from the colony with his parishioners, and they listened to Þorláksson's suggestion to move to the Pembina Hills.¹⁰

On March 17 and 18, 1879, Þorláksson and Bjarnason engaged in a second, and fateful debate over their differing views of doctrine. The proceedings of this debate were published in Framfari. Houser suggests that this second debate, and Þorláksson's subsequent actions, aroused stronger opposition from the leaders of New Iceland.

That Þorláksson sought a more prosperous place for New Icelanders indicates his concern for their welfare. New Icelanders were indeed suffering: their grain farming efforts had been unsuccessful so far. Their animals were starving along with the immigrants themselves, leaving them with no income.

In 1875, the Canadian government had loaned the Icelandic immigrants money and provisions for their move to New Iceland, on the understanding that it would be reimbursed. Those Icelanders who favoured the move from the colony would have to repay their part of the debt in order to be free to leave with all of their possessions. However, most settlers were in no position to repay the government loan. Þorláksson

¹⁰ For a description of Þorláksson's actions following the March 1878 debate (in this and the next few paragraphs), I rely on Houser pp. 162-172.

likely had the hardships of New Icelanders in mind when he petitioned the Dominion government to release the settlers from their debt and to thus allow them to move to better land in the United States. When the government refused Þorláksson's request, he left New Iceland in the fall of 1879 with the 50 families who wished to accompany him, all of them having promised to repay the government their portion of the loan in money or in provisions. This exodus marked the beginning of the disintegration of New Iceland.

Several historians have wondered about the extent of the conflict between the Jónsmenn and the Pálsmenn, during the years 1878-1879. Particularly notable is Valdimar Eylands' expression of surprise that "people who hardly had a shelter over their heads and in many instances did not know where their next meal was coming from, spent two whole days in order to hear a debate on such scholarly themes as the Inspiration of the Bible, the value of Confessions, Pre-Destination and Election, the Power of the keys and the Sacraments" (Lutherans 165).

A fevered description of the religious debate comes from literary historian Stefán Einarsson, who suggests that the event consisted of "all shades of opinion from the most benighted fundamentalism to the extreme radical liberalism" (234). His spirited comment of 1948 indicates that the conflicts, if not the issues at hand, were still fresh in the minds of later generations of Icelandic-Canadians. He obviously sides with Bjarnason, referring to him as the "uncrowned king" of Icelandic-Canadians (234). Although he notes that Þorláksson's generosity in securing employment for Icelanders in North Dakota made him a "saint," it is clear that he firmly places Þorláksson in a fundamentalist camp and Bjarnason in a liberal camp, and that he considers liberalism to be the superior philosophy (234).

Historian Jonas Thor gives an interesting perspective on the debate in his doctoral thesis. His is a modern interpretation and reflective of the views of the Icelandic-Canadian community today. He wonders how the New Iceland community, in which citizens were highly dependent upon each other, could find itself in such heartfelt debate that a schism became inevitable. In his analysis, which links Icelandic religion and nationalism, Thor separates the reaction to the debate into matters of adaptation and resistance to assimilation. People who favoured integration into mainstream Canadian culture supported the Norwegian Synod. Immigrants who wanted an independent Icelandic colony saw the Norwegian Synod as a threat to the preservation of Icelandic culture and to the religious traditions they valued.

Þorláksson's biographer, George Houser, presents a different view of the religious debate, appearing to sympathize with Þorláksson. Houser views the debate as an issue of clashing personalities and views the removal of Þorláksson from New Iceland as a political matter. He questions whether people based their decision to side with Bjarnason on their theological beliefs. He considers it more likely that the majority of New Icelanders were persuaded to turn against Þorláksson by the "barrage of anti-Paul propaganda" presented to them in Framfari (156).

At the time of the second debate in New Iceland in 1879 – the one that provided the impetus for the split of the community – Þorláksson was 29 and Bjarnason was 33. They were given heavy responsibilities as religious leaders of their communities. It is important to bear in mind that these were not seasoned theologians, but young men fresh out of school, who had more conviction than experience.

Not only did Þorláksson's religious views arouse controversy, but his actions did as well. In January 1878, with the support of his parishioners, he wrote a letter requesting financial aid from the Norwegian Synod. As a result, the Synod granted \$1,300.00, collected from Norwegian farmers in the United States (Houser 145). The leaders of the colony reacted strongly, referring to Þorláksson's written request as the "begging letter" (e.g. Jónasson "Íslendingar" 1).

Briem, who had experience as a theological student at the Norwegian Synod, may have believed that its presence in an exclusively Icelandic colony posed a danger to Icelandic culture. Briem argued that Þorláksson's request for money was treason to the Icelandic-Canadian people.

Þorláksson may have believed that his plea for financial support from the Norwegian Lutheran Synod was a last resort to save the New Icelanders from starvation. Yet Briem's editorials in Framfari suggest that Þorláksson had ulterior motives – to convert Icelanders to Norwegian Lutheranism and to enhance his personal glory. Yet Houser's depiction of Þorláksson as a pastor dedicated to the welfare of his flock would suggest otherwise.

The split in the community of New Iceland had a devastating effect on the colony. Once Þorláksson and his parishioners were gone, the framework for building a strong, united colony was weakened. New Icelanders had experienced a debate that would lead them to question the fate of their colony.

Þorláksson's comments and actions in New Iceland show a real concern for his parishioners. He was in a better position to help his countrymen make their way in the New World than most immigrants were, for he had lived amongst early Norwegian

settlers and witnessed their success. Þorláksson's letters to his father in Iceland, written when he first arrived in the United States in 1872, give practical warnings to potential immigrants from Iceland. Þorláksson was a first contact for many Icelanders newly arrived in Canada and the United States. He helped them adjust to their new reality by matching them with successful Norwegian immigrant families and by assisting them in finding work.

Þorláksson offered practical advice to Icelandic immigrants. He may have felt that their survival depended on combining forces with the Norwegians in the United States, for example, and learning how to work the land and be self-sufficient. Whatever the virtues of Þorláksson's position, the leaders of New Iceland were unconvinced that the colony was in jeopardy. When neither side could compromise, some of the settlers decided that their own fate lay in following Þorláksson. The colony split.

As a result of this intense argument, Icelanders in North America developed a profound fascination with the passionate drama of religious conflict, something that Valgardson's work reflects.

1.8 Related Religious Dissent ¹¹

New Icelanders cemented their religious views during the debates in their community in 1878 and 1879. Debates and religious dissent amongst Icelanders in nearby communities at the turn of the 20th century, suggest that people had begun to question which religion was right for them. For example, in January 1893, the

¹¹ Valdimar Eylands' Lutherans in Canada (pp. 169-171, 173-176, 180-181) is the source for this section unless otherwise noted.

Evangelical Lutheran Icelandic Congregation in Selkirk was founded from members who wished to depart from the Icelandic Synod.

Reverend Friðrik Bergmann served the Selkirk congregation in 1894. Bergmann, who had been under the tutelage of Þorláksson in Wisconsin also came to New Iceland in the summer of 1878 to teach to Þorláksson's congregations (Houser 95). In 1902, he answered a call to preach to the Tabernacle congregation in Winnipeg and teach Icelandic at Wesley College (Houser footnote 203). On a visit to Iceland, Bergmann became interested in New Theology, which was more liberal than Icelandic Lutheranism. He promoted this religious movement upon his return to Winnipeg in his lecture entitled "The Letter and the Spirit," arousing controversy in the process. Between 1909 and 1911, fifteen congregations influenced by Bergmann left the Icelandic Synod (Jonasson 37).

Ironically, Bjarnason's beliefs were now too orthodox for many Icelanders. The supporters of New Theology split from the religion of their ancestors and converted to Unitarianism. This controversy seems to have initiated a pattern of constant sway between orthodox and liberal currents in the Icelandic settlements, one that, as we will see, is reflected in Valgardson's work.

1.9 Conclusion

These few instances of religious dissent that followed the debate between Bjarnason and Þorláksson in 1879 demonstrate that the immigrant Icelanders in these communities were deeply involved in their religious life. The prevalence of dissent indicates that religious division – such as that which led to the migration of Þorláksson's followers to North Dakota – was not uncommon in the Icelandic-Canadian community.

The theological divide continues to today. Modern day Icelandic-Canadians discuss the fact that the community of New Iceland split, if not the details of the debate that sparked the move to the United States. In the following chapter, I will discuss how Valgardson, an Icelandic-Canadian author, explores themes of tolerance, intolerance, and fanaticism in his writing – themes present in the events surrounding the religious debate in new Iceland in 1879.

Chapter 2: Valgardson's Treatment of Tolerance, Intolerance, and Fanaticism

2.1 Introduction

The consequences in New Iceland of the religious debate were dramatic and traumatic for Icelandic immigrants. These events happened long ago, yet they continue to play out in contemporary life. I will argue in this thesis that history has repeated itself in the works of Valgardson, born 60 years after the debate. This chapter will examine how Valgardson explores themes related to the religious strife.

Valgardson was among the generations of Icelandic-Canadians raised in the Lutheran faith, within traditional Icelandic values and way of life, and surrounded by stories of early immigrant Icelanders. Like many members of his generation, he has his own version of the story about the dissent that occurred in New Iceland, which finds expression in his writings.

In the previous chapter I maintained that religion was not the only factor driving the religious debate in New Iceland. Icelandic nationalism, issues of physical and spiritual survival, and a desire on the part of many immigrants to assimilate into mainstream Canadian society all added to the rising tension, which eventually split the community. The debate, and the migration from New Iceland to North Dakota, created a fascination with the tension of religious conflict that lasts to this day in the Icelandic-Canadian community.

2.2 Definition of the Themes

In order to address Valgardson's handling of religion a clear understanding of the terms is necessary. For the purposes of this thesis, tolerance¹² will refer to the act of being indulgent toward and non-judgmental of the opinions or conduct of others. Intolerance¹³, on the other hand, will indicate narrow-minded resistance to differences in opinion or practice – especially religious – or the persecution of those who are different. Fanaticism¹⁴ will mean the indulgence of wild extravagant notions, or the displaying of excessive enthusiasm. This chapter will examine how these matters run through Valgardson's novel, short stories, and poetry.

2.3 Valgardson's Works

2.3.1 The Novel Gentle Sinners

The first work I have selected for analysis in this chapter is the novel, Gentle Sinners (1980). It is the story of a young man, Bobby, who makes a journey from youth to adulthood and at the same time escapes from his parents' religious dogmatism, which has left him a virtual prisoner in their household. He runs away from the brutal repression of his authoritarian parents to the refuge of a wise and gentle uncle Sigfus – a man Bobby did not know existed until he made plans to leave home. In Eddyville, a fictional prairie town, Bobby is symbolically baptized into his new life by Uncle Sigfus. Sigfus runs water from a pump over the boy's head, renames him Eric, and presents him with an alternate way of understanding the world. During his journey, Eric encounters

¹² "Tolerance," The Oxford English Dictionary. 1989 ed.

¹³ "Intolerance," The Oxford English Dictionary. 1989 ed.

¹⁴ "Fanaticism," The Oxford English Dictionary. 1989 ed.

obstacles to his growth into manhood, such as the character Larry, who is Eric's angel of retributive justice. Larry represents Eric's temptation to evil. But the protagonist also meets good influences along the way. Sam, who is Sigfus' brother-in-law, is a man of virtue. It is Sam who teaches Eric the values that he is missing: a respect for family ties, for others, and for himself. Along with Sigfus, Sam educates Eric into adulthood.

On the other hand are Eric's parents: his mother Helga and his unnamed father. Eric's parents pressure him into accepting their religious way of life to the point that he plans to murder them for the years of psychological and physical imprisonment he endured. Valgardson has created complex characters, each showing at least some intolerance. Yet his message is clear that we are to interpret Sigfus as tolerant and Eric's parents as intolerant.

Gentle Sinners is not, however, a simple story in which religion represents evil and the wisdom of an uncle represents good. The surface structure of this novel is morally simplistic and reveals a Gothic literary style: crude images, gloomy settings, sinister and violent events, and a heroine in danger. But the deeper structure reveals the morally complex world in which Uncle Sigfus lives. In this world, Eric must distinguish between good and evil and face decisions that test his moral resolve.

2.3.2 Short Stories

Valgardson's short stories "God is Not a Fish Inspector" and "Wrinkles," both prime explorations of intolerance, also contain tolerant characters, who struggle to survive in the narrow-minded worlds that the stories describe.

“God is Not a Fish Inspector,” which Valgardson wrote in 1975, revolves around Fusi, a 70-year-old fisherman who fishes without a license, to the distress of his judgmental daughter, Emma, who is immersed in her fundamentalist religion. Wrestling with the elements of the lake, Fusi defies death.

He feels proud to be able to elude the inspectors on his early morning fishing expeditions, only to discover that the inspectors have always known about his illegal actions, but have ignored him out of sympathy. Valgardson deals with the effects of a fundamentalist religion on people’s lives, as Emma and Fusi argue about the nature of God. I will show the extent to which religious conflict figures in this story, later on in this chapter.

“Wrinkles” (1990) is the story of Duke and Albert, two young criminal friends who plan to rob an elderly man. Valgardson reveals both their relationship and Albert’s murder of Wrinkles, the old man’s fiancée, as they await their opportunity to strike. In a twist of fate during the robbery attempt, Duke is left to die in a cistern and Albert collects reward money for Duke’s capture from their intended victim. Valgardson presents the relationship between the two criminals as precarious, with the possibility of either one of them turning on the other. The outcome of the story is catastrophic for both friends.

2.3.3 Poetry

As with his other writing, in his poetry Valgardson centres on the morality of a person or situation, juxtaposing signs of tolerance and intolerance. The poems “The Carpenter of Dreams,” “Paul Isfeld: Fisherman,” and “Turtles Migrating” provide good instances of such attitudes.

2.4 The Themes

The argument of this chapter is that W. D. Valgardson, as a member of the Icelandic-Canadian community of Gimli, was so affected by events that took place in New Iceland 60 years before his birth that the dominant themes of that conflict are expressed in his writings. Thus, the religious conflict, which dominated the attitudes of the early Icelandic Canadians, continues to resurface in his work.

2.5 Tolerance

Tolerance, the acceptance of other people's beliefs without judgment, is most strongly revealed in Valgardson's literature through the image of baptism, symbolizing both rebirth and tolerance of life. In this chapter, I will address Valgardson's treatment of the qualities of spirituality, family and community acceptance, and nurture in his characters, as well as his description of the landscape as a Garden of Eden.

2.5.1 Rebirth

Writer Robert Kroetsch speaks of the idea in ethnic writing of a "necessary death," that of experiencing a death out of one culture and a rebirth into another (1985: 70). Kroetsch suggests that most ethnic writers employ these ideas of death and rebirth as underlying themes, and as we will see, Valgardson certainly is no exception.

Relating to the idea of rebirth are images of water, which abound in Gentle Sinners. Once settled in Eddyville, Eric goes fishing with Sigfus and Sam and wades into the lake to bring in their net. Eric's fear of water is realized when he is pulled under the water by the current. Sam reaches into the water, grabs Eric by the hair, and rescues him from death. Similarly, when at the end of the novel, Eric is caught in a downpour,

Valgardson emphasizes the act of cleansing as the rain falls relentlessly, seeming to fall “inside him, washing away everything until he was an empty shell” (182).

Eric overcomes his fear of water in this pivotal scene, in which he rescues a local girl, Melissa, from the wrath of her abusers, the Tree brothers. He pulls himself across a river on a flat-bottomed boat, holding onto a submerged barbed-wire fence. He tears his palm on a barb during his ordeal – the pain of a modern-day saviour. On their retreat from the Tree Brothers, Eric and Melissa escape in the boat, and are confronted by Larry, who hurls a knife at Eric, narrowly missing him. In desperation to reach the shore before being carried out to the open lake, Eric jumps into the current and leads the boat and Melissa to safety.

Overcoming his fear of water is one step in a series of accomplishments for Eric. He has already defied Larry and turned away from evil. With each trial in Eric’s path toward adulthood, Valgardson assures the reader that Eric, in control of his future, will survive.

The image of baptism is powerful in Valgardson’s work. At the beginning of Gentle Sinners, when Sigfus symbolically baptizes his nephew “Eric.” Eric rejects his birth name “Bobby” (9). This is a first step in Bobby’s rite of passage toward adulthood from his old life in a fundamentalist religious community and the restrictive bonds of his abusive parents, his repression, and the overwhelming feeling that his “body belonged to God” (24). Even though the beliefs of Eric’s parents repulse him, Sigfus accepts Eric into his family. Bobby’s renaming to Eric signifies rebirth into a new life with a caring uncle. Valgardson emphasizes the tolerant aspect of baptism as a process of rebirth.

Alternatively, Eric's baptism is representative of Sigfus' intolerance toward his nephew's old life. As a ritual of organized religion, the act of baptism involves the belief that everyone is born with sin and cannot be accepted by God until baptized.

Robert Kroetsch, in his idea of a "necessary death" that must occur in order to survive in a new environment, refers to the immigrant experience in the New World. Valgardson uses baptism as an image of relinquishing an old way of life in order for a new one to emerge. Eric is the epitome of the immigrant in transition; he is caught for awhile between two lives, one with his fundamentalist parents and the other with a caring uncle. Valgardson makes it clear that in order for Eric to survive, he must die in one culture (in this case, his family of origin) and be born into another (Sigfus').

2.5.2 Spirituality

The attribute of a broad-minded spirituality that is not fundamentalist in nature is found in Valgardson's characters, Sigfus and Sam in Gentle Sinners. These men show their spirituality, not through their adherence to organized religion, but through moral ways of living, the valuing of open communication, respect for their environment, and the performance of good deeds. Indeed Sigfus and Sam reflect a spirituality that is nourishing for Eric. The imagery that Valgardson uses to describe them is that of saints and gods, of fatherly figures, nurturing and all-knowing, imparting wisdom based on life experiences. Valgardson reveals their foibles and vices as being simply part of human nature. Even at their basest, they are forgivably human. At their greatest, they are god-like in their power to positively affect Eric's life. Sigfus teaches Eric to be responsible for his own actions, and to choose his own path. Eric's parents, by contrast, use religion to restrict their son's actions with disastrous consequences to their relationship.

Referring to Gentle Sinners in a letter, Valgardson discusses the spiritual salvation and morality of his characters. He suggests, “perhaps, the only way to salvation is through the relationships between people who pass on moral and ethical values on an individual basis, where the immorality of Eric/Bobby’s parents is rejected but where the ‘soft’ morality of the modern is also rejected” (1997). With his claim comes the suggestion that spirituality comes from within. Certainly the characters of Sigfus and Sam stress their belief that Eric is responsible for his actions and that he must know and accept who he is.

In one particularly poignant scene in Gentle Sinners that illustrates Sigfus’ spirituality, he shows Eric a church on his property and the graves of his wife and son, introducing Eric for the first time to his aunt and cousin. As Eric follows Sigfus into the church, he is treated to a reprieve from his tumultuous emotions, and comes to know the meaning of this sanctuary to Sigfus. When Eric, confused by Sigfus’ religious conviction, questions him, his uncle explains: “I learned a long time ago that it’s not a matter of whether a man will have gods but, rather, which ones he’ll worship” (171). From Sigfus, Eric learns that religion need not be fundamentalist or authoritarian. The prospect of a church as a positive place intrigues Eric, and it is thus to Sigfus’ church that he and Melissa escape from the Tree brothers.

Valgardson often presents orthodox religious figures as intolerant, as with the actions of Eric’s parents in Gentle Sinners. However, there are glimpses of an ideal religion in Valgardson’s characters, whom he endows with the symbols of organized religion. Valgardson’s poetry, for example, offers glimpses of a tolerant religion. The most obvious example is in the poem “Paul Isfeld: Fisherman,” wherein the protagonist,

Paul Isfeld, is described as being akin to a saint. Paul's overalls are white, the colour of purity and saintliness in organized religion. Thus, not all images of organized religion are intolerant. At the end of the poem, the narrator seems to want salvation from Paul as one of his chosen flock. Like the fish, the poet wishes to be resurrected by Paul. Valgardson intricately describes the process of catching, gutting, and filleting fish as a transformation in the literal sense, of fish bodies into food. But this transformation is also symbolic of a conversion of the fish that would accompany the entrance to Heaven by the fisherman, who appears God-like in his power to give and take away life.

There is an importance and sanctity to the fisherman as his actions become ritualistic – almost holy. Fishermen supply food and it is this food – made sacred in the poem – on which the immigrant community of New Iceland survived. Although the fish are killed, the caring actions of the fisherman imply tolerance. In “Paul Isfeld: Fisherman,” captured fish flounder on land, as if trying to woo the fisherman into returning them to the lake. In a religious sense, fish may be seen to represent people who accept God, and who are thus saved, in keeping, perhaps with Jesus who claimed that he would teach his followers to “fish for people” (Matt. 4:19).

2.5.3 Acceptance

In his essay, “Personal Gods,” Valgardson claims to be aware of, and to express in his writings, the universal need for a “sense of belonging, an acknowledged place within the community” (1979-80: 181). This need to belong is certainly expressed by his characters, as Eric in Gentle Sinners attests to.

Valgardson portrays in Sigfus, a character who is sensitive to the importance of family ties. From the first sentence of Gentle Sinners, Eric's uncle recognizes him as his

nephew: "Sigfus knew who he had to be" (5). However, as part of his rite of passage, Eric must undergo rituals that allow him to enter the Icelandic culture. In his own awareness of this unspoken ritual, the boy introduces himself to Sigfus by his relationship rather than by his name. Sigfus gives the boy a place of belonging in the Icelandic-Canadian community, teaches him about his cultural identity, and strengthens his moral resolve. Eric's pursuit of his sense of family and the earning of his uncle's acceptance are not easy processes. Rather, they constitute the "impossible barrier of flame" that springs up between Sigfus and Eric on their first meeting (6). It is not long, however, until Sigfus welcomes Eric into his family.

However, the community of Eddyville is not as accepting as Sigfus, and Eric must prove his worth to the inhabitants. Jobs are scarce in the town for young people, and Bert, the owner of the local lumberyard, is hesitant to give Eric a job because of his inexperience. He believes that the young must mature before taking on a real job. However, Eric works hard and is rewarded by Bert with pay. Eric learns the intrinsic value of a job well done, later in the novel, when he straightens Sigfus' yard and to his uncle's delight, paints his house.

When Sigfus accepts his nephew, he significantly gives him a traditional Icelandic meal of skyr (a kind of yoghurt), which Eric finds bitter, yet finishes as if starved for a sense of belonging. Sigfus represents Eric's cultural identity, which had been lacking in the boy's life. He educates Eric about his Icelandic heritage, giving him the cultural identity that his parents rejected. Eric's father, for example, so refused his lineage that he changed his last name from "Finsson" to "Smith" when he married Helga (10). Sam also

teaches Eric the importance of family bonds: he tells Eric that if he does not have a sense of family, he is “like a tree somebody planted after cutting off the roots” (157).

Both Sigfus and Sam translate their values of belonging, cultural identity, and self-reliance to Eric as he grows from child to adult. Sigfus has a strong awareness of the importance of family ties, claiming that they bring together people who “belong together” (22). It is not insignificant, then, that before coming to Sigfus, Eric knew little about his relatives. As a matter of fact his parents were so determined to suppress such ties that they kept secret any existence of kin, leaving him without cultural ties or sense of community. In such terms, Valgardson portrays Eric’s desperation throughout the first chapter, describing him as a “defeated king who has sought and gained sanctuary” with his uncle (23).

Sigfus also gives Eric a sense of belonging in a spiritual sense, when he shows his nephew a church on his property. Intrigued by this part of Sigfus’ past, Eric follows him into the church, where his uncle explains that religion need not be fundamentalist or authoritarian.

Although Fusi, the protagonist in “God is not a Fish Inspector,” is a loner, he also thrives on a sense of belonging. Ironically, his acceptance does not come from his family, but from Rosie who works at the local nursing home. In a symbolic gesture typical of the Icelandic community, Rosie offers Fusi coffee when he comes to visit, in order to make him feel welcome. The character of Rosie provides the most significant image of tolerance in this short story, which is otherwise nearly devoid of tolerant characters. Just as Sigfus welcomes Eric into his family, Rosie welcomes Fusi to the nursing home when he comes bearing his catch of the day. In contrast to Rosie, Emma, Fusi’s daughter, is

situated outside of Fusi's community. She seems to be the antithesis of Rosie in her fear of local scandal caused by Fusi's actions. Even the fish inspectors have been tolerant, almost nurturing, toward Fusi. Fusi recounts how he once eluded the inspectors; he hid his catch under his boat, sat on top of it, and chatted with the inspectors, sharing their coffee.

Valgardson effectively creates the presence of accepting religion. The Lutheran church is situated at the mouth of the harbour, as if protecting the town from the lake beyond. As Fusi sneaks out to launch his boat in the early morning darkness, he sees the light of the church spire as a "distant star," shining like a beacon (Inspector 6-7). Although churches in Valgardson's literature are often places of intolerance, here the Lutheran church is seen as accepting and nurturing in its role as a landmark showing Fusi the way home from the dark expanse of the lake.

Except for the light from mercury lamps, the entire town portrayed in "God is not a Fish Inspector" sits in darkness, and most of the story takes place in the few hours before dawn. The lit burner on Fusi's stove indicates the warmth of his house, which like other houses, and like churches in Valgardson's writings, is a place of belonging and acceptance. Fusi's house is his property and contains all of his belongings; he expresses the hope that Emma will never take his house. Clearly, he feels that Emma is gaining control over his life.

Valgardson has provided an interesting contrast in the theme of a liberal spiritualism pitted against an inflexible organized religion. However, organized religion is occasionally portrayed as accommodating in Valgardson's writing. The image of baptism in Gentle Sinners, and in details surrounding Paul in "Paul Isfeld: Fisherman,"

derive from organized religion, it is only when religion threatens to hurt people that Valgardson opposes it. His materialistic characters – Eric’s parents, Emma and John – treat others severely in the name of religion, and destroy lives in the process. These characters transform the tenets of organized religion into instruments for evil deeds, with the result that Valgardson’s tolerant characters – like Eric and Fusi – become corrupted.

In Valgardson’s short story, “Wrinkles,” by contrast, there is little sense of belonging in the lives of the protagonists Duke and Albert. Having escaped the violence that filled their lives as young men, they are essentially homeless. Both characters act violently and have turned to a life of crime. Valgardson mourns their predicament as homeless criminals, when he gives voice to Albert’s feeling that “somewhere, if he could remember where, there was a place for him, a shack on the beach maybe, or a converted garage ... a place when he saw it, he would know was his” (38). The house they plan to rob provides a beautiful contrast to the streets and squatter-houses where they sleep. Blue and white, and well kept, it is a “shrine,” but is also a fortress (Mourned 39). It is entirely fitting, therefore, when Duke complains that to rob it would be like trying to break into Fort Knox.

2.5.4 Nurture

Eric’s Uncle Sigfus, in Gentle Sinners, epitomizes yet another face of tolerance – nurture. Valgardson expresses the theme most notably through the unconditional acts of kindness that Sigfus displays – acts that Eric never experienced at home. Sigfus teaches Eric essential values that are missing from his upbringing: a respect for family, for others, and for himself. Valgardson’s positive characters – Sigfus and Sam – speak volumes with their caring actions and their acceptance of others. Sigfus, for instance, nurtures

Eric's sense of responsibility. On Eric's first day of work his uncle brings him lunch, telling Eric that he expects him to repay him with his wages. Eric displayed his sense of responsibility in the past, when he sent money to a family from whom he had stolen clothing.

A traditional image of nurture is found in the character of Mary, who drives Eric to Eddyville. Her name is symbolic of the Virgin Mother, and she dispenses money and advice to Eric.

2.5.5 Eden

The Garden of Eden in the Bible is a place of growth, a paradise where God has created humans, animals, and plants. Kroetsch suggests that on the surface of much ethnic writing is the rewriting of myths, in particular, the myth of the "garden story," the idea of the immigrant in search of an Eden in the new world (1985: 69). The rewriting of such a myth enables Valgardson to come to terms with the difference between the fantasy of a better life in the New World and the often-harsh reality of the immigrant experience.

Sigfus' yard in Gentle Sinners becomes an image of Eden – a place of growth – in the midst of the disintegrating town of Eddyville. It is a place of belonging for Sigfus, and it becomes Eric's new home. At the beginning of the novel, Valgardson describes Sigfus' garden in detail as a place of neglect, full of dying grass and weeds. Later, as part of his rite of passage, Eric turns it into a paradise by planting flowers and clearing the debris. As a result, the reader is given the sense that both the land and Eric are reborn during this process.

Valgardson presents other images of growth. With Sigfus and Sam, Eric visits a farm lined with fruit trees, flowers, and vegetables; the woman who owns it is pulling

weeds on their arrival. At a summer religious camp, Eric encounters statues of plastic saints surrounded by a rose garden. The “Rose and Thistle” café in Eddyville provides a meeting place for the locals, as they gossip in the disintegrating surroundings. It is a place of disrepute and disrepair, yet it carries the image of a rose in its name and thus is also an emblem of Eden (117). Even the city itself, the hell from which Eric escaped, has its own spots of paradise. His private retreat by the riverbank is a place that awakens his senses, as he absorbs its “sights, sounds and smells” (46).

Although Valgardson’s characters live in a world that is often intolerant of them – Eric is brought up in the exclusive religious world of his parents and Fusi resides with his fundamentalist daughter Emma – their quest for acceptance is nonetheless central to Valgardson’s story. In this section I have discussed how Valgardson uses images of tolerance to illustrate that, even in the intolerant world he describes, there is hope and salvation for his moral characters.

2.6 Intolerance

Valgardson has claimed in interviews that his writings show how people come to evil: “nearly all evil is done in the name of good.” “Acts,” he maintains, “that an individual could not possibly do on a personal basis can be done and justified for a greater good because that ‘greater good’ (God, political beliefs, the righting of social ills) becomes responsible for what is done. The pursuit of ‘goodness’ allows turning off one’s conscience” (1997). This belief is demonstrated in Valgardson’s writing when images appear of killing and death, organized religion, judgment and rejection, New World values, and hell.

2.6.1 Killing and Death

Perhaps the most vivid example of such killing is found in Gentle Sinners, in the character of Larry, a symbolic angel of retribution and a nemesis for Eric, the gothic hero. In a savage act, Larry baits a seagull with a rotten fish head on a hook, and yanks it to the ground. The bird endures a slow and painful death in a gruesome scene, in which Valgardson plays out the full extent of Larry's brutal nature. Larry's unprovoked attack on an innocent creature implies his cold calculation. Although he has sadistically murdered a living creature, he shows no remorse, nor any other emotion. Larry's violence is not confined to this event, however. He declares his own Judgment Day, when he will violently attack people in the community to whom he has taken a dislike. Like Eric, Larry is on a journey, but one that will lead to his downfall.

Death images abound in Gentle Sinners, even in the character of Eric. When Eric arrives in Eddyville, for instance, we first see him as one who is dead. He appears, pale as a ghost, with "no premonition" and as a vision of "unfleshed bone" (5). Eric later tells his uncle that he disguised his real reason for running away with a story about going to Sigfus' funeral. Eric's clothing throughout most of the novel consists of a black suit and hat.

Even the image of water, usually considered to be a symbol of birth, carries a hint of death. Valgardson's persistent water images offer both connotations, for water has the power to kill as well as to give life. In "God is not a Fish Inspector," for instance, Fusi's knee throbs as he mounts his boat, and his chest constricts so that he cannot breathe. When he is on the lake, Fusi sees the two icons of the town, the Lutheran church and the nursing home, and muses that Emma would not be satisfied until he was "safely trapped

in one or carried out of the other" (10). During Fusi's fishing expedition, as he struggles to keep from toppling his boat, he literally fights with death and wins. However, it is important to him to continue to elude the inspectors so that he can continue fishing here, as he fears his body's ageing and remembers his youth, when he was physically strong and beautiful.

Furthermore, when we first meet Fusi, he is "reconciled to the idea of dying," awaking each morning with a "spontaneous sense of amazement at being alive" (Inspector 6). At the end of the story, Fusi has changed his philosophy. Although he knows many of the residents of the nursing home, he separates himself from them. He claims that, after hearing of a friend's death, the man gave up on himself. In short, Fusi keeps himself alive with an adage: "You believe in yourself and you can keep right on going" (16).

The lake is portrayed as a dangerous place, where only the most skilled of navigators can survive. Dark water surrounds Fusi's boat and the harbour forms an animal-like mouth. Valgardson suggests that the town must be protected from the lake by providing the image of the strong breakwater. This idea is at once sad and ironic, as the lake is a source of sustenance for the community.

In Valgardson's poem "Turtles Migrating," dead turtles appear on the side of the road like "burned out tanks," as Valgardson employs an image of war (Gutting Shed 25). The image of turtles shuffling across a road and then being squashed by passing cars is an image of chaos. The turtles routinely march along a regimented path for no apparent reason, other than to reach their destination.

2.6.2 Organized Religion

Religion can be, and often is, positive, then in Valgardson's literature, as when Sigfus' church provides a haven for him after the death of his wife and child. But religion is also a negative force, which Valgardson explores: most often linked to materialism, the abuse of power, and fanatical beliefs. In his literature, Valgardson portrays those characters that are devoutly religious as rigid and unsympathetic. Often grotesque in appearance, these characters possess values that contradict a moral way of life, despite their entrenched sense of righteousness. They are the killers, Eric's parents and Emma – both literally and figuratively – and they live with so much pain that they inflict it on others. And in Valgardson's stories, as in every good gothic tale, they are destined, eventually, to perish. But sometimes these characters live on, and the oppressors triumph over the oppressed. Emma, in "God is not a Fish Inspector," for example, seems to have succeeded in confining Fusi to the nursing home, and we imagine her living in her father's house, secure in having saved him from himself. Valgardson offers his reader a paradox to ponder, and that is the essence of the immigrant experience – that good does not always win out over evil.

Valgardson uses imagery that addresses two different religions. One is intractable and fixed in its beliefs. This fanatical religion is based on strict rules of conduct for entering Heaven. For example, in Gentle Sinners Eric's parents impose a set of moral laws and enforce consequences for breaking them. The members of this organized religion follow a scripture that limits people's actions, are intolerant of those who do not believe as they do, and value money above all else. The attitude toward money is shown in these characters: Eric's parents, the Tree brothers, and Larry in Gentle Sinners, Emma

and John in “God is not a Fish Inspector,” and Duke in “Wrinkles.” Further, the characters that exemplify this religion are verbose, believing a person’s deeds relatively unimportant. In short, there is an absence of a spiritual dimension in these characters; they seem not to be able to run their own lives, and must rely on catch phrases, money, and their intolerance of others for survival.

So sensitive is Eric to the symbols of organized religion and so infused with symbols of organized religion is Gentle Sinners, that Eric sees Fusi’s stove as an “altar carved from basalt” (10). Further images appear in “biblical Christmas cards,” the only correspondence that Sigfus receives from Eric’s mother (9). Throughout the novel, there are images of praying, kneeling before God, and images of Christ nailed to a cross. images that add to Valgardson’s religious theme.

The title of Valgardson’s novel Gentle Sinners suggests both tolerance and intolerance. The “gentle sinners” are those people whose sins affect few people. Bert cheats on his wife, Sigfus believes in Norse gods, Eric steals clothes after he is robbed on his way to Eddyville. When the sins of these minor characters are compared to the sins of Eric’s parents, they pale by comparison. What are they to imprisonment, abuse, and neglect? Nor are they as far-reaching as the Tree brothers’ tyranny over the people of Eddyville and their abuse of Melissa and her mother. These greater sins prove to be more damaging than the “gentle” sins.

In “God is Not a Fish Inspector,” Emma appears watchful of Fusi throughout the story. In this stance, she would seem to be tolerant and nurturing, providing protection. But the reader is inclined to see her as intolerant and spying on her father to ensure that he refrains from sinning. According to Emma, Fusi commits a sin by fishing without a

licence. It is note-worthy that Emma finds this sin intolerable, while the fish inspectors ignore it.

When Emma descends the staircase, and watches Fusi from above, she is like a judgmental God. In another scene, when Fusi descends the staircase, the image of God descending from above is invoked. As Emma and John part to let him pass, a rift is created between them, and they show Fusi respect, as they would God, Himself. Fusi is the head of his house, and as he descends, he is reaffirmed as someone to be revered.

As houses of God, churches are symbols of organized religion. Congregations are insular communities, which accept people on the basis of their beliefs. Valgardson portrays churches alternately as havens and as fortresses. John's course is offered by the "One True and Only Word of God Church" (7). The name alone indicates an intolerance that has the potential to lead to fanaticism.

Emma's religion is intolerant. At the opening of the story there is dissent between her and Fusi. She constantly warns her father of the dangers of ignoring the tenets of the Bible or defying God. To fish without a license is to defy God, in Emma's view, "God will punish" Fusi, because of his illegal fishing (5). We realize that Emma does not care that Fusi is fishing illegally, but rather wants to drive Fusi from his home. Valgardson does not give his reader a reason for Emma's persistent admonishment of Fusi, other than that she feels he is sinning and will go to hell. Governed by her hardened beliefs, she succeeds at the end of the story in destroying Fusi's identity, and thus destroying him.

The people in the nursing home appear to Fusi to be "interchangeable" because "time erased their identities" (10). He does not identify himself with these people, who are "relentlessly sliding into the endless blur of senility" (6). Fusi fears being caught by

the inspectors, because they will prevent him from fishing and take his boat, which he cannot afford to replace. If this happens, Emma will have her way, and he will be put in the nursing home. The image of Fusi rowing frantically to shore, the pain in his chest cutting off his breath, trying to reach safety before sunrise is the image of a dying man trying to stop the inevitable coming of death.

Through the eyes of Fusi, Valgardson describes Emma and John as “zealous missionaries” (7). John studies theology by correspondence, his ultimate goal to preach to a congregation, rather than remaining in the bank where he works. Emma and John preach their religion, at the same time avoiding their own community, where people might take offence. Emma believes that her discovery of John’s theology course is a sign from God of her husband’s destiny.

Fusi does not see God as a vengeful, unforgiving deity, as Emma and John see him, but rather as a provider, who made fish in order for them to be caught. He does not believe that to break the law is to defy God, because, as he says so certainly, God is not a fish inspector. Fusi’s God and Emma’s God are different. The title of the story echoes Fusi’s proclamation to Emma that God does not appear in human form to enforce human-made laws.

Despite the seeming indicators of the constricting force in Valgardson’s world, the more tolerant religion usually triumphs over the intolerant one, as is evident in the survival of Sigfus and Eric in Gentle Sinners. However, in “God is Not a Fish Inspector,” it is Emma who appears to have won over Fusi at the end of the story. She appears smug, seemingly having been somehow vindicated for Fusi’s sin, claiming that the inspectors knew all along about his fishing expeditions. At this point, Fusi’s pride is shattered by

Emma's words; he seems deflated, having given up on himself as his dead friend did.

Since his secret is found out, he loses the thrill of eluding the fish inspectors – a joy that has given meaning to his life. It is not the lake to which he will succumb, but to Emma's denial of his life-long identity as a fisherman. We expect him to remain in the nursing home, and indeed, as he turns and runs from Emma, who is blocking the doorway, he goes further into the nursing home. We are left to believe that Fusi will die physically and spiritually in the home, as the doors close ominously behind him.

2.6.3 Judgment and Rejection

Earlier in this chapter, images of community acceptance were described. Yet the communities in Valgardson's writing are sometimes insular places, where his characters are not easily accepted. Examples of this rejection by Valgardson's fictional communities constitute a significant part of his narrative. Eric's parents' judgment of people according to their appearance, in Gentle Sinners, illustrates the limits of their religious community. Eric's father is so narrowed down that he proclaims with unintentional cruelty, "See the abuse of God's holy temple," whenever he sees anyone who is overweight (24). Larry declares his own Judgment Day when he violently attacks innocent people in the community to whom he has taken a dislike. There are other milder, but nonetheless rejecting examples of community judgment in the story. Eric is not immediately accepted into the wider community of Eddyville. Bert, Eric's boss at the lumberyard, expresses the community's belief that young people must mature before taking on a real job, creating for Eric another step in his rite of passage. Three old men sit in front of the pool hall, passing judgment on various people in the community: a "chorus, the old men, the old [Norse] gods, now impotent and weak, [who watch] ... the

disintegrating world of Christianity [around them], in which order and meaning is being lost” (Valgardson 1997). These are the grotesque characters that comprise Gentle Sinners, and the world of chaos and immorality that Valgardson describes.

Light, usually used as a positive image, is an image of intolerance as well, revealing flaws in appearance or character that remain hidden by darkness. Fusi claims that Emma would look the same in the dark as in the light. He worries that Emma will turn on the light and attract his “enemies,” the fish inspectors (7).

Even the colour white, which usually represents purity and religious salvation is given a sense of false purity when applied to Emma, when we discover at the end of the story how utterly cruel she is. Her lips, when she is angry, turn white, in an image of restraint and her nightgown is white.

Other colours appear in the story and take on their own meaning. Purple and black are colours of mourning that indicate death. Valgardson uses the colour purple as an image symbolic of death and foreboding in his image of the lake, turned into a vast darkness by the street lamps. Indeed Fusi almost drowns in the lake.

The theme of intolerance in “The Carpenter of Dreams” is evident in the carpenter’s son-in-law, who wants to impress his neighbours with the appearance of his house, not caring about the labour or artistry behind the building. The carpenter muses that for this reason, his daughter’s marriage will not last.

A central theme in this poem is the difference between appearance and reality. The carpenter does not seek to build for appearance but for the real world: “Not fancy stuff / Pavilion’s [sic] or palaces for kings but split-levels and cottages” (16). This attitude is reminiscent of the dreams of the immigrant Icelanders who, when they arrived

at their new colony, named it Gimli, which turned out not to be the land of their dreams; their reality was not to live in palaces, but in log houses built with their own labour.

2.6.4 New World Values

Just as Sigfus and Sam teach Eric Old World values of the importance of family ties, Eric's parents hold New World Values, which find expression in materialism and abuse of power. Eric's parents represent a segment of society that Sigfus refers to as the "rest of the world" that is crazy (181). An example of the lack of cultural identity is found in Eric's parents. Eric's mother "denied the existence of all relatives," having severed ties with her family (10). As for Sigfus, he was so far removed from Helga, that he received only a newspaper clipping about his nephew's birth. Little wonder, for the two parents suppose that their highest prize is their personal salvation and that their religious order is comprised solely of converted individuals whose goal it is to save only themselves.

Another example of New World values is the idea of sexual promiscuity. Bert has developed a sexual value system that conveniently allows him to cheat on his wife, whom he finds sexually unappealing. Disillusioned by marriage, Bert warns Eric not to trust anyone but himself. In a further example of suspect sexual values, old men sitting in front of the pool hall routinely comment on a local woman pumping water, "If I had that at home for one day, I'd fuck myself to death and die happy" (31).

It is an example of Valgardson's complexity that Eddyville is both a paradisiacal rural town and a breeding ground for moral corruption. The Tree brothers, the town dictators, are known cheats. A woman at the local gas station asks Eric if Bert has ever

cheated him in his wages. When Eric denies it, she asks, “Are you sure?” (44). Later, captivated by her suspicion, Eric counts his money.

Valgardson explores the acquisition of wealth and property most notably in Gentle Sinners. The relationship between materialism and evangelical religion is especially evident in the characters of Eric’s parents, who hoard money, collecting it from unwitting people in the name of God. Eric never had money to spend on himself, and is forced to steal from his parents in order to finance his escape. It is certainly fitting, then, that when Sigfus asks Eric if his mother’s best friend is still God, the boy replies that it is a “close race between Him and money” (25). Eric’s nemesis, Larry, provides an extreme example of materialism in his philosophy of personal ownership. By gathering any trinket he can acquire in order to decorate his home, Larry gains a sense of identity. Larry’s sense of belonging is expressed in his credo: “If you ain’t got anything, who are you?” (61).

Although the setting in the short story “Wrinkles” – that of Victoria, BC – is quite different from the Interlake area of Manitoba, where Valgardson sets most of his writings, similar themes of intolerance are evident in it. The idea of materialism as a type of religion is present in “Wrinkles,” in the character of Duke. As poor as his partner Albert, Duke dreams of what he will do with his windfall from robbery: “He was already thinking about spending the money. Of buying airplane tickets out of Vancouver, of lying on the beach in Mexico. Of living in a hotel room, of eating when he wanted, sleeping when he wanted. No begging for handouts” (What Can’t be Changed 33-34).

In this story, the tension between the two main characters – Duke and Albert – is centred on Albert’s killing of a woman named Louise, whom they call “Wrinkles.” The world of the two criminals is governed by a belief in an eye-for-an-eye revenge.

Therefore, it follows that someone must die for Wrinkle's death, and indeed, Duke's death seems a natural progression in Valgardson's narrative. Duke is trapped in a cistern at the home of Louise's fiancé, "Raisin," without an escape route. We suspect Raisin will leave Duke to die, as he suspects Duke of the murder. The reader is inclined to believe that Duke's imminent death is in retribution for Louise's killing and for Duke's materialism.

2.6.5 Hell

The image of hell in Valgardson's writing is one of an intolerant realm, an instance of God's rejection. Certainly in the Christian religion, those who do not follow Christian ways will be punished – not only punished, but also punished eternally, in a place where Satan is present. Fittingly, Larry appears satanic in his preference for the hell he lives in, in his tempting of Eric to do evil, and in his violent killing of a seagull.

Valgardson's stories, written in the gothic genre, include characteristics of magic and mystery, chivalry and horror, with an emphasis on setting rather than on character. Certainly Gentle Sinners is a novel replete with gothic characters – the hero Eric, the heroine Melissa, and the wise old man Sigfus – even grotesque figure. Eddyville's inhabitants are physically and morally grotesque. The Tree brothers, local scam artists, are a case in point: one is smaller and another is larger than the other characters and they are deformed in a symbolic sense, with their size mirroring their corrupt psychological states. Although size alone does not constitute the grotesque, in a symbolic sense these characters, (one stunted, the other large), may be observed to have psychological deformities that their physical appearance illustrates. Similarly, Eric's parents are grotesque in their restrictive moral attitudes and in their virtual imprisonment of Eric.

Valgardson describes them so powerfully at the beginning of the novel that the reader recognizes them when they appear, toward the end of the story, to confront Eric. The boy, too, has a sense of the gothic: he stares at his parents as if they were a part of a circus sideshow.

In contrast to the image of Sigfus' yard as an Eden, is the general sense of hellish decay in Eddyville. This is a familiar setting in Valgardson's stories: a disintegrating town, in which the environment rules people's lives, where "weeds and wildflowers are slowly taking over from the defeated inhabitants" (French 1980: E14). In the town dump, refrigerators rise like tombstones and putrid water runs everywhere. As Sigfus leads Eric through Eddyville, the boy sees "disintegrating houses [with] chaotic yards," and has the sense that everything in the town is being "slowly twisted" out of shape (35). Valgardson describes the environment as if it were alive and destroying the town: "grass and hedges and trees were consuming what remained" (45). Valgardson describes the buildings in Eddyville as being without foundation and looking as if they would break apart (36). The foundation of the deserted gas station "hung suspended as if on the point of being drawn into an abyss" (39).

Larry's home, an abandoned warehouse that he inherited from his father, provides the reader with the strongest image of hell. The air is dank, shadows loom, and wires appear as snakes in this anti-Eden. Larry lets his possessions rot, precisely as he requires in order to suit his intricately planned life, his "vision of chaos" (63). One literary reviewer describes Larry, as he appears at the end of the novel, as Charon, the mythical Greek keeper of the River Styx, who lured souls toward damnation (French 1980: E14).

The intentional contrast that Valgardson makes between Eden and hell emphasizes the interpretation of Larry as the impure nemesis of the pure Eric.

2.7 Fanaticism

This section will examine two different manifestations of fanaticism in Valgardson's writing: religious extremism and the abuse of power.

2.7.1 Religious Extremism

In Gentle Sinners, Eric's mother Helga is fanatical about her beliefs, and, with Eric's father, imposes her dogmatic beliefs on her son. An embarrassing event occurs when Eric defies his parents, who had forbidden him to attend a birthday party. Valgardson describes the consequence of Eric's action, at the scene of the party: "an hour later, his parents, the minister and two elders from the congregation, had pulled up, marched into the yard and knelt before the picture window in the beginning of a prayer vigil" (12).

2.7.2 Abuse of Power

The theme of fanaticism is most evident in the novel when Eric threatens to kill his parents. Eric is driven to despair by his parent's abuse, when he follows through on his threat. The boy repeatedly convinces himself that he will commit the murder of his parents without remorse and works long and hard in order to save money to buy a gun. Eric has run away, as if from prison, and is at the point of despair, "like someone whose nervous system is disintegrating" (179).

At the moment of confrontation at Sigfus' house, Eric points a gun at his father, threatening to kill him. His father replies with the commandment, "Honour thy father and thy mother" (177). It is not the first time his parents resorted to quotations from the Bible

in order to express their feelings. His mother, Helga, joins her husband in prayer, clasps her hands, and looks to the sky as if “she might, at any moment, begin to rock back and forth and begin resolutely singing a hymn” (177-78). Uncle Sigfus, who has been a witness up to this point, calmly agrees to send Eric home in time to start school. Eric views Sigfus’ promise to his parents as a betrayal, and being too immature to accept any other solution, he turns the gun on himself. Luckily, Sigfus has removed the pin and the gun cannot fire. These attempts at murder and suicide are part of Eric’s journey toward adulthood.

The ultimate test of Eric’s journey toward adulthood comes when he severs his relationship with his evil counterpart, Larry. After Eric attempts to kill himself, he runs away again, this time fleeing from his uncle. He meets Larry, who derives great pleasure from feeding off Eric’s unhappiness. Since their first encounter, Larry’s appearance and mannerisms have repulsed Eric. As Eric’s shadow and nemesis, Larry has tempted him at every turn to follow the path of evil. Larry makes one last unsuccessful attempt to secure Eric’s companionship by stressing their commonality: “You and me, we got a lot in common. I feel I’ve known you all my life” (183). When Larry pushes, Eric turns on his nemesis, not to fight, but to disengage, when he assures Larry and himself, “I don’t need you” (184). Valgardson’s implication is clear: Eric must reject evil and embrace good in order to survive. And indeed, Larry’s later suicide coincides with Eric and Melissa’s escape; the event is symbolically necessary to ensure Eric’s growth into an adult.

Commonly, abuse and fanaticism lead to imprisonment. Eric’s parents are described as prison guards. They neglect and alienate their son. Eric has dreamed of killing his parents and we see him at the beginning of the novel as “someone long in

prison who, instead of despairing, has lived in hope of avenging himself upon his jailers” by threatening their lives (8).

Fusi’s daughter Emma in “God is Not a Fish Inspector” is overbearing, forceful, and satanic; she hisses like a snake. The suggestions of God’s punishment of Fusi, and Emma’s abuse of her father are indications of fanaticism in this short story. The fanaticism described by Valgardson in his writings is a result of his characters inflicting their narrow-minded attitudes on others in order to destroy them.

This chapter has explored the themes of tolerance, intolerance, and fanaticism, as they figure in Valgardson’s writings. The next chapter sheds light on the effect on the writer of these three themes: how the religious debate in New Iceland relates to the literary analysis presented in this chapter.

Chapter 3: The Author's Reaction to History: Valgardson and the Aftermath of the Religious Debate

3.1 Introduction

The religious debate between Bjarnason and Þorláksson in New Iceland in the 1870s revolved around issues of tolerance and intolerance – themes that appear continually in Valgardson's writing, especially in the actions of his characters.

3.2 Valgardson's Themes Reflected in the Religious Debate

We have seen examples of fanatical behaviour in the characters of Eric's parents and in Larry in Gentle Sinners and in Emma in "God is not a Fish Inspector." For example, Eric's parents show their fanaticism in their staging of a prayer vigil in front of Eric's friends, when he defies their orders and attends a party. Emma's constant admonishment of Fusi is a result of her fanatic religious beliefs. She acts, not as a loving daughter, but as Fusi's nemesis, destroying his spirit with her verbal abuse.

Valgardson is concerned with intolerance at many levels and repeatedly addresses in his writings what he deems to be oppressive behaviour stemming from a dogmatic position. In an interview with Kristjana Gunnars, he claims, "What I find terribly distressing is what I see being presented as religion is usually economic and social prejudice. The mix of all other things with religion makes it hard to find the religion among all the agendas and concerns and cares and power struggles and politics" (18). Presumably, like all writers, Valgardson has found that religious upbringing and beliefs have shaped his writings. Certainly what he says in interviews suggest as much:

I think there's a real moral quality to my work, but I'm not a moralistic writer. My characters don't often behave morally but in terms of the theme – of what I have to say – I'm very concerned in many of my stories with Christian and un-

Christian behaviour. By Christian I mean the use and abuse of religion. The power that emanates from religion and how that power is used or abused (18).

On the theme of religion, Valgardson claims that his Lutheranism has shaped the narrative voice of his writing. "I can't help looking at the world as a Lutheran," he says, having grown up surrounded by it (Gunnars 17). Valgardson's experience of Lutheranism was that of the Missouri Synod. What he remembers was the "incredible intolerance that came from people's certainty of their rightness. The sin of that rightness is the intolerance and the cruelty of it. The rigidity and the refusal to recognize the right of anybody's 'other-ness'" (Gunnars 18). He defines this strict Lutheranism in Eric's parents in Gentle Sinners, and Emma in "God is not a Fish Inspector," in their evil doings in the name of religion.

In a later interview, Valgardson discussed religious themes as they inform the structuring of his writing. He suggests that his experience with the Lutheran church and its strict codes of conduct affected his experience and, presumably, his writing. He reveals that had he not become a writer, he would have become a pastor. Indeed his earlier works, such as Gentle Sinners and "God is not a Fish Inspector," deal with religious themes (Valgardson 1998).

In his "Toast to Iceland," Valgardson discusses the influential people and events of his past, which continue to shape his writing. He claims that his upbringing included lessons in his Icelandic identity: a love of language and traditions, and religious instruction in "Icelandic Lutheranism with not just its religious beliefs, its social strictures but also its history" (Valgardson 1995: 2). Valgardson was taught moral values that stemmed from "not just Lutheranism but from the time before Christianity. Attitudes I

hold toward friendship, loyalty, bravery, death are rooted here. And find expression in both my life and writing” (Valgardson 1995: 2).

The dilemma that Valgardson addresses with his statements – the allusion to being raised with both Lutheranism and Norse Mythology – is more easily understood when the religious beliefs of Icelanders are considered. Icelanders were a people of tolerance in their home country, where Catholicism and Norse Mythology were practiced side by side for centuries. It is thus plausible that New Icelanders were equally as tolerant toward their neighbours, whether they were Jónsmenn or Pálsmenn. An indication of their capacity for accommodation is the fact that the religious debate in New Iceland did not result in a clean division of the community into Jónsmenn and Pálsmenn, with all the Pálsmenn moving to North Dakota.

3.3 Ethnicity, Language, Culture, and Religion

The theme of religion figures strongly in Valgardson’s writings and the tension between liberal and conservative theological positions finds continual expression in his work.

Icelandic-Canadians feature as prominent characters and Icelandic traditions abound in Valgardson’s writings. Valgardson addresses several concerns that immigrant Icelanders may well have had in the 1870s: the loss of their language, their displacement from family left in Iceland, and their struggle to maintain Icelandic culture and tradition as a minority culture within a majority one. Tamara Palmer wonders about Anglo-Canadians representing the concept of “other” in the term “ethnic,” as it may describe people and literature outside the scope of that which is British (50). Inherent in the idea of ethnicity is the Old World culture of immigrants to North America. It is this Old

World culture that Valgardson describes and which provides the link to the past, essential for the survival of his characters.

The images of acceptance into a community, as seen in Valgardson's writing, relate to the historical event of the religious debate in New Iceland. Icelandic immigrants were faced with two identities: as Icelanders and as Canadians. At the same time, they must have found strength in their common history with other minority cultures.

3.4 The Attempted Banning of Gentle Sinners

I have argued in this thesis that Valgardson confronts issues of religious bigotry. His writings might well, therefore, generate negative reactions among some readers. A real-life example of this negative reaction is found in the attempted ban of his first novel, Gentle Sinners, from a Winnipeg school curriculum.

Valgardson's characters are portrayed in his writing as actors responding to the story's landscape and surviving in a morally corrupt world. However, it is understandable that some readers would interpret his writing as advocating the morally corrupt world that he describes. I mention the negative public reaction to Valgardson's writing here, in order to illustrate the powerful effect of Valgardson's stories.

In 1990, led by one of their members, several parents of students from Fort Richmond Collegiate in Winnipeg petitioned the School division to ban Gentle Sinners. The attempt was eventually overruled, when school officials decided to make the book optional reading in order to quell the wave of negative press. The comparison between the reactions of literary reviewers and outraged parents reveals that Valgardson is a convincing writer and that his themes speak to the public in a profound way.

The majority of the literary critics have focussed on Valgardson's depiction of myth. According to one critique that reiterated the view of other reviewers, the novel is too easily divided into themes of good versus evil (Eggertson 1981). Others are more positive, and cite well-defined themes.

The moral criticism was levied in the local newspapers by a group of parents from Winnipeg – located 80 kilometres south of Gimli, the presumed site of Eddyville and the home of Sigfus. Those parents who opposed the reading of Valgardson's novel by their children, expressed their opinion in the local paper.¹⁵ For example, some of the claims were that Gentle Sinners contradicts Christian values, condones rebellion against one's parents, and encourages suicide [in the case of Eric's nemesis, Larry] (Jenkinson 1992: 57). When asked about the value of Gentle Sinners, parents gave fewer responses: flashes of good literature and a positive attitude toward hard work (Jenkinson 1992: 56).

The intensity of these social reactions is perhaps not surprising, in view of Valgardson's ability to create complex and realistic characters. A naive reader could easily suppose that Valgardson's characters act in accordance with his own beliefs. The arguments of the would-be censors mask what was perhaps of real concern to them: that the novel constitutes dangerous literature for impressionable young minds being raised to follow the tenets of the Bible.

Valgardson's reaction to the attempted banning of Gentle Sinners was that of shock and disbelief. He defended Eric's challenge of authority, claiming that abusive parents such as Eric's should not be obeyed, and that abuse in all its forms should be

¹⁵ For a thorough report on the attempted book ban, see Jenkinson, Dave. "W. D. Valgardson's Gentle Sinners: A book more sinned against than sinning." CCL 68 (1992): 52-69.

denounced. As Valgardson explains, in reference to the characters of Eric and Larry, the novel looks at two “children who have been abused by fundamentalist parents, one of whom goes out and finds love and respect and survives and the other who doesn’t” (“Being a Target” 18).

Drawing from his religious and cultural heritage and focussing on the fictional Icelandic-Canadian community of Eddyville, Valgardson has created stories that link thematically to his ethnic past. They are not religious treatises but imaginative treatments of the consequences of religious dogmatism on the lives of his characters. Valgardson addresses religious intolerance in his novel Gentle Sinners by exploring a world in which nurturing religion has broken down and by examining the effects of a gothic and perverted environment. What is ironic about the attempted book banning in Winnipeg is that art imitates life, as intolerance and fanaticism rear their ugly heads.

CONCLUSION

The catalyst of Valgardson's writings has been the central topic of this thesis – how he draws from his religious and cultural heritage to create his literary themes. For Valgardson, the writing process becomes a voyage of discovery into his own experiences: “In the process of writing I discover what I myself am thinking: how I am feeling. Things I didn't know before” (62).

During an interview with Kristjana Gunnars, Valgardson reveals his inspiration for Gentle Sinners: a boy standing on a muddy road in the rain, a vision of a Manitoba prairie town in the background (1989: 60). Here we see in the character of Eric, an embodiment of Valgardson's concerns. At the outset of the novel, Eric is escaping a life of misery with his religiously extremist parents and entering his uncle's world of tolerance. As we follow Eric through his journey, guided by Sigfus, we find that even in this world, intolerance and fanaticism can reach one. The loneliness of Eric's plight is a common theme for Valgardson, who describes a world in which, even in the womb of tolerance, one cannot escape the intolerance and fanaticism of the outside world.

In Chapter 1, I explored the religious debate in New Iceland. I suggest that the events surrounding the religious debate in New Iceland reveal the intolerance and fanaticism of the citizens. It was intolerant for the immigrants to believe that there was only one true religion. It was fanatical for them to sit for two days listening to theological arguments, and ultimately for them to leave their homes and their country. The settlers who followed Þorláksson left New Iceland at a time when the community needed to stick together, facing as they were the likelihood that they would disintegrate more quickly as a result of this exodus. These were people who had lived through a horrendous journey to

what they thought would be the Promised Land, only to discover that their hardships would continue – in the early years, they nearly starved, and many died from smallpox. Now they were faced with one more disruption to their lives: the battle over whether or not to leave the colony of their dreams.

The ideas of sacrifice and hardship that surrounded the event of the migration from New Iceland to North Dakota connect to the ideas explored in Chapter 2, of suffering and death in Valgardson's writing. Often, the sense the reader has at the end of Valgardson's stories is that the victim is left without hope, with death around the corner. For example, in "Wrinkles," Duke is left in the cistern with no way out, due to a twist of fate and a mistaken identity. In "God is not a Fish Inspector," Fusi's death – and we do expect him to die spiritually in the nursing home – is unnecessary. If Emma had been a gentle daughter, Fusi might have been allowed the important things in his life, his fishing and his house, and, strong in his identity, might thus have survived.

Valgardson does not leave his reader without hope, however, as he also examines how people survive in the midst of adversity. There is an urge to fight against the coming of death, both in Valgardson's characters and in his reader. But we realize that this fight is futile, and that death is as inevitable a part of life for the characters of Valgardson's stories, as it was for New Icelanders.

Icelandic settlers thought of survival in a new land before considering how their language and culture might be affected by living as a minority group in the Dominion of Canada. Their concern for keeping Icelandic language and culture alive in a new setting was shown in their attempt to create a separate Icelandic colony in the New World. However, once Icelanders arrived in North America and faced the reality of their

situation, the grandiose plans of language and cultural preservation were cast aside in lieu of daily survival. Only in the eyes of the colony leaders was the dream of an exclusive and sustainable settlement of Icelanders still a driving force. At celebrations of Icelandic history – for example, in Milwaukee in 1874 – Icelanders could express their nationalistic pride and dream for a moment that their hardships would give way to prosperity and that they could govern their own fate. First- and second-generation Icelandic-Canadians tended to be more nationalistic toward the old country than were their immigrant ancestors. Responding to the economic and social demands of their new country, the third generation relaxed its nationalistic pride in the homeland and assimilated more readily into mainstream Canadian culture. These descendants did not experience the suffering associated with building a life in the New World, and many of them probably viewed their ancestral homeland as exotic and foreign.

Valgardson's themes are closely tied to his Icelandic heritage. These themes are symbolic of broader concerns of the identity of immigrant Icelanders in New Iceland. These immigrants may have experienced displacement from family, the need to preserve an Icelandic religious belief system, and the loss of their culture, tradition, and ethnic identity as an Icelandic-Canadian minority culture within an Anglo-Canadian majority. Yet with settlement in the New World came an acceptance of and by other minority cultures and a strengthening of common bonds within the New Iceland community itself – themes that are also expressed in Valgardson's work. Valgardson suggests the importance of Old World values – of maintaining Icelandic traditions – in the characters of Sigfus and Sam. Sigfus represents the Icelandic-Canadian community, while Sam encompasses the traditions of a much older, Aboriginal one. On the one hand are his

characters who cling to their roots – Sigfus and Fusi – who are rewarded with the reader’s sympathy. On the other hand are Emma and Helga, who deny their roots and embrace New World values of materialism and denied ethnicity, and generate our contempt. The question remains for the reader: who is better equipped to survive in Valgardson’s world? The reality of New Iceland – as with any reality – was that survival and death were to a large degree arbitrary.

Valgardson draws from his religious and cultural Icelandic heritage and sets the majority of his writing in fictional Icelandic-Canadian communities. He writes about his own growing-up experiences in the Interlake area of Manitoba, in order to give voice to rural life. Valgardson uses ethnic minority characters as protagonists, among those, Icelanders and Ukrainians of his heritage, and in doing so addresses broader issues of ethnic identity in Canada – specifically, of the growth of Icelandic-Canadians into their own cultural identity. By writing from his experience as an Icelandic-Canadian, Valgardson implies an important link with the past, for Icelandic-Canadian literature within the framework of Canadian literature as a whole. He holds a unique place in Icelandic-Canadian literature as he rewrites his ethnic and religious past, giving voice to a specifically Icelandic-Canadian event.

WORKS CITED

“Being a Target.” Canadian Library Journal. 48.1 (1991): 17-18, 20.

Bjarnason, Jón. “Frá frjettaritara vorum sira Jóni Bjarnasyni, Lúther College, Decorah, Iowa í Bandaríkjunum.” (From our correspondent pastor Jón Bjarnason, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, USA) Þjóðólur [Reykjavík, Iceland] (27, 5) 28 Nov., 1874: 17 – 19.

---. “Úr brjefi frá Ameríku.” (Concerning the letter from America) Þjóðólur [Reykjavík, Iceland] (27, 6) 41 – 42.

---. Rit og Ræður. Winnipeg: Hið Evangelíska Lúterska Kirkjufélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi. 1946.

Briem, Halldór. “Athugasemdir við ofanritaða grein.” (Editorial comments on the preceding article) Framfari [Gimli, MB] 24 Jan. 1878: 34-35.

---. “Athugasemdir við ofanritaða grein.” Editorial comments. Framfari [Gimli, MB] 12 Feb. 1878: 43.

---. “Athugasemdir við ofanritaða grein.” Editorial comments. Framfari [Gimli, MB] 20 Feb. 1878: 46-47.

Eggertson, Eric. “Twisted Lives and Ugly Lies.” Ubysey 30 Jan. 1981.

Eylands, Valdimar J. Íslensk Kristni í Vesturheimi. Reykjavík, Iceland: Þjóðkirkja Íslands, 1977.

---. Lutherans in Canada. Winnipeg: The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod in North America, 1945.

French, William. "Gentle Sinners proves that Manitoba short-story writer can go the distance with a first novel that celebrates the life away from a metropolis such as Toronto." Globe and Mail 15 March 1980: E14.

Friesen, Gerald. The Canadian Prairies: A History. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1987.

Gjerset, Knut. History of Iceland. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924.

Gunnars, Kristjana. "'Voyage on a Dark Ocean': An Interview with W. D. Valgardson." Icelandic Canadian (Spring 1989): 15-19.

Houser, George J. Pioneer Icelandic Pastor: The Life of the Reverend Paul Thorlaksson. Ed. Paul A. Sigurdson. Winnipeg: Manitoba Historical Society, 1990.

Jenkinson, Dave. "W. D. Valgardson's Gentle Sinners: A book more sinned against than sinning." CCL 68 (1992): 52-70.

Jonasson, Eric. "The Congregations of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod, 1885-1962." Icelandic Canadian (Spring 1980): 37-38.

---. "Five Eminent Icelandic Pioneers." Icelandic Canadian (Spring 1980): 40-41.

Jónasson, Sigtryggur. The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada. Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press, 1901.

---. "Eru Íslendingar Bornir til Ævarandi Hungurs og Harmkvæla?" (Are Icelanders Born to Everlasting Hunger and Suffering?) Editorial. Framfari [Gimli, MB] 5 April 1878: 1+.

Jónsson, Þorlákur. Letter. Norðanfari [Iceland] 8 Feb. 1873: 25.

Kristinsson, Jónius H. Vesturfarakrá 1870-1914: A Record of Emigrants from Iceland to America 1870-1914. Reykjavík, Iceland: Institute of History, U of Iceland, 1983.

Kristjanson, W. The Icelandic People in Manitoba: A Manitoba Saga. Winnipeg:

Wallingford, 1965.

---. "Some Dates in North American-Icelandic History, mainly 1870-1920." Lögberg-

Heimskringla [Winnipeg] 1 June 1967: 11ff.

Kroetsch, Robert. "The Grammar of Silence: Narrative Pattern in Ethnic Writing."

Canadian Literature 106 (1985): 65-74.

Lindal, W. J. The Icelanders in Canada: Canada Ethnica II. Winnipeg: Viking Printers,

1967.

Marteinsson, Rúnólfur. Ævisaga Séra Jóns Bjarnasonar: Winnipeg. Akureyri, Iceland:

Bókaútgáfan Edda. 1969.

Morton, Desmond. A Short History of Canada. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983.

Morton, W. L. Manitoba: A History. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1979.

Palmer, Tamara. "Ethnic Response to the Canadian Prairies, 1900-1950: A Literary

Perspective on Perceptions of the Physical and Social Environment." 49-73.

Pétursson, Pétur. Church and Social Change: A Study of the Secularization Process in

Iceland, 1830-1930. Diss. U of Lund, 1983. Helsingborg, Sweden: Plus Ultra,
[c.1983].

Thor, Jonas. "A Religious Controversy Among Icelandic Immigrants in North America

1874-1880." M. A. Thesis. U of Manitoba, 1980.

Threinen, Norman J. ed. In Search of Identity: A Look at Lutheran Identity in Canada.

Winnipeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1977.

Valgardson, W. D. The Carpenter of Dreams. Victoria: Skaldhús, 1986.

---. E-mail to the author. 10 Feb. 1997.

- . Gentle Sinners. Ottawa: Oberon, 1980.
- . God is Not a Fish Inspector. Ottawa: Oberon, 1975.
- . In the Gutting Shed. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1981.
- . Personal interview. 31 July 1998.
- . "Personal Gods." Essays on Canadian Writing (Fall/Winter 1979-80): 179-86.
- . "Toast to Iceland." Icelandic Celebration. Gimli, MB. 7 Aug. 1995.
- . What Can't Be Changed Shouldn't Be Mourned. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1990.
- Þorláksson, Páll. Letter. Norðanfari [Iceland] 8 Feb. 1873: 59-61.
- Þorsteinsson, Þorsteinn Þ. Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi. Ed. Tryggvi J. Oleson. 5 vols. Reykjavík, Iceland: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1951.