Department of History
The University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba

A RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY AMONG ICELANDIC IMMIGRANTS IN NORTH AMERICA 1874-1880

by

Jonas Thor

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

1980

A Religious Controversy among Icelandic Immigrants in North American 1874-1880.

by

Jonas Thor.

A thesis 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

© 1980

Permission has been granted to the LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA to lend or sell copies of this thesis, to the NATIONAL LIBRARY OF CANADA to microfilm this thesis and to lend or sell copies of the film, and UNIVERSITY MICROFILMS to publish an abstract of this thesis.

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

ABSTRACT

The present thesis examines a religious controversy in an Icelandic settlement in North America during the 1870s. Icelandic people began emigrating to North America in the early 1870s and throughout that decade several thousands settled in Canada or the United States. Most of them wanted to settle together in an isolated area in order to preserve their language and culture. This turned out to be more difficult than they ever anticipated. Poverty, hunger, cold weather and hard work was certainly nothing new for these Icelandic immigrants but a serious controversy over religious matters was something they had not yet experienced. In Iceland, church matters were in the hands of the State but in North America religious bodies were more democratic in nature.

This study investigates the origins, arguments and consequences of this dispute. Two pastors, Pall Thorlakson, a fundamentalist and Jon Bjarnason, an advocate of 19th century Lutheranism as practiced in Iceland, differed to such extent in their religious views that any reconciliation was impossible. Important as this controversy turned out to be scarcely anything has been written on it. Several

major works on the history of the Icelandic people in North America mention it, but not to any extent. Dr. Valdimar Eylands is the only writer to examine it to some degree, but he fails to discuss its origins and consequences. His book _Islensk Kristni i Vesturheimi_ is the general ecclesiastical history of the Icelandic people in North America, but since it covers more than one hundred years not much attention could be given to the religious controversy in New Iceland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I look back and recall all those who in one way or another helped me make this study possible, the list of names seem endless. Therefore only few can be mentioned here but to all the others I am very grateful. First of all sincere gratitude must be expressed to my supervisor, Professor A.B. McKillop, whose advice and patience were tremendous. Similarly I am greatly indebted to Professor Haraldur Bessason whose knowledge of the Icelandic people in North America was extremely beneficial to this present thesis. Thanks are due to Professor Ed Rea who constantly encouraged me and was most understanding during my first year at this University. I am also greatly indebted to the late Professor Hjalmar Valdimar Larusson, to whom I dedicate this work, for his assistance during the years. My wife, Anna, who suffered with me through thick and thin, certainly deserves credit for her understanding and kindness and finally to my typist, Mrs. Carol Adam, who did an exceptional job, I express my sincere gratitude.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	vi
Chapter	
I. ICELAND AND THE CAUSES FOR EMIGRATION	1
II. SETTLEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES - A DEBATE	25
III. EARLY SETTLEMENTS IN CANADA - TWO PASTORS	45
IV. THE ICELANDIC STATE CHURCH AND THE NORWEGIAN SYNOD	67
V. THE DEBATE IN NEW ICELAND	88
VI. CONCLUSION	110
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES	135
SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY	136

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Icelandic People for ten centuries is in many respects an ecclesiastical history. The first settlers who arrived in Iceland in the 8th century were mostly heathen; but in the year 1000 they were converted to Christianity. For the next five centuries the Church was extremely wealthy and powerful; Bishops often became the most influential men in the country. Following the Reformation the Church lost its power and wealth to the Danish Crown. Lutheran Orthodoxy, however, during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries was strong and in many ways responsible for the survival of the Icelandic people during Danish repression.

After Iceland had been inhabited for almost one thousand years, a relatively large segment of the population emigrated to North America. Their knowledge of the vast continent was, in the beginning, limited to one State--Wisconsin--so consequently the most emigrants went there. Those in Iceland who opposed emigration argued strongly that once in North America, the Icelanders would lose their language and culture as they mixed with people of other nationalities. It was therefore the dream of most of the

immigrants from Iceland to secure an area large enough for all of them to settle. The early years in the States were disappointing as the most desirable districts had already been settled. However, by 1875 they had secured land in an isolated area on the west bank of Lake Winnipeg, Canada. They called it New Iceland.

The first years in New Iceland were extremely difficult. A smallpox epidemic in 1876 killed more than one hundred immigrants; extremes of the prairie climate and unfamiliarity with North American soil proved disastrous for attempts in agriculture in the colony. During these difficult years the Icelandic immigrants felt, more than ever before, the need for a pastor. Upon their arrival in North America and following a brief stay in their new country they quickly realized that they had to organize their own Church and secure a pastor by themselves. This was to be a much greater difficulty than they ever anticipated.

By 1877 two young pastors, Jon Bjarnason and Pall Thorlakson, had established Lutheran congregations in the colony. They differed to such degree in their conception of theological doctrine, however, that any agreement was impossible. How could it be that a community of fewer than two thousand people suddenly found itself in such a debate that a schism was inevitable? Why did the two friends from Iceland suddenly become opponents on the battlefield

of faith? What was the nature of their disagreement? What were the consequences of this religious controversy?

These are but few of the questions the present thesis will attempt to shed some light on. In order to do so it is important to examine briefly the history of Iceland, especially those events that led to the emigration in the 1870s. A good deal of this thesis, similarly, must be devoted to the religious background of the Icelandic people and that of both pastors. The difference between the education and training that Jon Bjarnason received in Iceland and the one Pall Thorlakson obtained at Concordia University, Missouri, is also accounted for since they, as leaders of the two factions in the dispute in New Iceland, were responsible for much of the social and spiritual life of the Icelanders during the first decade of Icelandic settlement in North America.

Although the debate originated in the disagreement between the pastors the common people certainly participated and soon any major decisions having to be made in New Iceland were hotly discussed and agreements seldom reached on a friendly note. These disputes also are accounted for, to a considerable extent, because they led to a complete schism in the colony that saw close to half of the population move out of the settlement and south to North Dakota.

CHAPTER I

ICELAND AND THE CAUSES FOR EMIGRATION

The Icelanders believe that a chieftain from Norway, Ingolfur Arnarson, arrived in the country with his family in A.D. 874 and that his arrival marked the beginning of Icelandic settlement. Even though most of the immigrants came to Iceland from Norway, a portion of them originated in the British Isles, Sweden and Denmark. Many of the Norwegians are said to have gone to Iceland in order to escape the tyranny of King Harald Fairhair.[1] One thousand years after the arrival of Ingolfur Arnarson an emigration from Iceland to America had begun and here again one of the reasons for this second exodus was said to be lack of freedom.

The emigration to North America was precipitated by various causes and one must go back in time to some important events in the history of Iceland to seek explanations. In the 13th century major conflicts between secular and ecclesiastical authorities resulted in an agreement between

---

[1] Jon Johannesson, _A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth_, trans. Professor Haraldur Bessason (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1974), p. 26.

Iceland and Norway: the Old Covenant. Later when the Danish and Norwegian monarchies were united in 1380, the Icelanders came under Danish rule. Later the Danish King assumed absolute power over the Icelanders,[2] which eventually left the Icelanders in a state of misery and extreme poverty.

The 16th century was a time of radical change in Europe. With the Reformation new attitudes in political and intellectual matters were born. Iceland was certainly affected by the trends of the time but this age in Iceland was not one of progress and economic uprising; rather it was an era of repression and decline brought about, for the most part, by the steady increasing strength of monarchial rule.

Under the reign of the last Catholic bishops in the first half of the 16th century in Iceland, the church reached its peak of wealth and power. The death of Bishop Jon Arason in 1550 not only meant the downfall of Catholicism in the country; it also meant that the entire nation was left without a political leader. With the death of this bishop, resistance against Danish repression in Iceland virtually came to an end. The Danish King had accepted Protestantism and aided its enforcement in all Danish colonies. As soon as he learned of his victory in Iceland, he was quick to confiscate all monastic property and had soon gained possession of one-sixth of all property in the

---

[2] Johannes Nordal and Valdimar Kristinsson (eds.), Iceland 1966, (Iceland: Isafoldarprentsmidja, 1967), p. 38.

country.[3] Although this represented a far greater revenue from the country than ever before, the king tried to increase his income. Lack of natural resources and changeable weather are the compelling reasons why the Icelanders always had to import much of what they needed.

During the first two or three centuries of their history, the Icelanders seem to have been in charge of their trade with other nations, using their own ships. At the end of the 12th and at the beginning of the 13th century, this trade more and more got into the hands of foreigners. Icelandic seagoing ships gradually disappeared[4] and with them trading profits which, up to the time in question, had accrued to the country. When the "Old Covenant" was negotiated with Norway in 1262, one of the conditions made by the Icelanders was that at least six ships would visit the country annually.[5] Only bitter experience and other compelling reasons could have led to such a demand. Not only had King Christian 3 of Denmark secured a great revenue from land property but he also sought trading profits. Noticing the activity of German and English merchants in Iceland, the king quickly passed laws to prohibit their trade. Then he sold trading licences to Danish merchants at excessive

---

[3] Pall Eggert Olafsson, Saga Islendinga, Vol. V: Seytjanda Old, (Iceland: Gutenberg, 1965), p. 160.

[4] Nordal and Kristinsson, op. cit., p. 42.

[5] Johannesson, op. cit., pp. 96-97.

profits. They created their own profit margin by extending the selling price of Icelandic products way beyond what they had paid for them, which generally was extremely little.

Farming had been the main industry for ages, but from the beginning of the 15th century a greatly increased demand for fish and fish products in Europe made fishing a livelihood of a rapidly growing interest among the Icelanders. This resulted in a decline in farming in some districts; at the same time numerous fishing villages sprang up along the coast. The demand for fish always exceeded that for farm products so the decline in farming went unnoticed. The Danes continued to profit at the expense of the Icelanders. This resulted in heavy economic losses and the ruination of the spirit to resist. As time passed the Icelanders "fell into a state of dull shiftlessness and general wretchedness".[6]

In the first years of the 18th century the conditions in the country had reached the lowest level in the history of the nation. Delegates were sent to Denmark in order to present the situation from the Icelanders' point of view and to explain their plight. As a result, some action was finally taken; authorities in Denmark carried out an investigation "into economic conditions, the commercial regulations and the conduct of officials"[7] (all of them Danish, of course). The Danes had to admit that conditions

---

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 282.

[7]Nordal and Kristinsson, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

were bad, so throughout the century attempts were made to improve the situation.[8] For various reasons this was not easy. First of all the spirit of the people had to be revived. Second, an epidemic wiped out about eighteen thousand people between 1707 and 1709. It is estimated that by the turn of the century the Icelanders numbered fifty thousand, which means that nearly half of the population died in the epidemic. Population figures show that the fifty thousand level was not reached until a long time afterwards. Third, in 1783-1784, Iceland suffered probably the worst volcanic eruption in its history. The loss of livestock was enormous, thousands of acres of cultivated land were destroyed, and many people died. In spite of good intentions and serious efforts, improvement was slow: the 18th century is usually considered the gloomiest in Icelandic history.

As a result of a war between Denmark and England (1801-1814) the opening decades of the century were lean in Iceland. However, there were signs of revival. Several steps were taken, which at a later date proved of utmost importance to the intellectual and cultural development of the nation. In 1779 Icelandic students in Copenhagen formed a society the purpose of which was "to promote knowledge of the practical arts and sciences amongst the people".[9] There were other equally important events in the cultural advance,

---

[8] _Ibid_.

[9] _Ibid_., p. 46.

most of them taking place in the first few decades of the 19th century. The Icelandic Literary Society was founded in 1816 and in 1818 the National Library of Iceland.

These were the results of the romantic nationalism which had swept across Europe and now encouraged poets and scholars in Iceland to let their voices be heard. The whole nation was awakening and soon the long and bitter struggle for independence was to begin. Owing to the Revolution in France in 1830 and to economic improvements at home, political awareness increased greatly. A group of enthusiastic Icelandic scholars began their fight for the restoration of the Althing.[10] They "demanded complete restoration of legislative authority and financial control to the Althing, abolition of all restrictions on trade and improvements in the fields of education and public health."[11] There was to be a long and hard struggle and although some demands were met, such as the reinstitution of the Althing as a consultative body in 1843-1845, and free trade in 1854, the disappointments were many. It is apparent that conditions in Iceland improved during the second half of the 19th century; yet this was also the time of emigration. The remainder of this chapter will deal with this apparent paradox.

---

[10]"Althing" is the name for the Icelandic Parliament. It was established in 930 and is therefore the oldest parliament in the world.

[11]Nordal and Kristinsson, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

The first Icelanders emigrated to America in 1855. Having accepted the faith of the Mormons, they settled in the state of Utah. During the next few years a handful of people from Iceland came to join them.[12] The reasons for this early emigration were primarily of a religious nature. The next wave of emigration appears to have been due to severely cold winters in Iceland. In the second half of the century the climate gradually became colder.[13] The winter of 1858-1859, for example, was so bitterly cold in the North that emigration came under severe consideration. At a meeting at Nesi[14] in the fall of 1859 the prospects of a settlement in Brazil became such an attractive alternative that a committee was formed to investigate this matter and, if necessary, arrange transportation. For the next five years these matters were pondered with caution; meetings were frequently held and articles favouring emigration appeared in newspapers. Finally, in 1863, five Icelanders set off for Brazil and for the next few years they sent favourable and encouraging reports on their new country to Iceland.[15] The almost prohibitive distance between Iceland and Brazil, coupled with a steadily increasing interest in

---

[12]Hjortur Palson, _Alaskafor Jons Olafssonar 1874_, (Iceland: Bokautgafa Menningarsjods, 1975), p. 12.

[13]Magnus Jonsson, _Saga Islendinga_, Vol. IX: _Landshofdingjatimabilid_, (Iceland: Gutenberg, 1955), pp. 227-228.

[14]Nes in Sudur-Thingeyjarsysla.

[15]_Nordanfari_, March 3, 1870, p. 3.

attractive settlement sites in the United States, may explain why only about thirty more emigrants went to join their Brazilian-Icelandic compatriots.[16]

The emigrations to Utah and Brazil only marked the beginning of what was to come. Hundreds of Icelanders who now considered living conditions in Iceland extremely poor were dreaming of an exclusive Icelandic settlement in the New World. In 1870, for example, four Icelanders emigrated to Wisconsin[17] and thus started the emigration from Iceland to the United States. This emigration was to continue for years. The emigration to Brazil was brought about mainly by severe winters. Similarly, inclement climatic conditions played a great part in the emigration to the United States. The very existence of the people may be said to have circumscribed by conditions of the weather.

It gradually grew colder in Iceland in the second part of the 19th century; the winter of 1859 is usually considered to have marked the beginning of this cold spell. It continued for the next six years, with 1866 probably the coldest year of the century.[18] Polar ice was close to the north coast throughout the year, finding its way every now and then into the bays, preventing any fishing. Blizzards

---

[16]Sources do not agree on the total number of emigrants to Brazil. In his book, Alaskafor Jons Olafssonar 1874, Hjortur Palsson, for example, suggests that not more than thirty emigrated. Wilhelm Kristjansson claims in his book The Icelandic People in Manitoba that about forty persons left for Iceland.

[17]These settled on Washington Island in Lake Michigan.

[18]Jonsson, op. cit., pp. 227-228.

constantly made any transportation impossible and livestock had to be kept indoors most of the year. The hay harvest failed in many areas and for those farmers who were not well provided with hay, retrenchment was inevitable. The following four years were cold so the survival of many was constantly threatened. By 1870 those who had struggled through this time had become exhausted and welcomed the idea of emigration. The close connection between emigration and harsh climate is best described by the fact that the number of emigrants rose significantly following a bad winter.[19]

There were other inescapable elements which similarly threatened the existence of the nation. Scab on sheep added to the hardship of the decade before 1870. More than two hundred thousand sheep had to be killed but sheep raising was one of the major industries in the country. Still another ever present danger lay hidden under surface of the earth. There are many who find it unbelievable that a land with such a chilly name can turn into one of the most volcanic places on Earth. In recorded history, Iceland has seen about hundred and fifty eruptions from at least thirty volcanoes. For the people depending on the land these brought disaster time and again. One particularly violent eruption which played a large part in the emigration of the 1870s, took place in 1875, blanketing a large

[19]Palsson, op. cit., p. 14.

area with lava and thick layers of ash, leaving hundreds of people without homes or livestock. During the following year more Icelanders emigrated than ever before or since; in one year; most of the emigrants coming from the area destroyed by the volcano.

In the same manner, there is a close correlation between political set-backs in the struggle for independence from Danish rule and increasing rates of emigration. On January 2, 1871 the King issued an act defining the position of Iceland to the Danish Crown. This law made it clear that Iceland was a Danish colony and thus severely halted the progress of the struggle. Secondly, on May 4th, 1872 the post of a governor was established. Now the executive power vested in him. This had all been done without any consultation with the Icelanders and so consequently caused a tremendous reaction in Iceland.[20] Undoubtedly many of those who left in 1872-1873 had felt the stifling effect of this legislation and had given up hope. The fight for increased political autonomy had then lasted for twenty years without any appreciable success. They had time and again tasted the bitterness of defeat and with nothing significant in sight they left the country. Although little was gained in this struggle, improvements were made in industrial and economical affairs. In spite of these, the country remained poor and undeveloped. Trade opportunities

---

[20] See for example, Frjettir fra Islandi, 1873, p. 1 and Gongu Hrolfur, 1873, p. 26.

were few; in fact there was hardly any hope of more than mere survival. In many districts every farm was over-populated[21] and even though young and eager men wanted to start on their own, want of tenancy and the presence of poverty prevented them from trying. In many cases people were forced to leave such farms and emigrate.

It should not be forgotten that emigration was the trend of the time. Throughout Europe thousands of people were considering prospects in the new world and agents tirelessly encouraged them to leave. Iceland was no exception in this matter. Although foreign agents were not popular with the majority, their voices reached the ears of many who later emigrated. Finally, it can be added that those already in America wrote encouraging letters to relatives and friends in Iceland and often such letters proved to be enough.[22]

The emigration from Iceland in the early 1870s was to the United States. Starting in 1870, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, became for the next five years a kind of capital of the Icelandic settlement in North America. It was indeed the residence of most of the important Icelanders who assumed

---

[21] Bjorn Teitsson, _Eignarhald og Abud a jordum i Sudur-Thingeyjarsyslu_, (Iceland: Bokautgafa Menningarsjods, 1973), p. 90.

[22] For example, in his letters to Rev. Jon Bjarnason, Pall Thorlakson constantly urged him to emigrate and this more than likely was the main reason for Bjarnason's emigration in 1873. Letters to Bjarnason from Thorlakson, 1973 (Special Collection, Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba).

responsibility of searching for a colony site in the United States and, later on, also became involved with New Iceland, Canada.

Before 1870, Icelanders knew little if anything about the United States. As the first began to consider emigrating there, they derived their information about the new land mostly from articles written by Norwegians in the States.[23] The authors of these articles settled in Wisconsin and described conditions there as knowledge permitted. Then, of course, when the first Icelanders settled there, letters to friends and relatives in Iceland added to the picture.

A Danish storeclerk, William Wickmann, for example, left Iceland in 1865 in order to visit his sister in Milwaukee. He corresponded with his former employer, Gudmundur Thorgrimsen, and praised everything he saw. He emphasized, among other things, that Lake Michigan was full of fish and that he could see no reason why Icelanders in America should not benefit, just like other immigrants.[24] Thorgrimsen discussed these matters with his friends, who carefully considered emigration. Finally, in 1870, four Icelanders left for Milwaukee and settled on Washington Island. During the next few years, around twenty-five Icelanders settled temporarily on the Island. Heavily wooded

---

[23]For example, Nordanfari, November 24, 1871.

[24]Arni Gudmundsen, "Landnam Islendinga a Washingtoneyjunni," Almanak 1900, p. 28.

surroundings made cultivation almost impossible and lack of money prevented the purchasing of the expensive fishing gear needed on the lake.[25]

In 1872 the group of the Wisconsin Icelanders was joined by twenty newcomers from Iceland. Their leader was a brilliant young theological student, Pall Thorlakson. These new immigrants to Wisconsin wrote letters to Iceland and told of their experience, so gradually Wisconsin became the focus of discussion on a future Icelandic settlement. In these discussions it was always emphasized that immediately upon their arrival in America the immigrants should make every effort to remain together and preferably form their own colony. This tiny Icelandic settlement therefore made Wisconsin the natural destination of future immigrants from the homeland.

At the time in question, emigrants leaving Europe for North America could look to new and wider horizons. In a steadily growing measure, agents were dispatched from both the United States and Canada for the recruitment of people from the old World. Their propaganda reached Iceland mostly through Denmark. In 1873, for example, a new Danish colony in New Brunswick, Canada, received publicity in an Icelandic periodical.[26] Similarly, Nova Scotia and the

---

[25]C.B. Eaton, Washington Island ("The Island Series"; Wisconsin: Bayprint, Inc., 1972), p. 67.

[26]Nordanfari, January 31, 1873.

unsettled interior of Canada had become known to a large group of emigrants gathered at Akureyri in July, 1873.[27] At a special meeting these areas were mentioned, along with Wisconsin, as a possible destination. On the 4th of August, the same year, 153 Icelanders sailed for Quebec, arriving on August 25th. After a few days rest and serious deliberations only 50 of these followed Pall Thorlakson, who had come to meet these new emigrants, down to Wisconsin. The rest accepted an offer from Canadian immigration authorities, who had found it increasingly disturbing to see thousands of immigrants pass through Canada and into the States. They therefore offered the Icelandic group "free transportation to Ontario, temporary quarters and two hundred acres of free land, on condition of three months residence in the Province".[28] At the end of that period some of the people moved down to Wisconsin while others remained in Canada.

This split might seem significant. The Icelandic immigrants had been unanimous in their wish to form a colony where all could settle. One may therefore wonder if this division really signified the end of a dream. However, this was not the case as almost every Icelandic

---

[27] Asgeir V. Baldvinsson, "Landnam Islendinga i Muskoka og Tildrog ad thvi," Almanak 1900, p. 41.

[28] Wilhelm Kristjansson, The Icelandic People in Manitoba, (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965), p. 17.

immigrant, whether in the United States or Canada, considered his place of residence only a temporary one. The formation of a New Iceland was the ultimate goal.

In 1873 between 130 and 140 Icelandic immigrants arrived in Wisconsin.[29] Among them were individuals who in every respect came to provide important leadership for their countrymen for many years. It is therefore appropriate to pause and introduce the two men on whom the present thesis will focus. First, our attention is turned to Pall Thorlakson.

Thorlakson was born on the 13th of November, 1849, at Husavik in Thingeyjarsysla. His father was, at the time, a storeclerk; but two years later, he and the family moved to Storutjarnir in Ljosavatnsskardi and took up farming. Pall's mother, Henrietta Lovisa, was of Norwegian-Icelandic ancestry, which may in part explain her son's keen interest in the Norwegians and their settlements when he arrived in Wisconsin in 1872.

As a youth Pall was extremely devoted to his mother, whom he is said to have resembled more than any of her other children.[30] The mother's deep religious convictions left lasting impressions on her son. He entered the Grammar School in Reykjavik in 1866, and he graduated from it five years later. An extremely diligent person, young Pall

---

[29] Nordanfari, March 17, 1874, p. 3.

[30] Logberg, November 25, 1897, p. 2.

devoted his entire energies to his study and always obtained extraordinary results. Having added English and French to the normal program of studies, he received, in his final year in school, private instruction in Hebrew. This special request appears somewhat strange since he intended to go to the University of Copenhagen to study Germanic Philology. Rev. Jon Bjarnason, who also attended this Hebrew course, suggested that Thorlakson's interest in Hebrew was in line with his intention to become a pastor.[31]

A letter from his father during the winter of 1870-1871 opened his eyes for emigration to North America. Unfortunately this letter no longer exists, but later Thorlakson referred to it and admitted that his father's suggestion came as a complete surprise.[32] After careful deliberation he decided to emigrate to the United States. Immediately following graduation he visited his parents in North Iceland, where he began preparing for his journey. During the winter 1871-1872 he taught future emigrants some English, serving at the same time as a private tutor for students preparing for entrance exams to the Grammar School in Reykjavik.

---

[31] Minningarrit hins ev. lut. Kirkjufelags Islendinga i Vesturheimi 1885-1910 (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1922), p. 61.

[32] Th.Th. Thorsteinsson, Saga Islendinga i Vesturheimi, Vol. II: (Winnipeg: Columbia Press Ltd., 1943), p. 121.

Finally, in the spring of 1872, he, along with his brother Haraldur and a few others, set off from Thingeyjarsysla in the north and headed south to Eyrarbakki. On the 13th of June, 1872, a group of twenty-two began the long journey to America. It was nevertheless a pleasant one for most of the people, whose expectations were exceedingly high. During the voyage a certain seaman, wanting to become a guide for emigrants, asked for a letter of recommendation. On the occasion Pall Thorlakson certainly showed his linguistic ability by writing letters in English, German, French, Latin and Greek.[33] The emigrants all reached their destinations safely; some immediately headed for Washington Island while Thorlakson and a few others remained in Milwaukee. It did not take Thorlakson long to become settled on a foreign soil. Rev. Jon Bjarnason even maintained that as soon as Thorlakson set foot on American soil, he was determined to become an American.[34] Bjarnason probably was of the opinion that Thorlakson soon felt he should mix with the Norwegians as impressed with their achievements as he was. It also seems to have been Thorlakson's opinion from the beginning that even though the immigrants to United States were of different nationalities, they were, in their new country, a part of a nation in the making, so the adaptation was inevitable.

---

[33] Eaton, op. cit., p. 58.

[34] Minningarrit hins ev. lut. Kirkjufelags Islendinga i Vesturheimi 1885-1910, op. cit., p. 62.

Shortly after his arrival in Wisconsin,Thorlakson became acquainted with a Norwegian pastor and accompanied him on journeys around Wisconsin. These journeys gave him an opportunity to investigate possible areas of settlement. At the same time, he studied Norwegian settlements and became extremely interested in them. This is, for example, borne out by the following description: ". . . It is unbelievable what the Norwegians have achieved here in few years. They have, for example, built a Latin School which costed $80.000, yet there are not more than thirty years since the first Norwegian set foot on this soil. . . ."[35] His letters to Iceland always reflected realistic attitudes and observations. He studiously avoided exaggeration and any such remarks that might misrepresent the new world among his countrymen in Iceland. Instead he cautioned Icelandic people against rushing away from their country insisting that emigration should not be taken lightly.[36]

His acquaintance with Norwegian pastors led to his registration at Concordia University, St. Louis, Missouri, in the fall of 1872. At that time the Norwegian Synod had not yet founded its own Seminary and sent its theological students to Concordia, the educational centre of the Missouri Synod. For the next three years Thorlakson applied himself to his studies and during this time his faith and

---

[35] Nordanfari, February 8, 1873, p. 3.

[36] Ibid., April 19, 1873, p. 4.

opinion on the pastorate fully matured. A fellow student, who later became a professor at the University of Minnesota, once commented on their acquirements at Concordia: "What we acquired there was not necessarily the Knowledge. That could be obtained almost anywhere equally well or better. No, it was the firm belief in the pastorate. It was the answer to what a pastor must be like on the inside as well as on the outside. . . . This is much more valuable than anything else and I doubt if it could be found anywhere but at Concordia."[37]

Following his ordination in 1875,[38] Thorlakson began his services among Norwegian congregations in Wisconsin. In spite of hard study, Thorlakson always had time to participate in all major affairs of the Icelandic immigrants.

Occasional references have been made to Jon Bjarnason in the preceding account of Pall Thorlakson. There is a special reason for this. For ten years these two men had strongly influenced each other and therefore it is appropriate at this point to introduce Bjarnason.

Born at Thvotta on the 15th of November, 1845, he later moved with his parents to Kalfafell in Vestur-Skaftafellssysla, where he served for five years. Bjarnason's

---

[37]Fridrik Bergmann, "Rev. Pall Thorlaksson," Sameiningin, Tenth Yearbook of the First Lutheran Congregation of Winnipeg, (Winnipeg: Logberg Print, 1896), p. 167.

[38]The ceremony took place during the annual conference of the Norwegian Synod on July 8, 1875 and was performed by H.A. Preus.

memories of this place are vague. Probably because his father in 1852, accepted another benefice at Thingmuli in Sudur-Mulasysla. There Bjarnason spent the happiest years of his childhood;[39] there he entered adolescence and there his father prepared him for the Grammar School in Reykjavik. He registered in 1861, almost sixteen years old, a very inexperienced country lad, extremely sensitive but talented and longing for education. Soon it became apparent that the years in Reykjavik would leave their marks on him, especially the atmosphere in the Theological Seminary which he attended immediately following the Grammar School.

In his "Apologia pro vita sua" he gives the following description:

> When I entered the school I became very disappointed. The students were fewer than ever before or just over thirty. One tends to think it needed not to be of any disadvantage, much rather the opposite, but such was the case. I found the spirit among the students cold and repellent. Later I found out, however, that there were exceptions. This dreadful spirit appeared, for example, in the attitude of the students to the study. It was not considered honorable to be diligent; in fact they even detested those who made any effort in that direction. . . . This attitude was at times beyond my strength; it hurt me tremendously.[40]

Nevertheless, he completed his study with praiseworthy results and was ordained immediately upon graduation in

---

[39] Minningarrit um Sera Jon Bjarnason, (Winnipeg: Columbia Press Ltd., 1917), p. 8.

[40] Ibid., pp. 10-12.

1869. For a year he was an assistant pastor to his father, who was ill, but thereafter he returned to Reykjavik and married his fiancee, Lara Gudjonsen, on the 15th of November, 1870. They spent the next three years in Reykjavik and he supported them by teaching. He was a part-time teacher at the Grammar School and the Elementary School but in addition he instructed young students at his home in foreign languages. Bjarnason always considered these posts as temporary ones; twice he applied for vacant benefices but was turned down on both occasions.[41]

It is difficult to understand why such a brilliant student and devoted pastor was not immediately offered a benefice, especially since in many instances pastors of this era were known to have neglected their duties. His disappointment with the Theological Seminary, which was obvious to authorities within the Icelandic Church, may in part explain this. In the absence of proof one suspects that as a result of his dissatisfaction, his services were not required.

During the winter 1872-1873, Bjarnason corresponded with his friend at Concordia University. These letters clearly show Thorlakson's appreciation of the Norwegian Synod and its leaders. It appears that Bjarnason asked, in one of these letters, for information on church life in the States and in a letter he received from Thorlakson

---

[41] Ibid., p. 15.

March 20, 1873, Thorlakson briefly discussed the Norwegian Synod. He emphasized that if Bjarnason wanted to come to America and serve as a pastor he should attend Concordia for a year or so in order to understand the differences between the Church in Iceland and the Norwegian Synod. Thorlakson pointed out that Bjarnason would undoubtedly be offered a post within the Synod after his stay at Concordia. Bjarnason was, however, not easily persuaded. Letters from Thorlakson May 10th and July 17th, 1873, show that Bjarnason for some unknown reasons was still somewhat hesitant.[42] Finally in late August he made up his mind and along with his wife, Lara, left Iceland, on September 5, 1873. Once in Quebec they immediately set off for Milwaukee where they spent a few days before heading south to St. Louis.

Thorlakson again suggested to Bjarnason that he attend Concordia University but Bjarnason never did. Instead he was considered for a teaching post at Decorah, Iowa, where the Norwegian Synod had recently established a Latin School. The annual conference of the Synod was scheduled there for January, 1874, and Bjarnason was asked to attend a special meeting where his future position within the Synod was to be decided.[43] After a three-week

---

[42]Letters to Bjarnason from Thorlakson, 1973.

[43]Minningarrit um Sera Jon Bjarnason, op. cit., p. 16.

period of confusion and indecision in St. Louis, the Bjarnasons travelled north to Decorah where they were met by U.V. Koren one of the most influential leaders of the Synod.

Gradually a new world opened to Bjarnason. He saw active churches all around him, living faith and extensive social functions controlled by these churches. This was the independent church, free from any interference of the State. This new world was very much to his liking and he became increasingly convinced that the organisation of the Icelandic Church was based on unsound administrative principles, for example, the non-existent participation of common people in the administration of the Church in Iceland. It was his conviction that it played an important role in the constantly declining effect of the Church on the people of Iceland.

As he began to discuss religious matters with Norwegian pastors, however, it soon dawned on him that he could not accept the fundamentalism in the doctrines of the Norwegian Synod.[44] In his correspondence with Icelandic friends early in 1874, he frequently touched upon this matter, in a letter to his former instructor in Reykjavik, Helgi Halfdanarson, for example he wrote:

> When my views are condemned, especially those which I know for sure are also yours, I feel I am wrongly accused. I would very much like to hear your point of view, and by all means do not hesitate to find

---

[44] Jon J. Bildfell (ed.), Jon Bjarnason Rit og Raedur, (Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1946), p. 286.

> fault with me if you think I am mistaken. My intention is and has been, at whatever cost, neither to deny my own conviction nor consider it wrong what I have accepted as right after careful deliberation. I hate all religious debates and I have no intention to deal with the Synod if I am not left in peace. I still dislike it but things may improve. If not, then I must leave. . . .[45]

At the conference in January, 1874, it was agreed that Bjarnason be offered a teaching post at Decorah. He happily accepted. His first term of teaching was a successful one, so he was asked to stay on. In the summer of 1874 he travelled to Milwaukee where he met many Icelanders. Soon he was deeply involved with what had now become a matter of importance--the search for a colony site in the United States.

Bjarnason's dissention with the Norwegian Synod is the topic of a subsequent part of this thesis. Suffice it to say here that upon his arrival in the States, he almost immediately came into conflict with both the Missouri and the Norwegian Synods. To this opposition one can trace the origins of a violent religious controversy that shortly afterwards arose in New Iceland, Canada, and which turned into a major threat to the continued existence of that settlement.

---

[45] Ibid.

CHAPTER II

SETTLEMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES - A DEBATE

The people who emigrated from Iceland in the 1870s can easily be divided into two groups. First, there were single men and women who had suffered from unemployment and did not really mind where they would eventually settle. As opportunities arose, they would move from place to place.[1] These people comprised the smaller group. The larger one consisted of families, often with many children and elderly relatives. The head of each family, in most instances, had been a self-employed farmer in the old country. In his new country he therefore wanted to claim a piece of land as his very own. From the beginning this engendered a need for an exclusive Icelandic settlement. There people would be able to share their native language and maintain their ties with friends and relatives.

---

[1]For example, Stephan G. Stephanson, the great Icelandic poet who emigrated to Wisconsin in 1873. In his book Umhleypingar, pp. 79-80 he tells of how he moved from one farm to another looking for employment.

The idea of an Icelandic settlement in North America had originated in Iceland in the late 1860s. After the immigration to Wisconsin it received great impetus and in 1874-1875 it was formalized and brought into being.[2] The Icelanders had not been long in Wisconsin when they realized that they would not be able to settle there. The most attractive areas in the State had already been occupied. Therefore future possibilities in such neighbouring States as Iowa and Nebraska came under consideration. To give an example, two brothers by the name of Torfi and Larus Bjarnason travelled in 1873 throughout the State of Nebraska in search of a site for a settlement. Eventually they bought a portion of land near the small village of Salt Hill, almost eight miles south of Lincoln.[3] This isolated region offered bleak prospects for settlers, and in September, 1873, Torfi Bjarnason returned to Milwaukee where he advocated abandonment of colonization plans in the above mentioned area.

The spring of 1874 was a time of serious deliberation among Icelanders in Wisconsin. Inflation and widespread panic over financial conditions had greatly reduced the prospects of newly-arrived immigrants to the United States.[4]

---

[2]New Iceland in the district of Keewatin, Canada, became in 1875 an all Icelandic settlement.

[3]Jon Halldorsson, "Tildrog Til Islenskrar Nylendustofnunar i Nebraska," Almanak 1914, p. 151.

[4]The New York bank crash in 1873 is normally considered the explanation.

Employment was scarce in towns and villages. In rural areas jobs were hard to get and wages low. With no economic improvements in sight the immigrants from Iceland had only two alternatives. One was to rely on support from relief funds. Back in Iceland many of the immigrants had long been faced with the possibility of becoming welfare cases.[5] In their new country any such degradation was a frightening anathema. The other was to organize an Icelandic colony immediately and attempt to survive on farming.

During the winter 1873-1874 the leading Icelanders in the United States constantly dwelt on the settlement question in their correspondence, Mr. Jon Olafson,[6] for example, then at North Cape, Wisconsin, wrote on December 30,1873 to Jon Bjarnason that it was his intention to travel to Milwaukee in January the following year to organize an association among the Icelanders. He further stated that he felt there was no excuse why no such effort had been made long ago. Once in Milwaukee he met many Icelanders

---

[5]The "welfare" system in 19th century Iceland worked in the following manner: Each county provided the poor with necessities. The better-to-do farmers normally housed the poor and fed them and would charge the county for a fixed amount for each person they took care of. It was, during the time in question, considered a terrible shame to be on the county.

[6]Jon Olafson, a poet and an editor of a periodical in Iceland in 1872 made serious accusations against the Danish Government and facing imprisonment he escaped to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1873.

who felt the same way. He did not, however, stay there long and even though the Icelanders he met held similar views no organization had yet been born at the time Jon Olafson left Milwaukee.

One of the Milwaukee Icelanders, Olafur Olafson, had greatly impressed Olafson. This man was endowed with intelligence and qualities of leadership. Yet he seems to have had a problem of adjustment. Bergsteinn Jonsson, a leading Icelandic historian, once wrote: "In spite of obvious talent and natural qualities of a leader it appears that he could not stay in one place for long. He suggested one possible settlement after another and always seemed convinced that the latest idea was the right one."[7]

During the early months of 1874, Olafur Olafson led a group of Icelandic immigrants who considered an exploration to Iowa and Nebraska. After careful preparation delegates left Milwaukee May 5, 1874 for Iowa. It soon became clear to them that Iowa, like Wisconsin, had more or less been settled. Therefore they turned to Nebraska. Having examined areas along the Burlington-Missouri railway, they agreed that this was the proper location for an Icelandic settlement, although previous land-claims within the area by people of other ethnic origins precluded on the part of the Icelanders an absolute territorial contigriti.[8]

---

[7]Bergsteinn Jonsson, "_Addragandi og Upphaf Vesturferda af Islandi a nitjandu old_," _Andvari_ 1975, p. 15.

[8]Halldorsson, _op_. _cit_., p. 152.

The delegates immediately reported to Milwaukee where many were eager to move west. This, however, was not to be. During the summer of 1874, grasshoppers destroyed all the crops in vast areas in Nebraska, and, naturally, the grasshopper plague was of great discouragement to anyone planning to settle there.

There were other reasons why the Icelanders lost their interest in Nebraska. In May of 1874 a man by the name of Marston Niles[9] requested Jon Olafson to translate a book on Alaska. Niles suggested that since conditions in Alaska were in many respects similar to those in Iceland it might offer good prospects for Icelandic immigrants. Having considered this proposition carefully, Jon Olafson stated in a letter of the 27th of June[10] that he had made up his mind and arranged to travel to Alaska by a U.S. battleship along with two other Icelanders. At a meeting of twenty-two Icelandic immigrants, Jon Olafson, Olafur Olafson and Pall Bjornson had been selected to make this journey. Convinced that a solution had now been found not only for Icelandic immigrants to North America but for all Icelanders, Jon Olafson wrote with extraordinary enthusiasm that

---

[9]Marston Niles was a lawyer in New York. He had for some unknown reasons become interested in Iceland and was aware of the problem facing the Icelandic immigrants in Wisconsin.

[10]It was sent to Jon Bjarnason and mailed in Milwaukee where Jon Olafson was introducing his Alaska project.

> . . . the purpose is to settle a vast area where all Icelanders could live, where they could multiply, preserve their language and nationality. Here they could establish an Icelandic State as a part of the United States, - Iceland should be depopulated but established again, free and reborn in Alaska.[11]

On August 2, 1874, 43 Icelandic immigrants in Milwaukee signed a petition to the President of the United States. They requested that the United States support an expedition of three Icelandic explorers to Alaska where they would spend three weeks investigating the suitability of Kodiak Island and other nearby areas as the future colony for the Icelandic immigrants. The petition pointed out that the seventy thousand living in Iceland had been faced with such a steadily deteriorating climate in the second half of the century that many of them were considering emigration. Abortive attempts to find settlement sites were also mentioned and Alaska was hailed as the ideal place for the Icelanders in the United States. The petition made clear that the plight of the Icelandic immigrants in the United States was so serious that if decisive measures were not immediately taken Canada would soon become a major attraction for them. Moreover, the petition stated that if the three Alaska explorers approved of conditions there, two of them would stay behind for the winter while the third, Jon Olafson, would return to Wisconsin to give a detailed report on the

---

[11] Ibid.

entire exploration.[12] In brief, the plan anticipated that the three explorers take the frigate "Portsmouth" from San Francisco to Alaska, and that, in case of affirmative results from the expedition, Jon Olafson would return on the same ship.

The Icelandic delegates left San Francisco on September 15, 1874, and reached Kodiak Island on October 9. Having surveyed the area from several angles the three men composed the previously noted positive report which Jon Olafson brought back to Milwaukee on December 2.

Although Jon Olafson's intentions were good and his efforts impressive the plans he conceived failed to materialize for various reasons. First, Governor Elliot of Alaska opposed the Icelandic colonization idea, and approval from the Government in Washington was contingent upon his support. At any rate his opposition put an end to the hopes that the Icelandic immigrants, as they had requested, would receive free transportation to Alaska. Second, Olafur Olafson, upon his return in the spring of 1875, had completely reversed his opinion on the Alaska site. The bitterly cold winter he experienced undoubtedly was the main reason for his decision. One should also bear in mind Olafson's problem of adjustment.[13]

---

[12]Palson, _op_. _cit_., p. 56.

[13]Jonsson, _op_. _cit_., p. 16.

There are no figures available to show the extent of public support of the Alaska venture. The petition to the U.S. Government carried the signatures of forty-two Icelanders but this document only requested that the area in question be explored. It seems that the majority of Icelanders in Wisconsin soon abandoned the idea and that Jon Olafson continued to fight alone.

From the above one may conclude that Jon Olafson, Jon Bjarnason and Olafur Olafsson represented a group of Icelanders who wanted to get out of Wisconsin. Also in reading the sources on the Alaska affair, one quickly notices that Pall Thorlakson does not seem to have been involved.[14] It is certain, however, that he was deeply concerned with everything that might affect the future of his fellow-countrymen in Wisconsin. He is known to have made supreme efforts in support of the Icelandic immigrants. It is also clear that he opposed the Alaska project from the beginning[15] and, accordingly, did not sign the petition.

In order to understand Thorlakson's point of view one needs go back to the year 1873, when in the early spring he received a letter from Iceland requesting him to seek out a colony site for 500 Icelanders who would be emigrating later that year. In his reply published in the

---

[14]He at least did not correspond with Jon Olafson but he may have followed the preparation through Jon Bjarnason.

[15]Palson, _op_. _cit_., p. 27.

Icelandic paper Nordanfari[16] he declined for the following reasons: First, he pointed out that he was totally lacking in expert knowledge of the qualities of North American farmlands. Second, he believed that, having emigrated, Icelandic farmers needed first and foremost experience and practice in the field of North American agriculture, which in so many ways was bound to be unfamiliar to them. Finally, it was his conviction that most of the emigrants could not afford to buy land and the expensive equipment such transactions inevitably entailed. Therefore, he suggested that the Icelandic immigrants should spend some time at the outset on Norwegian farms throughout Wisconsin in order to learn new skills in work and language. He pointed out that the Norwegian immigrants had, after they first arrived, spent considerable time on "Yankee" farms and benefitted greatly from that experience.

One may now pause briefly and consider Mr. Thorlakson's refusal to comply with the previously-noted request. The reason he gave for his stand are valid and testify to his intelligence. Even though he was later accused of having suggested that Icelanders blend into Norwegian settlements in Wisconsin, one doubts if his decision and advice really reflect any such thoughts on his part. As will be shown later, accusations of this kind were usually based on

---

[16]Thorlakson claimed that he received a request from three Icelanders whom he immediately refused. It is therefore obvious that he must have written to them long before he wrote this letter to the editor. That is dated October 18, 1873 and was not published until February 28, 1874.

Thorlakson's involvement with the Norwegian Synod. In his previously-noted reply he first discusses his inability in such matters as the one of selecting a site for a settlement. Only a person with proper qualifications, he pointed out, could assume this responsibility. This statement does not indicate whether he felt that someone else, either in Iceland or in America, had the qualifications he referred to. One can only assume the latter and that he is referring to his Norwegian friends. Given the validity of this assumption one can hardly doubt that Thorlakson must have been correct. The cost of land and equipment was probably beyond the means of most of the Icelandic immigrants, who in most cases were poor when they arrived in the United States. Thirdly, one must consider his advice on language learning and experience gained from established farmers. There is no question that both would be of obvious benefit even though people might have been able to survive without either. It is, for example, tempting to believe that some of the earliest settlers in New Iceland, Canada, who only had learned some wood-cutting in Ontario, did every now and then wish that they had known a little more not only about new agricultural methods but also something about the composition and qualities of the soil on their farmlands.

Having explained his point of view in the above mentioned letter, Pall Thorlakson communicated with the chairman of the Norwegian Synod, wanting to find out if Norwegian farmers could possibly house Icelandic immigrants

who were expected to arrive in the summer. This request was immediately granted and soon accommodation for fifty Icelandic families had been found. Thorlakson deemed this sufficient since the total number of emigrants had decreased from the original estimate to around 200.

On August 25, 1873, between 150-160 Icelandic emigrants reached Quebec. Some of them stayed behind in Canada, while others chose to follow Thorlakson down to Wisconsin. After an adventurous journey from Quebec[17] most of the immigrants accepted accommodations on farms. Others spread around the State in search of their fortune. Letters from these people indicate that they were well looked after and that they lacked nothing.[18] Employment was available throughout 1873 but in the beginning of 1874 it became increasingly scarce, so that Icelandic immigrants began to feel uneasy. They therefore contacted Thorlakson, whom they now considered their leader, and asked if he would assist in their search for land in Wisconsin. This he was more than happy to do and in the company of his father and brother he investigated an area in Shawano County, north of Milwaukee.

Thorlakson's willingness in this matter certainly seems to contradict his letter to Nordanfari in October, 1873, in which he refused to undertake a task of a similar

---

[17]During their journey they were involved in a train accident injuring some of the Icelandic immigrants.

[18]Nordanfari, for example, November 22, 1874.

kind. The desperate need of his fellow countrymen at this point, however, probably accounts for his assistance on this occasion. It can also be added that most of them had spent some time on Norwegian farms as originally suggested by Thorlakson so he undoubtedly considered them more able to start their own farming than before.

Both Jon Bjarnason and Jon Olafson, on the other hand, strongly opposed the founding of this new settlement in Wisconsin.[19] They felt, as did so many others, that a future settlement in Wisconsin was out of the question. Whether Thorlakson felt that way is not clear. It is quite conceivable that he may have considered the settlement as a temporary one. However, this is doubtful. He was being educated as a future pastor for the Norwegian Synod, which at the time was mostly confined to Wisconsin and Iowa. At the same time he wanted to serve his countrymen. Therefore he may have had fairly strong reasons to be opposed to their leaving the State. This was exactly what Jon Olafson feared the most. He was, for example, convinced that the Norwegian Synod shrank from nothing to allure Icelandic immigrants into the Synod and that Thorlakson and his father were "humble slaves of the Synod" constantly plotting to deceive their fellow-countrymen. He also claimed

---

[19]Palson, op. cit., p. 31.

that the idea of Icelanders spending some time on Norwegian farms before securing their own lands, was the Synod's effort to force its "bigotry" upon them.[20]

These were serious accusations and certainly made in Jon Olafson's own personal style. Considering the nature of his complaints, one obviously wonders about their validity. For example, how could the Synod benefit from the Icelandic immigrants? There was certainly no prospect of material gains because the majority of the immigrants were poor. The only sensible explanation that comes to mind is Olafson's patriotism. He shared Bjarnason's views that the longer Icelandic immigrants lived scattered among Norwegians, the smaller the probabilities became that they would ever unite in one Icelandic settlement.

As a result of increasing rate of unemployment and disappointments in their search for a colony site, the morale among the Icelanders in Wisconsin was low in the spring of 1874. That same year marked the passage of one thousand years since Ingolfur Arnarson settled in Iceland. A national festival was planned in the old country and that was of course known to Icelandic immigrants in North America. Jon Olafson, for example, wrote in February to his friend Bjarnason expressing his feelings that Icelandic immigrants should begin to consider how and where to celebrate this remarkable event. He was probably not the first to become aware of the appropriateness of a millennial celebration

[20]Letters to Jon Bjarnason from Jon Olafson, May 15, 1873-May 5, 1875.

but he may have been the first to formulate the idea. In any event, he insisted in his autobiography that he persuaded the Icelanders in Milwaukee to celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the settlement of Iceland. In his letters to Bjarnason during the winter of 1874 he frequently brought this up and discussed his ideas of an Icelandic organization in Wisconsin. It appears that Jon Olafson did not want Pall Thorlakson to become too much involved in this venture. For example, in a letter dated June 27th, he urged Bjarnason to come as soon as possible to Milwaukee because Thorlakson was expected there any day. He insisted that if Thorlakson's interference would in any way oppose their plans they should declare war against him. Olafson did not give any reasons for why he thus objected to Thorlakson's participation in the festival but his involvement with the Norwegian Synod certainly must have been a decisive factor.

Thorlakson was, however, not as much of a problem as Jon Olafson anticipated, because the preparation went smoothly and he was able to leave for New York to discuss his Alaska project.[21]

Jon Olafson, Olafur Olafson and Pall Thorlakson in all likelihood formed the committee responsible for the preparation of the millennial celebration. That Thorlakson was a member of this committee is borne out by his letter to Nordanfari in January, 1875, in which he said ". . . we

---

[21]This is borne out by a letter to Jon Bjarnason from New York dated July 18th.

asked the Reverend Jon Bjarnason to perform a divine service." It may seem strange that Jon Olafson accepted Thorlakson's membership on the committee but one should remember that the celebration was also an effort to unite the Icelandic immigrants in Wisconsin so his presence was certain to serve that purpose.

On the 2nd of August between 60 and 70 people gathered in a Norwegian church in Milwaukee to attend the first divine service in Icelandic in North America. The Reverend Jon Bjarnason discussed the thousand years of hardship and struggle, despite which the Icelanders had always preserved their language and culture. It was the moral duty of all those present, he emphasized, to do the same. He then concluded with these words: "I hope that these few Icelanders who are gathered here for this service do not consider these words insignificant, even though fate has brought us away from our homeland. I don't want to hear anyone speaking ill of the old country, the place where we all were born and brought up in. We are not here to shirk away from our duties to the country which God has forever linked us with. He who forgets his homeland or feels no duty to preserve from his sentiment what is good and divine for the sole reason that he now lives on a foreign soil, also forgets his religion."[22]

---

[22]Rognvaldur Petursson, "Upphaf Vesturferda og Thjodminningarhatidin i Milwaukee 1874," Timarit Thjodraeknisfelags Islendinga, 1931, p. 76.

Following the ceremony, the people marched through the streets of Milwaukee until they reached a park where the celebration was planned. Jon Olafson made the first speech of the festival and discussed the past and present political struggle in Iceland. He mentioned among other things, the new constitution Iceland had received from Denmark and insisted that the Icelanders' struggle for independence from Denmark was by no means over, the Icelandic people, he said, needed to carry their fight on with greater force than ever.[23]

Next Olafur Olafson spoke and said that nothing was more important for the Icelandic immigrants in North America than unity. Having concluded with a toast to the immigrants in America, he made room for Pall Thorlakson. Thorlakson discussed the possibilities in North America, especially in the United States. In his conclusion he insisted that the Icelandic immigrants should be grateful for all the help they had received from their Norwegian friends. He felt that the Icelanders should follow the example given by the Norwegians and make every effort to be accepted in their society. A Norwegian pastor responded to Thorlakson's kind words and maintained that strong ties would always remain between Icelanders and Norwegians.[24]

---

[23]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 74.

[24]<u>Ibid</u>.

Thorlakson's speech certainly needs some attention at this point. His emphasis on assimilation clearly shows that he did not support the idea of an exclusive Icelandic settlement in North America. Consequently a division among the Icelanders was bound to happen. Ever since Thorlakson became acquainted with the Norwegian settlers in 1872 he was convinced that the Icelandic immigrants could benefit greatly from their experience and knowledge. It was his opinion that this could only be accomplished by settling scattered among the Norwegians. Thorlakson's participation in the search for a colony site outside Wisconsin was non-existent, but when asked to assist few Icelanders finding an area in Wisconsin he immediately reacted positively. Furthermore, Thorlakson did not sign the petition to the President of the United States, which certainly adds credence to the above assumption.

Shortly after Thorlakson spoke, Jon Bjarnason made a speech and reminded his countrymen to make every effort in the future to preserve their mother-tongue in North America. He pointed out that Icelandic immigrants, like immigrants of any other nationality, obviously had to learn English but it was their holy duty neither to forget their language nor mix with it slang from other languages. He strongly emphasized that the Icelandic immigrants should avoid, by all means, following the example given by the Norwegians in this matter.[25]

---

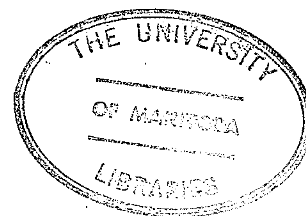
[25] Ibid.

It is not known if Bjarnason's speech was planned beforehand or if he felt the need to speak to his countrymen only following Thorlakson's words. In his sermon earlier that day, Bjarnason emphasized the need to preserve the Icelandic language in North America. In his second speech he warned the Icelanders not to follow the example given by the Norwegians. "They have," he said, "either changed their names or taken up completely new ones." In other words Bjarnason saw in Thorlakson's opinions a threat to an all Icelandic settlement and the perseverance of Icelandic culture in North America. The different views of these two men, as expressed that day, no longer left anyone present in any doubt of the fact that a debate was taking place among their leaders; but at this point no one anticipated its consequences.

Since so many Icelanders were present that day, the opportunity was used for various purposes. The petition to President Grant was signed and finally an organization of the Icelanders in North America was established. Jon Bjarnason was elected president and Jon Olafson secretary. Its main function was to preserve and promote Icelandic sentiment among them but it was also to give leadership to the search for a colony site.[26] This organization did not survive long, however, a year later most of its members had left Wisconsin for New Iceland, Canada.

---

[26] Ibid., p. 75.


THE UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA
LIBRARIES

When the proceedings of the day are considered it cannot be denied that on the whole the celebration was a success. Although most of them became aware of the encounter between Bjarnason and Thorlakson they left the park in Milwaukee more aware of their nationality and with better hope for a solution than they had before. The signing of the petition and the founding of the organization gave the people the new hope which they so badly needed.

The petition suggests that the majority of those in attendance supported Bjarnason. As stated earlier, there were some of the 60 to 70 persons present of non-Icelandic extraction. It is not clear if the above number includes children, but as forty-two Icelandic adults signed the petition Bjarnason's majority was unquestionable. A dispute between the two pastors had begun, and from this resulted the division among the Icelandic immigrants in the United States. The two men returned to their posts, Bjarnason to his teachings in Decorah, Thorlakson to his studies at Concordia.

In Decorah the winter of 1874-1875 passed without any major disputes. The Norwegians had realized that Bjarnason would not accept a post within their Synod. However, they were pleased with his teaching and did not interfere with his duties. This was what Bjarnason had always wanted. However, he soon began to feel a little uneasy despite the reasonably good salary he was drawing. By the end of the semester, in the spring of 1875, he had decided to leave

Decorah and in July he headed for Madison, Wisconsin.[27] In the meantime, Thorlakson graduated from Concordia University and was ordained in July.

During the early summer months of 1875, a region in Canada came under consideration as a future colony site. The Icelanders in Wisconsin followed the efforts of their countrymen there and soon they would pack their gear and head for New Iceland on the Canadian Prairies. Before turning to a discussion of New Iceland, it is necessary to return to the year 1872 and to examine the career of Sigtryggur Jonasson, later referred to as the father of New Iceland.

---

[27] Minningarrit Sera Jon Bjarnason, op. cit., p. 22.

CHAPTER III

EARLY SETTLEMENTS IN CANADA - TWO PASTORS

Most of the Icelandic immigrants in the early 1870s headed straight for Wisconsin. Their knowledge of the United States was very much limited to that State. Most of them felt that their dream of an exclusive Icelandic settlement in the New World could only be fulfilled there. In this respect, Sigtryggur Jonasson was an exception. Born on Februrary 8, 1852, at Bakki in Oxnadal, Eyjafjord, he soon showed signs of intelligence and ambition. At the age of thirteen he secured himself an employment at the office of Mr. Petur Hafstein, a senior magistrate at Modruvellir in North Iceland.[1]

This post gave him an excellent opportunity to acquaint himself with political affairs in Iceland at that time. The constant struggle for independence had strong effects on Jonasson but the disappointments in the early 70s undoubtedly played an important role in his decision

---

[1]There were two magistrates offices in Iceland: one in the North the other in the South. These magistrates operated as links between the Icelanders and the Danes.

to emigrate to North America. He left Iceland in September, 1872,[2] and reached Quebec that same month. During his voyage to Canada, Ontario was suggested to him[3] as "the finest part not only of Canada, but of the whole North American continent" by an unknown Scotchman. Whatever the effect of this advice may have been, Sigtryggur Jonasson later replied, when asked why he chose Canada: "I went to Canada because I liked the British form of Government better than the American." What he preferred about it is not known; he never gave any explanation. In spite of this he maintained, in his article "The early Icelandic Settlements in Canada," that on his journey from Iceland he had not yet made up his mind where to "try his luck".

He spent his first winter in southwestern Ontario, quite impressed with what he saw. During that winter he wrote letters to friends in Iceland and also to the paper Nordanfari, giving a most favourable picture of the province. This correspondence undoubtedly played an important part in the decision of 115 Icelandic immigrants, who arrived in

---

[2]Some history books dealing with the Icelanders in Canada, such as Wilhelm Kristjanson's Icelandic People in Manitoba and Walter Lindal's The Icelanders in Canada, state that Sigtryggur Jonasson was in the group which reached Quebec on July 15, 1872. This was not the case: Jonasson says in his essay The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada that he "started on a voyage of discovery all by himself, landing in Quebec September, 1872.", p. 4.

[3]Jonasson maintained that an English traveller suggested this to him during his journey across the Atlantic.

Quebec on August 25, 1873, to proceed immediately to Ontario. The Ontario Government offered free land in Muskoka district, about 150 miles north of Toronto which was carefully investigated. On August 30, the party arrived at Rousseau, a small village near Lake Rousseau in Muskoka. After some exploration an area near Rousseau was finally selected and two men bought farms.

As it was getting late in the season, only these two farms were settled; many of the immigrants therefore scattered throughout southern Ontario accepting whatever employment was available. For that reason Icelandic settlement in Muskoka never came to much; it is estimated that only about twelve families ever settled there.[4]

Sigtryggur Jonasson visited his countrymen in Muskoka during the winter of 1874 and persuaded three of them to accompany him on an exploration of northern Ontario. They investigated a vast area as far west as Parry Sound and as far north as Magnetewan River but disapproved of the land, so no attempt was made to establish a settlement. Therefore no decision had yet been made when the news reached the Icelanders in Ontario that a large group of new Icelandic immigrants was expected to arrive at Halifax, Nova Scotia, during the summer. This group had planned to settle somehwere in Nova Scotia.[5]

---

[4]Sigtryggur Jonasson, "The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada," The Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, Transaction No. 59, (Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press Co., 1901), p. 4.

[5]W.J. Lindal, The Icelanders in Canada, (Winnipeg: Viking Press, 1967), p. 88.

The Icelanders in Ontario discussed this idea carefully and felt that, in accordance with their knowledge of Canada, they should advise against a settlement site in Nova Scotia.[6] It was therefore decided at a meeting in Ontario that Sigtryggur Jonasson should proceed to Halifax and try to persuade the party to abandon the idea of going to Nova Scotia. Jonasson caught up with the party in Quebec[7] on September 23, and managed to change the minds of the majority but a few were still determined to continue on to Nova Scotia.

Most of these immigrants turned out to be extremely poor and needed employment to support themselves. It was therefore decided that the whole party would travel to Kinmount, Ontario. A railway was under construction between Kinmount and the town of Lindsey, offering employment to the Icelandic newcomers during the winter. Sigtryggur Jonasson went ahead and made necessary arrangements regarding accommodation and employment.

During the first part of the winter most of the men worked on the railway, but as a result of financial problems work was suspended, leaving the Icelandic immigrants in serious difficulties. In a letter to Nordanfari, in February, 1875, Jonasson accounted for this situation and

---

[6]Jonasson, op. cit., p. 7.

[7]Originally the idea was that this group would sail straight to Halifax; consequently Sigtryggur Jonasson went there. Once in Halifax he learned from Quebec that the group would land there. Ibid.

admitted that he had expected more support from the Ontario Government. He maintained that he had assumed that the Government would assist the Icelandic immigrants in clearing land and in starting farming. From the above-mentioned letter it becomes obvious that Jonasson must have enquired about this because he claimed that the Government had now turned down his request.

It was stated above that the Icelandic immigrants in Kinmount were in serious difficulties. At the time in question, Western Canada was under serious consideration as a future settlement site for immigrants in Ontario. This did not escape the attention of the Icelanders there and their increasing interest brought Mr. John Taylor,[8] who was living near Kinmount, into the picture. He was of the opinion that someone should go to Ottawa to explain the problems of the Icelanders to the Dominion Government. Finally, he offered to go to Ottawa himself to suggest to the Government that the Icelanders should settle in the North West of Canada. This was a generous offer and because of their difficult circumstances the Icelanders were appreciative enough of Mr. Taylor's suggestion to strongly favour his mission to Ottawa.

---

[8] John Taylor was born on the Barbados islands in the West Indies in 1812. His father was a commissariat officer in the services of the Majesty the Queen of England. In 1848 he resigned, moved to Canada and settled in Kingston, Ontario. John had intended to become a pastor but changed his mind and in 1865 he joined the Shanty Men's Mission of the British Canadian Bible Society. His work in Ontario later led to his interest in the Icelanders in Kinmount 1874. See the periodical <u>Syrpa</u>, April, 1920.

Further consideration of his presentation to Ottawa must, however, be preceded by a discussion on other aspects of Icelandic settlement in Canada. The Icelandic immigrants in Canada, like their fellow-countrymen in Wisconsin, were divided on the question of permanent settlement site. Jonasson was convinced that Ontario or the North West were the most desirable areas for the purposes of settlement, while others thought Nova Scotia would offer better prospects. It must be emphasized that both groups favoured the idea of an exclusive Icelandic settlement but simply disagreed on areas. Those who favoured Nova Scotia did so primarily because they felt that the Province could offer possibilities similar to those in Iceland, for example, access to the Atlantic Ocean. Those opposed to that idea argued that an isolated area in Western Canada would serve much better for the purposes of preserving the Icelandic language and culture. In both cases the dream of an Icelandic settlement preceded a careful observation of the soil as was also the case with Jon Olafson's Alaska project.

It was mentioned earlier that of the large group arriving on September 23, 1874, some went immediately to Nova Scotia. When employment on the railway near Kinmount ceased during the winter of 1875 many Icelanders who could afford it left for Nova Scotia. The Provincial Government[9] also made every effort to get new recruits from Iceland.

---

[9]The government of Nova Scotia, of course.

On May 8, 1875, for example, their Icelandic agent, Johannes Arngrimson, placed an advertisement in Nordanfari in which a generous offer by the Nova Scotia Government was introduced. A large area was to be offered the Icelanders free of charge and transportation was also to be arranged from Iceland at a very reasonable price. This undoubtedly tempted a number of people because over the next few years quite a few Icelandic immigrants found their way to Nova Scotia. Prospects there were, however, not as good as had been expected. The soil turned out to be extremely rocky and therefore difficult to cultivate. Gradually the Icelanders left that Province and moved west. By 1882 nearly all had left. Only few Icelandic families stayed behind in Ontario.[10] Icelandic settlement in Eastern Canada had virtually ended.

It is now appropriate to return to Ottawa and consider Mr. Taylor's negotiations with the Dominion Government. He had meetings with some of the ministers and explained to them the wishes of the Icelandic immigrants. Having little knowledge of Icelanders, the ministers were too hesitant to be able to reach any decisions. When all hopes of reasonable solutions seemed to have come to an end, Lord Dufferin, Governor General of Canada intervened. As a young man he had once travelled to Iceland,[11] had become acquainted with the people, and generally liked them.

---

[10] Jonasson, op. cit., p. 8.

[11] He made this journey as a young man in 1856. See A Yacht Voyage, Letters from High Latitudes, (Boston: Ticknos and Fields, 1859).

Once having heard Mr. Taylor's request, he made it his business to support the project of Icelandic settlement in Western Canada and before long he managed to solicit support from the Dominion ministers.

As soon as these positive reactions became known in Kinmount, the Icelandic immigrants called a meeting, which took place on May 30, 1875. At it, four delegates were selected to make a journey to the North West. Sigtryggur Jonasson was one of the delegates.[12] Accompanied by Mr. Taylor the group started off on July 2 and headed for Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There they were joined by Sigurdur Kristofasson who had been selected for the same journey by the Wisconsin Icelanders.[13] They then travelled through Moorhead, Minnesota, and reached Fort Garry, Manitoba, on July 16, 1875. They spent the next few days investigating areas near Winnipeg and were impressed with what they saw in spite of the damages still visible from a plague of grasshoppers. They felt, however, that in the vicinity of the city no area was large enough; so they wanted to look elsewhere. The land agent in Winnipeg then suggested the area west of Lake Winnipeg and after examination of the area they decided to secure a colony site along the lake.[14] In a lengthy report they gave the following reasons for doing so:

---

[12]The others were Skafti Arason, Christian Johnson and Einar Jonasson.

[13]Jonasson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[14]*Ibid.*

1. They thought that the grasshoppers would not be as likely to do damage to crops in that region as on the prairies;
2. there was abundant building timber and fuel in that section;
3. there was a waterway from that section to Winnipeg;
4. there was abundance of fine fish in the lake;
5. a large tract of land could be obtained without interfering with other settlers;
6. the main line of the Canadian Pacific Railway was supposed to cross the Red River at the present site of Selkirk, and would not be far from the settlement on the southwest shore of Lake Winnipeg.[15]

As soon as Icelanders in Ontario and Wisconsin learned about this new site they started the necessary preparation for a journey to New Iceland. Finally, on September 21, 1875, about 250 Icelanders left Kinmount and as they made their way west this number was augmented by others from areas in Ontario and Wisconsin. This first group reached New Iceland on October 21, 1875. As it was late in the season, and cold weather could be expected any day, these immigrants hastily built log cabins and managed barely to survive the first winter on their new land. In addition to an exceptionally long and cold winter, shortage of food and poor health created major problems.

The following summer did not see immediate improvement; it was wet. Cultivation therefore more or less failed just when mass emigration from the old country to New Iceland began. That summer about 1200 newcomers from

---

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Iceland[16] added greatly to the already existing confusion in the colony. During the next winter a smallpox epidemic caused the death of many[17] and for a considerable time New Iceland was quarantined and cut off from any communication from the outside world. In this situation the need for a pastor was keenly felt and although John Taylor had conducted religious services on Sundays, the Icelandic immigrants had for a long time wanted someone who spoke their own language and understood them.

It is now appropriate to consider the reactions of Pall Thorlakson and Jon Bjarnason to the settlement in New Iceland. As noted earlier, the Wisconsin Icelanders had been duly represented in the search for a settlement site in Manitoba or Keewatin. Therefore a full report on the exploration reached Wisconsin.[18] Thorlakson was certainly aware of Icelandic plans in Canada and when, in the summer of 1876, he learned that over a thousand Icelanders intended to settle there during the summer he became uneasy.

---

[16]The Dominion Government sent two of its agents, W.C. Krieger and Sigtryggur Jonasson, to Iceland in the fall of 1875 for recruitment. They travelled throughout the country and in spite of strong opposition by many they secured nearly 1200 Icelanders. Framfari, Dec. 10, 1877.

[17]It is estimated that a little over one hundred people died in the epidemic. Thorsteinsson, op. cit., p. 106.

[18]At a meeting in Milwaukee on August 15, 1875, this report was discussed with the result that many decided to leave for New Iceland. Nordvestern, October 8, 1875. See Jon Bjarnason clipping file, Special Collection, Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

The Norwegian Synod had for many years had a committee to assist Norwegian immigrants who were without the services of a pastor. Having learned about Thorlakson's worries, the committee urged him to travel immediately to New Iceland to offer his assistance. After a tiresome journey he arrived at Winnipeg on August 18 and joined a party of Icelanders heading for the colony. He had not been there long when he performed the first religious service in Icelandic in New Iceland. In a clearing in the wood north of Gimli about 500 Icelanders gathered on August 23 to enjoy the service. Having waited so long for this moment most of these people praised Thorlakson's service; but they sensed a new approach when he so enthusiastically advocated the literal interpretation of the Bible. One Icelandic pioneer wrote: "He strongly emphasized the reading of the Bible; I had never heard pastors in Iceland do that".[19]

Thorlakson spent some time in New Iceland performing the usual clerical duties but then returned to Wisconsin. Before he left he offered to become a pastor in the colony without any remuneration. This was a generous offer which poor immigrants could scarcely refuse, yet they hesitated, so Thorlakson left before any decision was made. It is necessary to consider his offer and also the response of the Icelandic immigrants before any further account of events in New Iceland is given.

---

[19] Thorleifur Jackson, Brot af Landnamasogu Nyja islands, (Winnipeg: Columbia Press Ltd., 1919), p. 97.

When the Norwegian Synod urged Thorlakson to go to New Iceland it must have been suggested to him that if the immigrants had not secured a pastor he should make the offer mentioned above. The Synod obviously intended to pay his salary, which in turn would have made Thorlakson's congregations in New Iceland a part of the Norwegian Synod. Nonetheless, Thorlakson was absolutely sincere in his intention to help his countrymen and did not mean to force a foreign doctrine upon them.

The hardship of the preceding years and the fact that no other pastor seemed available probably were the main reasons why many of the Icelandic immigrants rejoiced in Thorlakson's offer. A large number of the immigrants, however, were opposed to any interference from a foreign organization, fearing that it might severely limit their jurisdiction over their church and their schools. These argued, for example, that if they became involved with a big Synod, like the Norwegian Synod, their votes would count very little at the Synod's conferences so consequently what they might consider an important matter might not be accepted as such within the Synod. These Icelandic immigrants also pointed out that if such a foreign body was to run their schools, subjects such as Icelandic and Icelandic history might not be taught. In brief, this group wanted complete control over their church and schools and they could not see this accomplished with an interference from

the Norwegian Synod.[20] Because of this fear, Thorlakson returned to his congregations in Wisconsin without any decision having been made on his offer.

Jon Bjarnason seems to have been informed of the search for a colony site in Canada through his correspondence with a man by the name of Fridjon Fridrikson.[21] In a letter dated November 14, 1874, from Toronto, Fridrikson responded to Bjarnason's request for information on Icelandic immigrants in Canada, giving a detailed account on the number of immigrants in Muskoka and elsewhere in Ontario. He pointed out their need for an Icelandic pastor, whose duties, among other things, would be to instruct children in the same way as pastors had done in the old country. In this same letter Fridrikson also referred to a letter he had received from Sigtryggur Jonasson on the same matter. Finally, he asked Bjarnason if he could be persuaded to become a pastor in Canada. This was not a formal call, merely an enquiry. The letter nevertheless supports the view that in 1876 the Icelandic immigrants in New Iceland who accepted Thorlakson's offer did so partly out of despair, having then been without a pastor for two years. Second, it indicates that influential

---

[20] Framfari, September 30, 1877.

[21] He was born August 21, 1849 in the north-east of Iceland. He emigrated in 1873 and spent a few weeks in Parry Sound, Ontario, before moving south to Milwaukee. There he probably became acquainted with Jon Bjarnason but in 1874 he was back in Canada and settled in Kinmount before moving to New Iceland in 1875. Heimskringla, August 21, 1913.

men such as Fridrikson and Sigtryggur Jonason felt as early as 1874 that Bjarnason was the only pastor who could undertake the pastoral duties in question. They always remained loyal in their support to Bjarnason during his dispute with Thorlakson. One should, however, bear in mind that Thorlakson was not ordained until July 1875, so in November 1874 there was no one but Bjarnason available for immediate service.

On December 29, 1874, Fridrikson again raised this matter on a postcard to Bjarnason. This time he suggested that Bjarnason, if he accepted the job, would settle among his countrymen in Kinmount. This shows that the question of having an Icelandic pastor for the Icelanders in Ontario was a matter of serious concern to many. Fridrikson writes:

> Tonight I had the honor of meeting the Reverend Smithett from Lindsey and another pastor serving in Kinmount. Their business was to enquire what I last heard from you regarding the future pastorate among Icelanders in Kinmount. Mr. Smithett maintained he wrote to you about a week ago but had not yet received any reply; he will explain the terms offered to you. If you feel the need for an assistant he insists that suitable arrangements can be made. Please reply to Mr. Smithett's letter as soon as possible but do not decline any advantageous post until a definite proposal has been made to you.[22]

Whether Bjarnason ever wrote to Mr. Smithett is not known; but on January 4, 1875, Fridrikson received a

---

[22]This is the only time he mentioned Smithett in his existing letters to Jon Bjarnason. Therefore nothing is known of his dealings with the Icelanders in Kinmount. It is obvious, however, that the securing of a pastor for the Icelanders was of some concern to him.

postcard in which Bjarnason probably turned down the offer.[23] It is difficult to understand why he declined, especially when his dispute with Thorlakson on settlement in Wisconsin is taken into consideration. One might assume that he would happily support the attempt made by his fellow-countrymen in Canada to organize a settlement in Ontario. It can perhaps be argued that prospects in Kinmount were never good and that Bjarnason was aware of that. Also it should be remembered that he was employed at Decorah and that he may have felt he could not leave in the middle of his term there. Whatever the reasons may have been, no further attempts were made to secure an Icelandic pastor to the settlement in Kinmount. Although Bjarnason and Fridrikson did not exchange many letters, throughout 1875 Bjarnason was informed of prospects in Ontario and also on the new settlement in the district of Keewatin.[24]

On May 1, 1876, Fridrikson, then already in New Iceland, answered a letter from Lara Gudjonsen, Bjarnason's wife.[25] In it she maintained that during the winter she

---

[23]This postcard from Jon Bjarnason is not available; but in a postcard, dated January 8, 1875, Fridrikson mentioned it but does not discuss its content.

[24]During this time Jon Bjarnason did not write much to Fridrikson himself; his wife appears to have kept up the correspondence on behalf of her husband. However, Bjarnason was also in contact with Sigtryggur Jonasson in 1876 and 1877, as is for example born out in the letters of Fridrikson. For example, on April 30, 1877, Fridrikson wrote and says that earlier the same day Jonasson had received a letter from Bjarnason.

[25]This letter from Mrs. Bjarnason was dated March 22, 1876.

had hoped to be able to persuade her husband to become pastor in the new settlement. The conclusion can therefore be made that although Bjarnason had refused to come to Kinmount, Ontario, during the winter 1874-1875, he did not preclude the possibility that he might become a pastor in an Icelandic settlement in Canada. It was mentioned earlier that he had quit his work at Decorah and moved to Madison in the summer of 1875. There he was engaged in various types of work throughout 1875. Among other things, he worked on translations of books and articles.[26] This was, however, only temporary employment; he constantly appears to have been considering other possibilities. Finally, in January, 1876, he moved to Chicago were he became employed by the paper Scandinaven.[27] This was not a propitious move since he stayed in Chicago for only six weeks, resigning his new post and moving to Minneapolis. Later he explained his decision to leave Chicago as having been brought about by irregular working hours and all kinds of mismanagement on the part of the editorial staff of Scandinaven.[28]

---

[26]These were mostly Icelandic tales and were published under the name of Viking Tales. Minningarrit um sera Jon Bjarnason, op. cit., p. 23.

[27]He obtained this post through a friend in Madison, Professor Anderson. Ibid.

[28]Ibid., pp. 22-23.

His experience in Minneapolis was exactly the opposite. There he became the editor of the paper Budstikken,[29] which marked the beginning of one of the happiest periods of his life. He devoted his entire effort to his new work with positive response not only from the owners but also from the readers who expressed their appreciation to Bjarnason himself, verbally and in writing.[30]

Bjarnason's employment with the two papers by no means discouraged the Icelandic immigrants in new Iceland in their effort to persuade him to join them. For example, following a meeting in early January 1876, a formal request was sent down to Minneapolis. Again Bjarnason declined, which in turn aggravated the complicated issue of pastoral services in the colony.

Thorlakson kept his offer from 1875 and renewed it in 1876, so in the fall there was no longer any doubt that a unanimous decision on the issue could not be obtained. Fridrikson wrote to Bjarnason on November 27 to inform him that Thorlakson had recently written to the immigrants to reiterate his former offer, requesting at the same time a list including the names of his supporters. Fridrikson added that 200 immigrants had already entered their names on the list and that more might follow if no alternatives

---

[29]A man by the name of Halevard Hande suggested he wrote to Minneapolis and applied for the post. Ibid.

[30]Jon Bjarnason's clipping file. For example, August 2, 1876 and November 5, 1876. (Special Collection, Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba).

were offered. These letters to Bjarnason clearly indicate an awareness among the people of New Iceland of his opposition to the Norwegian Synod. They frequently point out the frightening prospect of the Synod's control over the church life and schools and that Bjarnason himself was the only one who could provide the proper defense against such impositions.[31] In spite of all these efforts Bjarnason was not easily persuaded. This was especially the case after he began his work at Budstikken. However, he had by no means changed his mind regarding the Norwegian Synod and did not want its influence to become a dominating force in New Iceland.

In the early spring of 1877 meetings were held throughout New Iceland and it was generally agreed that the need for a pastor called for an immediate solution. Fridrikson wrote to Bjarnason on April 30, 1877, and described a meeting held two days earlier on the question of securing a pastor. It was also agreed that the Icelandic immigrants in New Iceland should establish a Lutheran Synod whose doctrines should be in precise harmony with those of the Icelandic State Church and be completely independent from other Synods in North America. During the meeting a committee was organized for the purpose of securing a pastor

---

[31] Fridrikson, for example, said in his letter of November 27, 1876, that many immigrants in New Iceland had expressed their concern. Sigtryggur Jonasson, among others, had particularly urged Fridrikson to emphasize his worries over the interference of the Norwegian Synod in his letters to Bjarnason. (Special Collection, Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba).

and collecting funds for the construction of a church. The same committee was to inform Pall Thorlakson that his offer had been turned down. These meetings were called by the supporters of Jon Bjarnason.[32] In an effort to meet the cost of pastoral services each family agreed to pay $4.00 a year or as much as they possibly could afford. In his letter Fridrikson maintained that those who could afford to should pay more, whereas others might have to be completely exempted from any payment at all.

This was undoubtedly the first time any payment was mentioned to Bjarnason. Perhaps as a result of this he finally made up his mind to visit the colony. In July, 1877, Bjarnason saw New Iceland for the first time. During his short visit of three weeks he examined the conditions of the colony and the spirit of the people. One must bear in mind that the smallpox plague had raged during the winter, killing many children and youths. The disaster certainly affected the immigrants and surely was one of the reasons for Bjarnason's hesitation during the winter preceding his visit. The immigrants were impressed with his services and other clerical performances and he was equally pleased with their response.

Following Bjarnason's visit a meeting was held at Gimli on August 31, where yet another formal call to

---

[32]Letter from Fridrikson to Bjarnason April 30, 1877.

Bjarnason was signed.[33] In this call from four congregations, consisting of 130 families, it was stated that this was a renewal of an earlier request. Those who signed pledged themselves to guarantee Bjarnason's maintenance as long as he would serve the congregation. Among those who signed were Sigtryggur Jonason and Fridjon Fridrikson.

Once back in Minneapolis, Bjarnason expressed his views on New Iceland: it was his opinion that in spite of the lack of transportation the Icelandic immigrants, having conquered their initial difficulties, would prosper in their new surroundings. Having received the request from New Iceland, he finally made up his mind. He resigned as the editor of Budstikken[34] and on October 18, 1977, left a secure position in Minneapolis and headed for an uncertain future in New Iceland.

Meanwhile Thorlakson received his list of supporters but his arrival in the colony was postponed during the winter of 1876, possibly as a result of the smallpox plague. Finally, on October 19, 1877, he arrived at Gimli, just ahead of Jon Bjarnason.

---

[33]This letter states that he had not refused to become a pastor among his countrymen in New Iceland following a call in 1874. Whether this is a reference to Fridrikson's letter to Bjarnason on November 14, 1874 or the letter Mr. Smithett wrote in December of the same month is not known. On the other hand it proves that Bjarnason kept his countrymen in Canada warm.

[34]The publishers of Budstikken tried their utmost to keep Bjarnason. For example, they offered him a considerable increase in wages. Minningarrit um sera Jon Bjarnason, op. cit., p. 26.

It is now important to turn our attention to the immigrants in New Iceland and briefly examine on what grounds they chose a pastor. The cross section of the immigrants in New Iceland ranged from relatively well to do farmers to poor farm hands; in other words, the economic condition of these people did not follow any regular pattern. This fact must have played a very important part in their choice of pastor. Thorlakson's offer excluded the burden of maintaining a pastor, just as had been the case in the old country. There is no doubt that there were many who accepted his offer for this very reason, expecially those who struggled at the level of mere subsistence. These people were not extremely concerned whther each word in the Bible was inspired by God, as Thorlakson maintained, or only a part of it, as had been taught in the Theological Seminary in Iceland. The well-to-do who favoured Thorlakson did so primarily because they felt that as citizens in a new country they should be ready to accept new habits and trends such as different religious teachings. Their knowledge and insight of religion did not matter as much as their firm decision of becomming true citizens in their new country: Those also argued that it would be important for the Icelandic immigrants in North America to enjoy the protection and the overall assistance the Norwegian Synod could offer. Finally, one must not forget Thorlakson's personality which strongly impressed itself upon almost anyone who met him; his ability as a leader was

never questioned and as a result many gathered around him. In fact one might perhaps say that the question of which pastor to choose was less a matter of different doctrines than it was one of qualities of leadership.

Those who favoured Jon Bjarnason saw in him a representative from the Church in the old country. There he had received his education and training, so there was little danger that something unfamiliar would be required from them. They also felt he would make greater effort to preserve the Icelandic language in the colony and generally promote Icelandic culture. Immediately upon arrival in New Iceland both pastors began to organize their congregations; but before any further account is given it is necessary to examine the Icelandic State Church and the Norwegian Synod, for in them lies the source of many of their differences.

CHAPTER IV

THE ICELANDIC STATE CHURCH AND THE NORWEGIAN SYNOD

As soon as Thorlakson and Bjarnason had settled in New Iceland they organized congregations for which laws were drawn up and enacted. Both pastors insisted that their laws were in accordance with the dogma followed in Iceland for years. A close look at these laws reveals that in a sense both pastors were correct. Thorlakson based his argument on the works of three illustrious Icelandic churchmen[1] who were more or less responsible for the religious tradition from late sixteenth century to the early nineteenth, by which time Iceland was going through important stages of change in social, political and religious matters. Bjarnason, on the other hand, educated and trained as a pastor, while these changes occurred, enacted his laws in New Iceland according to the latest tendency in the Church of Iceland. In order to explain the difference it is necessary to examine briefly the ecclesiastical history of Iceland.

---

[1]These were Bishop Gudbrandur Thorlakson (1571-1627), The Reverend Hallgrimur Petursson (1614-1674) and Bishop Jon Vidalin (1698-1720).

Most of the earliest settlers in Iceland were heathen and it was not until the year 1000 that they were converted to Christianity. Soon monasteries were organized and two bishoprics established, one in Skalholt, in the South in 1056 and the other at Holar in the North in 1106. By 1100 the Church had reached a dominating position. Its most important achievement was undoubtedly the tithe law enacted in 1096, securing the economy of the Church. Through the next few centuries the position of the Church was strong but by the middle of the sixteenth century the power of the Church had diminished greatly.

The political consequences of the Reformation in Iceland in 1550 have already been discussed. We must now consider the concomitant upheaval in ecclesiastical affairs. The introduction of the new Theology appeared first in 1542 in the translation of the New Testament into Icelandic by Oddur Gottskalkson.[2] In 1584 Bishop Gudbrandur Thorlakson at Holar included this translation in the first full edition of the Bible in Iceland. These were by no means his only publications; he worked tirelessly on religious studies, many of which became extremely popular in the country. One example of such work was the Graduale (Grallarinn), a service book and a hymn collection. This

---

[2]He was the son of Bishop Gottstalkur Nikulasson and was educated in Denmark and Germany. He became fond of Luther's teachings and as a secretary to Bishop Ogmundur Palsson (1521-1540) at Skalholt, Iceland, secretly began to translate the New Testament. He completed his work in Denmark, in 1539.

book was in fact not replaced until 1801. There is little doubt that Gudbrandur Thorlakson's efforts consolidated the position of Lutheran doctrine and rite in the country. These publications also helped greatly in preserving the Icelandic tongue, preventing it from becoming tainted by foreign linguistic influence.

Soon other works appeared which greatly contributed to the "fervid personal and communal piety which marked the whole nation"[3] in the early post-Reformation period; for example the works of Hallgrimur Peturson. He was born 1614 and moved with his family to Holar, where his uncle, Gudbrandur Thorlakson, now an old man, still reigned. Whether Thorlakson had much influence on the young man while at Holar is unknown but his works certainly did.[4] Peturson was a great poet; his hymns are still regarded as the most beautiful works ever written in Icelandic. The Passion Hymns, which deal with the last days of Jesus Christ, are undoubtedly his masterpiece.

Lutheran Orthodoxy gradually was strengthened during the 17th century and soon this new religious tradition became important to every farmer and his family throughout Iceland. These became the times when the religious tradition achieved a unity and strength which

---

[3]Nordal and Kristinsson, op. cit., p. 284.

[4]Magnus Jonsson, Hallgrimur Petursson, Vol. I, (Reykjavik: Leiftur, 1947), p. 24.

has not since been matched. On each farm religious practice became standard procedure and, in addition to normal church attendance, prayers were said daily together with reading, usually the sermons of Bishop Jon Vidalin, and singing under the supervision of the master of the house. The sermons of Jon Vidalin, first published in 1721, became very important to most Icelanders, and in spite of some serious efforts later to have them replaced they were still widely read in the early 19th century.

The unity of tradition and practice was therefore very significant during the peak of Lutheran orthodoxy in the 17th and 18th centuries.

When the period from the Reformation in 1550 to 1800 is considered, the very strong influence of Bishop Thorlakson, Peturson and Bishop Vidalin does not escape one's attention. The unadulterated Lutheran orthodoxy in their works dominated religious exercise in Iceland during the time in question.[5] This religious exercise gradually gave way to new tendencies in the 19th century, but before these are examined it is necessary to discuss briefly what Bjarnason's contemporaries thought of the age of Lutheran orthodoxy in Iceland.

Matthias Jochumson, for example, a great poet and editor,[6] attacked this Lutheran Orthodoxy and blamed

---

[5] Jon Helgason, Kristnisaga, (Reykjavik: Felagsprentsmidjan, 1925), p. 273.

[6] Matthias Jochumson is without question one of the most popular poets ever born in Iceland. Among his many

Bishop Gudbrandur Thorlakson and Danish authorities for reducing the nation to a state of extreme misery and poverty, Thorlakson through his preaching and the Danes by their monopoly.[7] Bishop Petur Peturson was more moderate and said when discussing Bishop Vidalin's sermons that they had been better fitted for Vidalin's age than the late 19th century.[8] In other words, the late 19th century Icelandic Church had renounced Lutheran Orthodoxy as had been practiced from the Reformation up to the beginning of the 19th century. This was the orthodoxy that in Pall Thorlakson's view came closest to the doctrines of both the Norwegian and the Missouri Synods.

The earliest attempts to alter the tradition in religious exercise in Iceland came from a man by the name of Magnus Stephensen.[9] He was a young lawyer who had graduated from the University of Copenhagen in 1788 and brought with him the ideas of Rationalism. Lack of knowledge and education among his countrymen strongly affected him and for years to come he would do his best to improve

---

poems and hymns is the Icelandic National Anthem. Jochumson was a friend of Jon Bjarnason and visited the Icelanders in Manitoba, much to their delight, during the 1890s.

[7]Matthias Jochumson, Hallgrimur Petursson, (Reykjavik: Steindorsprent, 1934), p. 10.

[8]Thorvaldur Thoroddsen, Petur Petursson: An Autobiography, (Reykjavik: Gutenberg, 1908), p. 134.

[9]Magnus Stephensen was born in Iceland 1762. Having obtained necessary education in Iceland for entering the University of Copenhagen he left Iceland for Denmark in 1781. He studied law and graduated in the spring of 1788.

the situation. Reason, in his opinion, was the foundation of religion, not only Christianity but also any other faith. What did not reconcile with reason he considered of no use to him, and such things were therefore, in his opinion, useless to others. He thought the notion of God, as inherited by the people of Iceland, would not pass the test of existing knowledge of science. In short the Lutheran orthodoxy as had been practiced in Iceland did not harmonize with reason. He therefore made it his business to alter it. His greatest efforts lay in the publication of new books intended as replacements for the Graduale, Passion Hymns and so forth. This was an extremely difficult task, especially since many of the most influential people in the country did not understand his views. Rationalism therefore never gained much popularity in Iceland; few intellectuals supported Stephensen but the common people never came to terms with it.

Nineteenth century Iceland saw new trends in political, social and religious matters. The revolutions in Europe and the Romantic movement contributed to a changing spirit in the Icelandic people. In 1847 the Theological Seminary in Reykjavik was established and its first master was Dr. Petur Peturson, later Bishop over Iceland. He had been educated in Denmark and was influenced by Danish theologians such as C. Mynster, H.N. Clausen and H. Martensen. These men were responsible for the so-called New Theology,

originally formulated in Germany.[10] It was based on the assumption that religion and science could be united. It was their opinion that they were indeed the same. In Iceland this thought came to be recognized as the New Lutheran Orthodoxy. Instead of rejecting what seemed to contradict reason, as Magnus Stephensen did, the Danish theologians, in their theology, tried to reconcile certain apparent contradictions, which in turn resulted in quite pragmatic views.[11]

During Peturson's years as master of the Theological Seminary in Reykjavik and his years as Bishop the Icelandic State Church was going through a testing period. Peturson worked tremendously for improvements in his Church. He wrote a collection of sermons which gained great popularity in the country. His sermons were often compared to Bishop Vidalin's and in Bishop Peturson's autobiography, Thorvaldur Thoroddsen probably described the difference best when he said that Vidalin was the stern representative of the old Lutheran Orthodoxy whereas Peturson was mild and extremely tolerant.[12] This was in fact what gradually became the dominant tendency in the Church of Iceland but was in the making during Peturson's time. Most of Peturson's works were intended to replace older works and to introduce the New Lutheran Orthodoxy, but the Icelanders were slow in accepting new trends so quite often they became confused.

---

[10] Helgason, op. cit., p. 286.

[11] Ibid., p. 328.

[12] Thoroddsen, op. cit., p. 73.

Because of all these turbulences in 19th century Iceland one wonders what kind of faith the Icelandic immigrants to North America brought with them when they arrived there in the 1870s. One can only state that tolerance and trust in merciful divine powers were among its distinctive features. This faith was to this extent quite different from the 17th and 18th century Lutheranism. At the same time it was also the difference between the modernistic views of Jon Bjarnason and the traditionally entrenched dogma espoused by Pall Thorlakson, Hallgrimur Peturson and Jon Vidalin, 17th and 18th century religious Icelandic leaders. In other words, 17th century Icelandic orthodoxy adequately suited his education and training at Concordia University, St. Louis, Missouri. Bjarnason, on the other hand, only knew what Dr. Peturson had introduced at the Seminary in Reykjavik, Iceland. In order to understand why Thorlakson opposed the New Lutheran Orthodoxy, if we may thus designate it, and how his education suited the old tradition in Iceland, one must therefore examine the teachings of the Missouri Synod.

This Synod was organized in the early 19th century by three German immigrant groups deeply interested in Lutheran orthodoxy.[13] These groups, however, soon entered into a debate on doctrine, and after a long struggle which failed to settle certain ecclesiological questions, a German by the name of Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther

---

[13] Carl Stamm Meyer, Moving Frontiers, (Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p. 142.

started the publication of Der Lutheraner, in St. Louis, Missouri, a periodical through which he finally brought this dissension to an end. He later became Professor of Theology at Concordia University and laid the foundation of the religious dogma adopted by the Missouri Synod.

As a young student at the University of Leibzig, Germany, Walther became upset over the dominance of Rationalism in his country, and in his search for a remedy he turned to the Confessions of Martin Luther. The Lutheran Orthodoxy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a strong appeal to him and when he emigrated to North America in 1839 his religious convictions were gaining in strength. He settled among his countrymen in Perry County, Missouri, and soon became an active participant in their religious life.

The constitution of the Synod is set forth in seven chapters. The beginning of chapter II reads as follows:

> 1. Acceptance of Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and life.
> 2. Acceptance of all symbolic books of the Evangelical Church (to wit: the three Ecumenical Symbols, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, its Apology, the Smalcald Articles, the Large and the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord as the pure, unadulterated statement and exposition of the divine word.[14]

It was the conviction of the Synod that Luther became infallible after 1523 and in spite of progress in science and cultural changes true and pure evangelical

---

[14] Ibid., p. 149.

Lutheran faith would not change. The Synod was certainly successful in preserving its original doctrines unchanged. It has been maintained[15] that in its history, from the end of the Civil War to the end of World War I, two characteristics of the Synod are of primary significance. On one hand there was "a vigorous theological conservatism which led it to resist any compromise in the historic Lutheran confessional position". On the other, one also detects "a continued isolation from American linguist, economic and social patterns".[16] The Synod constantly warned its members against many common economical practices, for example, the charging of interest, the purchasing of life and fire insurance. It was pointed out in the same manner that many of the social customs such as dancing and theatre-going were sinful.[17] The use of the German language was exclusive in the synodical conventions and in most courses at Concordia University.[18] In view of the facts above it is not surprising that the policies of the Synod should have remained virtually unchanged throughout the period in question (1865-1920). However, questions were often raised at conventions on the position of the Synod on such important matters as slavery. Missouri was, of course, geographically on the border line between free and slave states, but no member of the Synod was ever known to have

---

[15] _Ibid_., p. 109.

[16] _Ibid_., p. 353.

[17] _Ibid_., p. 350.

[18] _Ibid_., p. 355.

been a slave owner. Despite this, the Synod condemned abolitionism. In one of the Synod's periodicals, Lehre und Wehre (February 1867), Dr. Walther wrote

> Having set forth this status controversy (that slavery per se is not sinful) we therefore maintain that abolitionism which holds and declares slavery as an essentially sinful relationship and every master of a slave thereby a malefactor and therefore wants to abolish the former under all circumstances, is a child of unbelief . . .[19]

Such conclusions were normally left to Walther. He would go through the Bible in his search for an answer because it was the belief of the Synod that its every word was inspired by God. So if Walther would, as he usually did, find an answer, his discovery revealed God's Will and Truth in its only acceptable form. Anyone who dared to oppose Walther's conclusion opposed God as well and was therefore a heretic. This dogmatic view came to be called the Plenary Inspiration, based on the idea that human participation in the making of the Bible was nonexistent. Each word was written exactly as God wanted it to be written. That the sacred text might reflect human intelligence and interference was not taken into consideration. Holy writers were inspired by the Holy Ghost. The entire Bible was written under such circumstances, it was felt, and in other manner.[20] This view had been made known after

---

[19] Ibid., p. 323.

[20] Valdemar Eylands, Islensk Kristni i Vesturheimi, (Reykjavik: Edda Print, 1977), p. 42.

the Reformation and this was the theory accepted by both the Missouri and the Norwegian Synods. It must be pointed out here that 19th century Lutheran movements had nearly all abolished this theory. Such was, for example, the case with the Danish theologians and also Dr. Petur Peturson at the Theological Seminary in Reykjavik, Iceland. These accepted the so-called Partial Inspiration which is based on the assumption that the Holy Bible is only partly inspired by God.

We have here the main reasons for the later isolation of the Synod from other religious bodies. Those which did not accept full doctrinal unity with the Missouri Synod were wrong. Any revision of the Synod's doctrines was considered unnecessary:

> The theological leaders of the Missouri Synod maintained that since neither man nor sin nor grace had changed since the days of Adam, there was no reason for the Synod to concern itself with the question of a revised theology or of the use of the new insights of psychology and so forth. Complete subscription to the truths of the Bible was the only proper attitude for a Christian, in the opinion of its leaders.[21]

From the above information the conservatism of the Missouri Synod becomes obvious. It is now important to examine the relationship of the Norwegian Synod with the Missouri Synod, since they were responsible for Thorlakson's education and training.

---

[21] Meyer, op. cit., p. 366.

The Norwegian Synod was organized in 1853 and based its doctrines on those of the Lutheran Orthodoxy, still dominant in Norway.[22] For unknown reasons, Lutheran orthodoxy survived through new tendencies during the early 19th century in Norway whereas other Scandinavian countries, such as Iceland, Denmark and Sweden underwent significant changes, already mentioned. The Norwegians who emigrated to North America in the 1830s and 1840s brought this faith with them and its doctrines became fundamental in the Norwegian Synod in Wisconsin.

Shortly after the organization of the Synod in 1852 it took up the question of the training of future pastors. Since no school had been founded the leaders of the Norwegian Synod decided at a convention in 1855 to send delegates to three theological seminaries: in Columbus, Ohio, Buffalo, New York and St. Louis, Missouri. Having spent considerable time at these educational institutions the delegates recommended Concordia University, St. Louis, as the future educational centre for the Norwegian Synod, at least until it could find its own. Following negotiations with the German Missouri Synod, eighty-four students were enrolled at Concordia in 1859.[23] During the negotiation with the Germans it had been discovered that the doctrines of both Synods were almost identical. This helps explain why Concordia was chosen by the Norwegians. Both Synods

---

[22] O.M. Norlie, History of the Norwegian People in America, (Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1925), p. 205.

[23] Ibid., p. 271.

considered the unaltered Augsburg Confession the fundamental one: both subscribed to the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, as well as Luther's Catechism.[24]

It must be pointed out that the Missouri Synod had nothing to do with the establishment of the Norwegian Synod. Their almost identical doctrines were based on the works of Luther, the leader of the Reformation, and this was what drew them together. The most notable difference of the two Synods was that the Norwegians, in the early stages, seemed more liberal. As earlier stated they had managed to preserve the Lutheran Orthodoxy in Norway up to the time of emigration but it had become more liberal than, for example, that practiced by the Germans. The Norwegians, for example, did not oppose dancing or theatre-going but that was strictly forbidden in the German Missouri Synod. The Missouri Synod, understandingly, was better organized and this fact, as will later be shown, made the Norwegian Synod somewhat dependent upon it.

> The German and Norwegian leaders not only honored Luther and republished his writings; they read them. His thinking entered the bone and marrow of their theology. If the Norwegians - without attempting to strain the simile - received a theological blood transfusion from the Missourians in the first decade of their Synod's existence and if this transfusion was successful, it was because both had the same type blood - the healthy product of Luther's theology. Walther

---

[24] Carl Stamm Meyer, Pioneer and Friends, (Minneapolis: Publish Luther College Press, 1962), p. 78.

> was acknowledged as the greatest Luther scholar among them all, Missourians and Norwegians. The rest was extensively acquainted with their common spiritual father. As such they honored, revered, used and followed him.[25]

These Synods did not, however, always agree on every issue. In 1863, for example, it seemed likely that the cordial relations between them would be disrupted as a result of the question of slavery. It had been hotly disputed among the Norwegians so they sent an unusually large delegation to attend the convention of the Missouri Synod.[26] With all his might Walther managed to show his Norwegian friends that slavery was not sinful. In the end the Reverend U.V. Koren, of Wisconsin, made a speech and expressed the gratitude of the Norwegian Synod. He said among other things:

> . . . they prized what they have learned from them with regard to pure doctrine and correct evangelical church life. They had come to this country as Lutherans in their attitude, it is true, but unclear in the understanding of many of the most important aspects of Lutheran truth; the Synod had led them to clearer understanding. However, with that he did not wish to say that they have now finished learning and are in all respects perfect. No, they want to remain pupils and learn still more. Some like to say they are dependent of the Missouri Synod; that is true, because in fact they do cultivate filial sentiments towards it.[27]

The Norwegians made use of Concordia University until 1876 when they founded their own seminary at Decorah, Iowa. The ties between these two Synods remained unchanged;

---

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 156.

whenever Walther came to a conclusion regarding any questionable matter it soon reached every congregation of the Norwegian Synod.

To many people today these two Synods certainly seem to have been plagued with bigotry but to many nineteenth century immigrants to North America they were not. These Synods became extremely powerful in States such as Missouri, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Their pastors were known for their faithfulness, orderliness and proficiency. Most of all they never questioned the decisions made by the synodical conventions and in this manner Thorlakson was no exception. Once he understood how any such decision was made, that is, where in the Bible the answer was found, he accepted it wholeheartedly. Even the issue of slavery was understandable to him; when he was accused of accepting it as not sinful he did not disagree. In a document presumably written by him,[28] efforts are made to explain the Synod's point of view. His main emphasis was based on the Plenary Inspiration: nowhere in the Bible does it say directly that slavery was sinful.

It is now appropriate to return to New Iceland to examine the congregational laws enacted by these two men. Earlier it was mentioned that Thorlakson named his three

---

[28] This document is available in the Special Collection of Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba. It is entitled "Has Halldor Briem proved his accusations against the Norwegian Synod?". When the handwriting is compared to Thorlaksons' it seems identical. One also tends to think that no one else would attempt to prove Briem wrong but Thorlakson. At least no one else tried to do so in Framfari during the debate.

congregations after three important Icelandic churchmen. It was also pointed out that the reason he did so was because these men were more or less responsible for the Lutheran Orthodoxy in Iceland up to 1800.

The naming of his congregations in this manner probably served to strengthen his case when he insisted that his congregational laws were in accordance with Lutheranism as practiced in Iceland. The fact that he enacted his laws in accordance with those of the Norwegian Synod might also be questioned. When, in 1875, Thorlakson established the first Icelandic congregation in Shawano County, Wisconsin, he maintained, according to Stephan G. Stephanson, that the laws of the Norwegian Synod, which he accepted and obeyed, "were unknown to the Icelanders and too complicated".[29] It is rather unlikely that the Icelanders in New Iceland, in 1877, had studied these laws. Why he changed his mind therefore remains a mystery but one suspects that since he was employed by the Norwegian Synod and knowing the Synod did not accept the doctrines of any other religious body, Thorlakson had no option. Thorlakson's opponents in New Iceland argued that his naming of the congregations only served to confuse the immigrants; his laws were in no manner according to the works of these great churchmen.

---

[29] Stephan G. Stephanson, Umhleypingar, (Reykjavik: Gutenberg Print, 1949), p. 86.

His laws were in twenty-one articles which clearly indicate the relations with the two frequently-mentioned Synods. When, for example, the third article of Thorlakson's laws is compared to article 1, chapter 2, of the constitution of the Missouri Synod, they appear identical in content. Thorlakson's article reads:

> The congregations accept the Holy Scripture i.e. canonistic books of the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God and the only true fountain, rule and norm of faith and life.[30]

The Missouri article reads:

> Acceptance of Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and life.[31]

In the spring of 1877, when the Icelandic immigrants, who did not ask for Thorlakson's services, discussed the need for an Icelandic pastor it was agreed to establish an Icelandic Synod based on laws which the Icelandic understood were in accordance with the faith in Iceland. A few men were selected to propose such laws but since they all lacked theological training they contacted Jon Bjarnason and Halldor Briem,[32] both of them known for their opposition to the Norwegian Synod. These men wrote the laws in eleven articles and once they reached New Iceland they were passed unchanged.

---

[30] Framfari, March 19, 1878, p. 2.

[31] Meyer, op. cit., p. 149.

[32] Both men were in the United States at the time and drew up an outline of congregational laws which were sent to New Iceland.

When Jon Bjarnason arrived in the colony in November 1877, the laws were discussed at meetings throughout the area and some changes suggested. After some deliberation some changes were made. For example, one dealt with the creeds. Originally the article read:

> The Synod considers the creeds of the Lutheran Church valuable evidence of how the Church has at various times interpreted the teachings of the Bible and defended itself against heresy.[33]

After the change it read:

> The creeds of the Lutheran Church are especially honored as evidence of how the founders of that Church, which our nation has accepted for three hundred years, have understood and taught the learning of the Holy Scripture and defended itself against heresy. But neither these Lutheran creeds nor any other confessions do we match with the Holy Writ, which any doctrine must be judged by.[34]

Since no explanation exists for these changes one can only assume that they were made in an effort to make clear the similarities to the Icelandic State Church. Since both pastors maintained that their laws were in accordance with what had been practiced in Iceland, these changes may also have been made as an attempt to prove Thorlakson wrong. The 4th article of his laws reads:

> The congregations accept the learning of the Holy Bible in the same manner as the Lutheran Church in Iceland does in its creeds because they do not only accept evidence of what the Church has taught at various times, but also as a pure and correct interpretation of the

---

[33] _Framfari_, November 15, 1877.

[34] _Ibid_.

> Word of God which never changes. These creeds are; 1)the Apostolic 2)the Athanasian 4)the unaltered Augsburg Confession 5)Luther's Small Catechism.[35]

When Thorlakson's laws were finally published in Framfari March 19, 1878,[36] the editor, Halldor Briem, found reasons to comment on some of the articles. His main interest was in the creeds, some of which--particularly the Nicene and Athanasian--he insisted had never been translated into Icelandic. He maintained that these were completely unknown to every Icelander and he doubted if Thorlakson had ever bothered to explain them to his congregations.[37] In a brief answer to Briem's comments in Framfari April 12, 1878, Thorlakson referred to a meeting held at Gimli in March of the same year, where he claimed he answered all such accusations. It was the intention of both parties to publish jointly the minutes of this meeting; unfortunately this was never done. Nothing presently exists in writing which might have indicated Thorlakson's answers.

When these laws are compared it does not escape one's attention that Bjarnason's were much more tolerant. For example, Thorlakson did not consider women as full members: they were not given the right to vote. It can be added here that this was in complete accord with the dictates of the Norwegian Synod. Bjarnason, on the other

---

[35] Ibid.

[36] Framfari published an appeal to Thorlakson for his approval of the publication of these laws. Later Briem admitted that due to lack of space the publication was thus delayed.

[37] Framfari, March 19, 1878.

hand, equated women with men in every respect. Thorlakson insisted that only a pastor with proper education should perform religious services, whereas Bjarnason maintained that in case his congregations would not have a pastor, religious practice should be performed as was done in Iceland. Laws of both parties had now been accepted and congregations organized.

CHAPTER V

THE DEBATE IN NEW ICELAND

When the battleground and the two dissenting forces in New Iceland are examined it becomes obvious that Thorlakson faced a stiff opposition. Each pastor may have had an almost equal number of supporters,[1] but the most influential of them, such as Sigtryggur Jonasson, Halldor Briem and Fridjon Fridrikson, were on Bjarnason's side. The newly established paper, Framfari, edited first by Jonasson and then by Briem,[2] similarly held to Bjarnason's views. Since Framfari was the only paper in the colony, its support was of tremendous advantage to Bjarnason.

As serious as this religious controversy turned out to be, the Icelandic immigrants did not, strangely enough, discuss it at any length in their letters or autobiographies. The only time they mentioned it was when they expressed its seriousness on the community as a whole in New Iceland, for example Jon Jonson from Mari. He once

---

[1]It is generally estimated that Bjarnason had the support of 142 families whereas Thorlakson was supported by 132. Eylands, op. cit., p. 64.

[2]Sigtryggur Jonasson was responsible for the first eight issues; Briem took over on January 24, 1878.

wrote: "What really made life miserable in New Iceland was the religious controversy. Wherever people met they would argue. The disagreement between these two groups was tremendous."[3] This short comment does not touch upon the nature of the dispute but it certainly expresses the situation in the colony quite well. Since the sources on the actual arguments are so scarce, Framfari, although partial, must be our main one.

Ever since Thorlakson offered to become a pastor in the colony in 1875 the immigrants had argued whether to accept his offer or not. Their concerns hinged on the question of whether they would have any authority in their church life and school system if Thorlakson should become their pastor. As soon as Thorlakson became aware of this dispute and the accusations made towards the Norwegian Synod[4] he felt it his duty to rectify what he called "a misunderstanding of the nature and tendency of the Norwegian Synod," which he found dominant in the opposition's arguments.

In an article in Framfari, January 24, 1878, he began by briefly accounting for its history. He described the new Norwegian Theological Seminary at Decorah, Iowa, and compared it to the one in Reykjavik, Iceland. He

---

[3] Joakimson, op. cit., p. 97.

[4] Thorlakson did not become fully aware of the seriousness of the disagreement until he arrived in New Iceland late in 1877.

maintained that the subjects taught were basically the same in both schools but that greater emphasis was being placed on theology at Decorah than in Reykjavik. He concluded this first article of three by comparing the students at the two educational centres, claiming that the students in Iceland were so liberal that they doubted the superiority of the Lutheran Church over other Christian Churches. They even doubted, he went on, the superiority of Christianity over other faiths. The students at Decorah were, on the other hand, grateful for the truth that God had granted the Lutheran Church. His comparison of the students clearly reflected the difference of these two institutions of religious education, and their attendant differences in doctrines: the liberalism or tolerance of the Icelandic students against the fundamentalism of the Decorah students.

Halldor Briem immediately commented on Thorlakson's article, stating that Thorlakson's intention should be appreciated because nothing was as important as a true, clear picture of the Synod. Although the intention was good, he said, Thorlakson failed to give any explanation of the misunderstanding. In fact it was not even mentioned. The comparison between the students at Decorah and in Reykjavik was not, Briem maintained, justified in Thorlakson's article. He felt that the accusations against the faith of Icelandic students were of such a serious nature that they could not be left unanswered. The majority.

of these students were ordained upon graduation, and served as pastors throughout Iceland. In conclusion he pointed out that if Thorlakson seriously intended to clarify any "misunderstanding" he needed to be a lot more accurate.[5]

Considering this exchange of opinions one immediately realizes that much more would follow. Thorlakson avoided entering any discussion on doctrines or tendencies of the Norwegian Synod, which was exactly what Briem asked for in his last suggestion to Thorlakson. Briem wanted him to admit that the Norwegian Synod, for example, had never considered slavery sinful. Such had been the accusations against the Synod and this was what Briem felt was the misunderstanding Thorlakson intended to rectify.

As was stated in Chapter IV, an effort was made to explain why the Synod did not consider slavery sinful; but this explanation, probably intended as an answer to Briem's request, was never published. Whether Thorlakson felt his argument would not convince Briem and other Icelanders of the same opinion is uncertain, but it is tempting to believe so. Although the Bible did not, as Thorlakson insisted, clearly state that slavery was sinful, it was strongly opposed throughout the civilized world in the second part of the nineteenth century. Any attempt to prove the opposite would therefore be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

---

[5] Framfari, January 24, 1878.

The second part of Thorlakson's article was published in Framfari on February 12, 1878. This time he gave a detailed account of the educational system of the Synod and described the schools to which it had access. Next, he explained why he was offered a scholarship by the Synod, maintaining that the prospect of his assistance to Icelandic immigrants to North America was the only reason for this award. Their need for a pastor had been known to the Synod and they had asked him to become their pastor. Finally, he discussed his journey to Iceland the previous summer[6] and described how wrong many in Iceland were in their opinion on the Norwegian Synod. Many of them, he maintained, thought it was a Catholic Synod; others, "an organization of zealots". These also believed, he said, that the Synod maintained that anyone opposing it could not expect salvation. He completed this second part of his article by saying that once he explained the truth to these people they all seemed relieved. He admitted that it had occurred to him to challenge those in Iceland who were responsible for such rumours publicly, but changed his mind as he felt it would only result in a paper war and that it was his opinion that the Icelandic Church should concentrate on something more useful than to try to judge a foreign synod.

---

[6]The reason for Thorlakson's journey to Iceland is believed to have been his interest in a woman at Eyrarbakki.

His reasons for including an account of his journey to Iceland are somewhat puzzling. Apart from few articles by Bjarnason, naturally partial, published in Icelandic papers, very little was known about the Norwegian Synod in Iceland. Scarcely anyone could oppose Thorlakson there. In New Iceland, however, both Bjarnason and Briem had studied the nature of the Norwegian Synod and could therefore offer considerable opposition.

In his comments on Thorlakson's article, Briem discussed,[7] among other things, his own experince of the Norwegian Synod. He related how, in October, 1876, he was invited by Norwegian pastors to attend the Lutheran Seminary in Madison, Wisconsin.[8] He was not considered a registered student but was permitted to attend classes as he wished. He accepted this invitation on the grounds that it would give him an excellent opportunity to become acquainted with an American Synod. He maintained, however, that he had not been there long when he realized that he could not accept the "bigotry and narrow-mindedness" of the Synod. He admitted that one day, in front of some students, he spoke his mind to some of the teachers and then left the Seminary for good. Next he discussed the Synod's assistance to poor immigrants: how it offered to

---

[7]<u>Framfari</u>, February 12, 1878.

[8]Norwegians in Wisconsin who did not follow the Synod formed their own congregations and had access to a seminary in Wisconsin. These offered Briem to attend lessons but Thorlakson's persuasion proved enough.

meet the expenses of a pastor, church, and school buildings. It was his firm belief that if immigrants accepted such help they had either to join the Synod or to repay the sum of money provided for their assistance by the Synod.

His last remark reflected one of the most frequent accusations against the Norwegian Synod. It was constantly blamed[9] for forcing its power upon poor, trustful immigrants by offering money and the services of a pastor. Many immigrants were said to have accepted such help and then found itself completely deprived of any influence on their church life.[10] In their effort to prove that such was the case in New Iceland, the immigrants quoted Norwegians who had opposed the Synod. Framfari, for example, referred to an article by R.B. Anderson,[11] published in Skandinaven, in which he accused Thorlakson for purposefully describing conditions in New Iceland so incorrectly that the Norwegian Synod had immediately offered a large sum of money for his congregations.[12] This assistance from the Norwegian Synod will be discussed later.

---

[9]Among these were men like Halldor Briem, Fridjon Fridrikson and Sigtryggur Jonasson.

[10]These accusations frequently appeared in Framfari but are also found in letters of many, for example, Jon Olafson's letters to Bjarnason.

[11]R. B. Anderson was a professor in Madison, Wisconsin, and strongly opposed the Norwegian Synod. He offered Bjarnason a temporary post in 1875 while Bjarnason sought something permanent.

[12]See p. 97 of this chapter.

The conclusion of Thorlakson's article was published in Framfari on February 20, 1878. Again he raised the question of the misunderstanding about the Synod; now, however, he blamed Jon Bjarnason and Halldor Briem for it. He maintained that their constant accusations made against the Synod and himself during the winter 1876-1877 resulted in suspicion and even distrust among many New Icelanders. He insisted that time and again, at meetings or whenever he had the opportunity, he had tried to explain his concept of the role of a pastor, the organization of the Norwegian Synod and its doctrines. His congregations had therefore been thoroughly informed. He completed his article by saying that among the Norwegians he had found some of his greatest friends and in general he expressed his appreciation of the Synod and his admiration for its leaders.

Halldor Briem maintained, in his reply, that Thorlakson undoubtedly had tried to explain the nature of the Synod and its doctrines. Whether he succeeded was a different story. Nothing in Thorlakson's article had clarified anything regarding the misunderstanding which he originally intended to rectify, so there were reasons to doubt that Thorlakson's attempts elsewhere had been any more successful. Briem concluded his comments by comparing the financial situation of both pastors. Jon Bjarnason had given up an advantageous post in Minneapolis and had to rely on the ability of his countrymen in New Iceland. Thorlakson, on the other hand, was maintained by the

Norwegian Synod and had nothing to worry about. Thus, "when he brings presents to members of his congregations we will not say that the intention is directly to allure them, but I have witnessed that such gifts from the Synods are not always due to charity."[13]

When this dissension, as it appeared in Framfari, is examined one realizes how bitter and frustrating the dispute had become. The discussion on doctrines was never entered into and both men tried their utmost to make each other's church distrusted. Thorlakson insisted that Icelandic pastors had limited faith and Briem went to great length to describe how the Norwegian Synod forced its authority upon immigrants in the United States and how it had revealed the same design in its association with the North American Icelanders. Although these opinions are only expressed by these two men, they probably reflected the arguments of others in the colony. The laymen probably never discussed the difference in doctrine, for they lacked knowledge of them; but they certainly had their own opinions on the Synod as a powerful body within the United States.

The harvest in New Iceland during the summer of 1877 was of considerable disappointment and so was the fishing in the Lake, so the scarcity of food began to show as it drew closer to Christmas. The Colony Council, therefore,

---

[13] Framfari, February 20, 1878.

asked for reports from every district for a subsequent discussion at a meeting at Gimli on December 28. It appeared that no less than one-fifth of the population was in desperate need.[14] The Council therefore felt that those who were comparatively well-off could help those in need and that assistance from outside the settlement was not required. Thorlakson and his men were, however, of a different opinion. At a meeting at Gimli, January 5, 1879, an appeal to the Norwegian Synod was signed by representatives from Thorlakson's congregations[15] with the request that he submit it along with his own assessment to the Synod. He wrote, on the 11th of January, a long letter describing the "hopeless" situation in the colony. These two letters from New Iceland and a note from H.A. Preus,[16] the president of the Synod, were then published in one of the Synod's papers and all Norwegians in North America were urged to help their friends in New Iceland.

The reaction to this appeal among Bjarnason's followers was very strong. Bjarnason wrote to Budstikken in Minneapolis[17] expressing the view that Thorlakson's statement was greatly exaggerated. Framfari, time and

---

[14]The Council reckoned that 116 families were well off. Another 116 could manage; only 23 were in a desperate need.

[15]There is no evidence of Thorlakson's presence at this meeting or his knowledge of its intention beforehand.

[16]Chairman of the Norwegian Synod.

[17]This was in March, 1878.

again, published Bjarnason's views[18] but also provided space for Thorlakson's followers who similarly expressed their convictions. The matter revolved around the question of survival without outside help. Bjarnason maintained, as the Council had done, that although many were impoverished others could come to their rescue.[19] Thorlakson, on the other hand, insisted that the situation among his people was serious; many a household had been forced to slaughter its only cow and others were eating the seed potatoes intended for next year's harvest. Bjarnason and his men also carried on their argument and insisted that through such assistance the Synod would gain a firm hold on the colony.

This dispute reached every Icelander in North America and brought divergent reactions. For example, Icelandic immigrants in Lyon County, Minnesota,[20] called a meeting and agreed to send a letter to future emigrants in Iceland to warn them against settling in New Iceland, giving Thorlakson's letter to the Synod as a reason for their warning. People of non-Icelandic extraction were also heard from. Professor R.B. Anderson of Madison maintained in his article, mentioned above,[21] that if the Norwegians intended to help the Icelanders they should not exclude Bjarnason's followers.

---

[18] These were expressed by many of his congregations.

[19] <u>Framfari</u>, May 3, 1878.

[20] This settlement was established by people in Wisconsin in 1876.

[21] See p. 94 of this chapter.

This is an interesting suggestion and may have affected the Synod's leaders because on March 13 Preus stated in the paper Norden that he had written to Thorlakson and asked for more detailed information. One wonders if he was enquiring whether all the immigrants in New Iceland needed help or if he merely wanted more information on the economic circumstances of those belonging to Thorlakson's congregations. One suspects the latter; after all, Bjarnason had declared that the situation in New Iceland was not as serious as Thorlakson's submission had indicated.

Still, there were others who took honorable stands as, for example, J.A. Heiberg, a Danish pastor in Chicago and the President of a Danish Lutheran organization. He asked Jon Bjarnason for information on New Iceland. The Danes in his community had collected a sum of money intended for starving Icelanders. In Framfari, May 22, 1878, Bjarnason explained that on behalf of his congregations he had turned this generous offer down, since need did not warrant its acceptance.

As is easily seen, the dispute now included almost everything concerning the colony; but its origin was the difference of theological opinions between the two pastors. The Colony Council therefore decided to call a public meeting at Gimli on March 25 and 26, where the pastors were asked to account for their theological doctrines. The intention was to reach some kind of an agreement between the two groups. It is estimated that at least 300 immigrants attended this meeting.

The meeting was to start with the singing of a hymn and a prayer but Thorlakson refused to participate on the grounds he could not accept Bjarnason as a brother in Christ. His refusal is interesting for various reasons. For example, it was in full harmony with the standard practice of both the Missouri and the Norwegian Synods and their complete disapproval of other religious bodies. That it was by no means a step toward a reconciliation between the two groups shows how determined Thorlakson was to follow the rules of the Norwegian Synod.

Almost two days were devoted to interpretive aspects of the Bible. Since this question has remained fundamental to every religious debate among Icelanders in North America, it requires close examination. Pall Thorlakson accepted the so-called Plenary Inspiration, whereas Bjarnason followed the theory of the Partial Inspiration, which the theological components of the Bible reflect the inspiration of God whereas historical constituents and formal presentation can be ascribed to human endeavour.

In his attempt to dislodge this theory Thorlakson invoked the words of one of the most prominent theologians, D. Gaussen of the Missouri Synod: "No arrogance can match that of him who believes that the Bible is God's apocalypse but dares to read it and distinguish what is inspired and what is not".[22] Thorlakson added that this theory would

[22] Eylands, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

demolish the very foundations of religion and would allow people to believe what they wanted to believe, not what God had said.

In their effort to prove each other in error, the pastors time and again quoted theologians and books of dogma in various languages. Initially, the lay participation in these discussions was limited, but during the second day of the meeting their participation began to widen the scope of the controversy. Halldor Briem repeated his accusations against the Norwegian Synod, probably using arguments similar to those in Framfari. As before, Thorlakson spoke in its defence. It is most unfortunate that no detailed account of the meeting exists because, according to an account in Framfari, Thorlakson answered Briem's accusations more directly than he had done in Framfari.[23] What he said will remain a mystery but one can perhaps assume the method he used: by referring to passages in the Bible where the truth in the matter was given, according to the Plenary Inspiration. This is how the Synod always found the truth in every matter. Why should he not also do so?

The minutes of the meeting came to the following conclusion:

> . . . everybody is convinced that the pastors hold extremely different opinions. Despite this it appeared that the members of the two factions departed with a friendly feeling and with much better understanding of the differences

---

[23] Framfari, April 12, 1879.

> between the two pastors and between Christian sects. It was especially apparent that the people were of one accord that while each person held to his own point of view in religious matters, this should not mar public concord and brotherly co-operation.[24]

In spite of this optimism, these words, unfortunately, turned out to be no more than wishful thinking. The dispute grew increasingly serious, demoralizing both civil relations and "brotherly co-operation". The constant disagreement led to hostility; good neighbors became bad; even families were split as a result.

As Thorlakson still had obligations in Wisconsin,[25] he left New Iceland in April, 1878, and did not return until October of the same year. His people were in the meantime by no means idle and in the spring many of them had begun to discuss a possible settlement elsewhere. Thorlakson had frequently pointed out to them that there were still some attractive areas unsettled down south.[26] As a result, a group of Icelanders explored certain districts both north and south of the border and in June some returned, determined to leave the colony of New Iceland for good.[27] Their decision led to the beginning of a new phase of the above dispute.

---

[24] Framfari, April 5, 1878. This quotation is all that ever appeared of the minutes of the meeting. In this coverage of the disputation at Gimli in Framfari it was mentioned that the intention was to publish an article on everything that was spoken but this evidently was never done.

[25] He still served a Norwegian congregation and also the Icelanders in Shawano County, Wisconsin.

[26] Almanak 1895, p. 98.

[27] Framfari, June 6, 1878.

For a long time people had concentrated on the difference between the Norwegian Synod and the Icelandic Church. Now the entire future of New Iceland had become the central question. In 1876 the Dominion Government of Canada had offered a large sum of money as a loan to the Icelanders to help them get established in New Iceland. It was emphasized that the loan was only for Icelandic immigrants in New Iceland and that the first installment was due to be repaid in 1879. Those supporting Bjarnason argued that if many people left the colony the payments would become unbearable for those remaining behind. They demanded that no one should be permitted to leave without paying his share, either in cash or by leaving behind livestock and tools.[28]

Again Thorlakson was blamed for having constantly urged his followers to leave; he had never liked the idea of a settlement in Canada and had always greatly exaggerated the shortcoming of New Iceland. Framfari maintained that everyone knew that the first years in an unsettled area were always difficult; such had been the case throughout North America for years. People would simply need to unite in their effort to conquer the pioneer problems.[29]

The above statement of Framfari clearly indicates how important it was for the Icelanders in New Iceland to face jointly the hardship of the first years in the colony.

---

[28] Framfari, June 14, 1878.

[29] Ibid.

Divided, as they gradually were becoming, progress would be slow. Since Thorlakson was not in the colony at the time these accusations were made, little defence on his behalf was offered in Framfari. However, in July, 1878, unexpected support came from Jon Bjarnason. In a long article he expressed his views on an all-Icelandic settlement and admitted that ever since his arrival in North America he had thought that maintaining a separate colony would suit the Icelanders best. It had been his dream to see the Icelandic language and culture flourish under such circumstances, but now he had changed his mind. Having witnessed the struggle in New Iceland and its limited progress over the last two years he saw only two alternatives for the Icelanders. One was to open up the reserve to people of other nationalities with necessary experience and economic ability to start an organized agriculture. The other was to leave the colony and scatter among others either in Canada or the United States: he personally had always favoured the United States. The Icelanders had to face the fact that they had come to North America to become either Canadians or Americans. Being isolated in New Iceland for long would only prevent progress and normal adaptation. He maintained that had it not been for the fish in the Lake no one could have survived the first two years. He concluded by saying that future emigrants from Iceland should not settle in groups in North America; they

they should scatter among others already familiar with North American soil and climate.[30]

This obviously came as a shock to Bjarnason's supporters, who had always dreamt of a separate Icelandic settlement. They immediately expressed their disappointment and in what remained of this year a whole sequence of articles appeared in Framfari expressing various opinions on the issue.[31] Those who opposed Bjarnason argued, for example, that there would be no way of guaranteeing that only desirable people would settle in New Iceland and so possibly the Icelanders would find their colony full of unwanted characters.[32] Everyone, however, agreed that the matter of opening up the reserve would need careful thought and consideration so no decisions were made.[33]

Bjarnason's article is interesting for other reasons; he admitted that in terms of economical and cultural progress he favoured the United States over Canada. This perhaps explains his hesitation, in 1874-1876, to become a pastor among his countrymen in Canada.

Bjarnason's recommendations must have been particularly disappointing to Sigtryggur Jonasson, who

---

[30] Framfari, July 25, 1878.

[31] Framfari, August 12, September 3 and 10, November 27.

[32] Framfari, September 3, published an editorial by Halldor Briem and Sigtryggur Jonasson discussed the question of opening the reserve in an article November 27.

[33] Ibid.

had been largely responsible for Icelandic settlement in Canada. Indeed, one can easily understand why Bjarnason's newly-expressed vision aroused widespread disapproval. He had strongly opposed Thorlakson's attempt to have the early Icelandic immigrants settle among Norwegians in Wisconsin, and emphasized instead the importance of preserving the Icelandic language and culture. This, he felt, could only be achieved in a homogeneous Icelandic settlement. Some may even have wondered whether he had now also changed his mind regarding the Norwegian Synod. At any rate, representatives from the two religious factions decided in February, 1879, to ask both Bjarnason and Thorlakson to participate in a public meeting at Gimli in March, for a continued discussion of matters raised at the Gimli meeting the previous year as well as of other topics of public concern.

Those who may have had any doubts regarding Bjarnason's views regarding the Norwegian Synod must have been relieved when on March 13, 1879, _Framfari_ published the beginning of a long article entitled "Necessary Exhortation" by Bjarnason. Here he attempted at length to explain the vast difference between the two previously noted Synods and the Icelandic Church. In his book _The Icelandic People in Manitoba_, Wilhelm Kristjanson gives an excellent summary:

> Reverend Bjarnason said, in substance, that it was evident from the public disputation of 1878 that the religious beliefs of Thorlakson differed on many fundamentals not only from his own views

> but also from those generally held in Iceland. From the first, Thorlakson had objected to a common cemetary for church groups in New Iceland; he had refused to join Bjarnason in a prayer at the public disputation of 1878 because he considered him a heretic, and he had stated that his conscience forbade him to call Bjarnason his brother in Christ. The Missouri Synod where Thorlakson and most of the Norwegian ministers had received their religious education, was by far the most conservative Lutheran organization of all time. A burning question among the students at their seminary had been whether it was sinful to accept interest on money; the Synod had officially forbidden the marriage of a man to his deceased wife's sister; one of its chief publications claimed that the sun moved around the earth; it demanded acceptance of beliefs not concerned with Christian religion and it claimed that Luther's teachings after 1523 were infallible and was elevating Luther to papal stature. Reverend Thorlakson's preaching of predestination was contradictory to God's wish that all would be saved in truth; contrary also to St. Paul's doctrine of Justification by Faith. The presence of the Host in the communion service was not real but symbolic. . . .[34]

It should be added that in his discussion on the Plenary Inspiration Bjarnason maintained that among many who had strongly opposed it was Bishop Martensen in Denmark. In his comment on Bishop Martensen, Professor Walther at Concordia had stated: "The so-called religious work of Martensen is a collection of the most revolting heresies."[35] As Bishop Martensen was thus considered a heretic, almost every Icelandic pastor would therefore also be one since Martensen's dogma was not only taught at the University of Copenhagen but also at the Seminary in Reykjavik, Iceland.

---

[34]Kristjanson, _op_. _cit_., pp. 112-113.

[35]_Framfari_, March 13, 1879.

Since only the first of three parts of Bjarnason's article had appeared in Framfari before the second public meeting at Gimli, Thorlakson did not have an opportunity to comment; but after the meeting and once the whole article had been published he stated in a short note in Framfari[36] that this whole matter was too complicated and extensive for any brief explanation and that he planned to publish a pamphlet in which he hoped to explain his point of view once and for all.

The second disputation took place at Gimli on March 17 and 18. Many have referred to this meeting as the most remarkable gathering ever to take place among Icelanders in Canada. Never before had the Icelanders been so enthusiastic on matters of religion, but the constant disagreement over the past three years had certainly left its mark. Again the two different theories of the inspiration of the Bible were discussed; Bjarnason claiming that the Bible was partly inspired but it was written by men who made errors. Contradictions could, then, be found in it. None of these, however, upset the text of the Holy Writ. In his answer, Thorlakson insisted that the Bible must reflect an instance in which men of very limited education must have been divinely inspired, since they wrote complicated sentences which were beyond even their own understanding.

---

[36] Ibid., April 22, 1879.

Again both pastors referred to various sources, Thorlakson normally gave passages in the Bible as proofs. Bjarnason, in his rebuttals, repeatedly insisted that no passages could be found to vindicate Thorlakson's point of view. This meeting made it clear that reconciliation between the two factions was impossible. Thorlakson's people were, by this time, seriously considering a departure from the colony for a new settlement in North Dakota. The future of the colony was once again at stake.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The controversy among Icelanders in North America during the 1870s was often considered by the pioneers in New Iceland as the most serious problem they had to face. Although the origins can be traced to the disagreements between the two pastors, other aspects must also be considered. The Icelandic immigrants hardly ever expressed their views on the actual theological controversy, but the conflict was particularly important to them because this religious dispute raised several other matters which directly concerned them: for example, the question of an Icelandic settlement in Wisconsin, the request to the Norwegian Synod in 1878 from Thorlakson's people, and the entire future of New Iceland. Such matters were of more importance to them than different opinions on the interpretation of the Holy Bible. In our conclusion our main emphasis will be on the consequences of the debate for the common people, but the influence of the two pastors on the Icelanders will also be examined.

The first Icelandic immigrants did not know much of what awaited them on the other side of the Atlantic.

They knew, on the other hand, that since life in Iceland had been a constant struggle with little rewards prospects could scarcely be any worse in the new world. The constant emigration from Europe to North America certainly had encouraging affects on them; thousands of people of different nationalities had emigrated west earlier in the 19th century in search of freedom in the land of new opportunities.

Despite their limited means, the Icelanders who came to North America in the 1870s were quite optimistic. The majority of them hoped to be able to found an exclusive Icelandic settlement, where they could preserve their language and culture. It soon became apparent, however, that a unanimous decision on a certain settlement site would not be reached. The reasons for this were many, but the immigrants' unfamiliarity with North American agriculture was one of the most important. Their judgements in these matters were more often based on what conditions they felt would enable them to preserve their ethnic identity than on realistic observations of necessary environment features and qualities. Such for example, was the case with Jon Olafson and his recommendation to settle in Alaska. Despite their rationalization in favour of an isolated settlement in Keewatin, Canada, Sigtryggur Jonasson and his followers were motivated by the same sentiments. Suffice it to say here that they certainly

should have examined the fertility of the soil more thoroughly than they did; in due course its wetness had disastrous consequences.

Among influential North American Icelanders from the 1870s, three individuals distinguished themselves as leaders, the two pastors and Sigtryggur Jonasson. Both Bjarnason and Jonasson wanted to establish an Icelandic settlement, Bjarnason in the United States, Jonasson in Canada. Thorlakson, on the other hand, having acquainted himself with Norwegian settlements in Wisconsin saw no other alternative for the Icelanders but to establish themselves in scattered communities among already settled pioneers, preferably those who had come from Norway.

It is interesting to reflect briefly upon what might have happened if Thorlakson's ideas had gained acceptance. The first years would obviously have been a lot easier on Norwegian farms in Wisconsin than they were in the isolation of Keewatin. Those who did so and later settled in Shawano County were far better off, and although their small settlement was later abandoned it certainly was sufficient to meet their requirements as their cultivation increased. The Norwegians had gained the necessary experience and ability to instruct the Icelanders. However, it is unlikely that the strong ethnic ties they have maintained to this day would have endured had they dispersed over such large areas as Wisconsin, Nebraska and Minnesota.

The isolation in Keewatin had certain advantages. Primarily it facilitated the preservation of the Icelandic language. Even today one finds old Canadian-Icelanders in the New Iceland area claiming that they knew no English when they first entered school.

The importance of preserving the language was first emphasized in Milwaukee, 1874, by Jon Bjarnason, and his views have remained remarkably strong to this day. The earliest tangible evidence of meaningful concern for the preservation of Icelandic in North America is the Icelandic paper, _Framfari_, which started publication at _Lundi_, 1877, and from the beginning of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba the descendants of the pioneers have had access to education in the language of their forebears.[1]

The views of Professor Haraldur Bessason, who has been Head of the Icelandic Department at the University of Manitoba for 23 years and an expert on the history of the Icelandic language in America, supports the above assumption on the preservation of Icelandic as the main feature of an ethnic identity; he has, in fact, no doubt that scattered

---

[1]The Icelandic immigrants organized a school in Ontario and once in New Iceland they lost no time in establishing another. Once Jon Bjarnason settled in the colony his wife immediately took up teaching at Gimli. Thorlakson similarly had religious instruction among his congregations. In the early months of 1882 a day school was established in Winnipeg which later became the foundation of continuous education in the Icelandic language in North America.

throughout the northern States the Icelanders would never have managed to preserve their language to the same extent as they did in Manitoba, Canada.[2]

In order to avoid any misunderstanding regarding Thorlakson's view on settlements it must be emphasized that he certainly wanted his mother-tongue to be preserved in North America; he maintained, in fact, that having obtained the necessary training and education in the States, the Icelanders would be in a position to establish their own colony.[3] He sincerely felt that nothing was of greater importance for the Icelanders during their first years in America than to learn proper agricultural methods. This, he was convinced, could only be achieved through work on farms already engaged in the production of wheat, corn, and other cereals, not by settling totally without experience in a remote area.[4]

He certainly seems to have been correct as far as the first years in New Iceland were concerned. Even his opponent, Bjarnason, admitted that. But the majority of the Icelandic immigrants, both in Canada and the United States, saw in Thorlakson's proposal a definite threat to their dream. This, however, did not emerge until Jon Bjarnason expressed his opinions on the Norwegian Synod. Before his arrival late in 1873, no one had objected to

---

[2]Numerous discussions with Professor H. Bessason during the years 1978-1979.

[3]*Framfari*, January 18, 1874, p. 3.

[4]*Ibid*.

assistance from the Norwegians because no one had any knowledge of the Norwegian Synod's doctrines. Thorlakson had found the kind of Lutheranism which suited his faith and, bearing in mind the declining influence of the Church in Iceland, he never doubted that the Synod could be of considerable help to the Icelanders, spiritually and economically.[5]

Had Bjarnason never emigrated to North America it is tempting to believe that had employment for the Icelanders in Wisconsin been available they might have settled in accordance with Thorlakson's suggestions. Neither Jon Olafson or Sigtryggur Jonasson expressed any opposition to the Synod until Bjarnason spoke his mind.[6] Bjarnason, in other words, started the controversy through his objections to the Synod's doctrines and carried it further by encouraging the Icelanders in Wisconsin to search for a site elsewhere, where they all could settle as a united ethnic group.[7]

As was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, and indicated in some of the others, public debate on religious disagreement between the pastors was very limited. Many certainly expressed their dislike of the Synod and

---

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jonasson's letters, for example, to Icelandic papers never expressed any concern and Olafsson's letters to Bjarnason similarly never revealed any opinion until May, 1874, after Bjarnason had made public his dissatisfaction with the Synod.

[7] See Chapter II, p. 36.

usually based their arguments on the Synod's attitudes towards matters like slavery, dancing, and interest on money, but they seldom spoke out with theological or religious conviction. The reason for this was probably a lack of sophisticated understanding of such matters and this in turn explains why people hardly ever expressed themselves in print about the entire dispute and why their voices were somewhat unclear at the meetings at Gimli.

This lack of training in religious dogma and in the administration of ecclesiastical affairs can be attributed to the traditions of the Church of Iceland, which had made no allowance for public participation in the governing of its affairs. When they suddenly had to choose between the kind of Lutheranism represented by the Synod and the one practiced in Iceland, their own views of their roles as citizens of a new country took precedence over religious consideration. Both factions would remain Lutheran, and although the Synod's approach differed from the one in Iceland the prospects of its assistance amply compensated for this difference.

Those who felt they needed to adjust to a new, North American way of life considered the Synod as a means by which such an adjustment could be achieved. On the other hand, those who were determined to remain loyal to their Icelandic culture and religious tradition were firmly opposed to any interference from a foreign religious organization. Although Thorlakson had been an active

leader of his countrymen in Wisconsin before 1875, he did not perform a religious service for the majority of them until August, 1876, in New Iceland. This marked the first point at which people sensed what to them must have been a deviant scriptural exposition.[8] But this did not concern them as much as the thought of losing control over their Church and their schools. Thus they did not argue about Thorlakson's literal interpretation of the Bible; their main concern was freedom of language and culture. But did they have any reason for being so worried?

A detached examination of the insinuation from both Bjarnason and Briem that the Synod threatened the participation of the Icelanders in Church and school matters shows that they were overly sceptical of its motives. There is indeed no evidence from the period of Thorlakson's tenure in New Iceland of unsolicited interference on the part of the Synod. Thorlakson undoubtedly followed the procedures of the Synod during his service in Canada; thus his congregations may be said to have been unofficially part of it although the general membership never saw it that way. Being in the Synod's employ, Thorlakson naturally maintained close relations with it and may even have attended some of its conferences and meetings and then only as a concerned individual since his congregations never elected him their official delegate.

---

[8]Thorlakson did organize a small Icelandic congregation in the summer of 1875, following his ordination and there he performed his first divine service for his fellow-countrymen.

The only time they ever sought his assistance in their relations with the Synod was during the time of their request of January, 1878.

The Synod therefore never gained the control in New Iceland that Briem and others had feared. Whether any such possibilities ever existed is really doubtful. After Thorlakson's death in 1882, for example, the Synod's influence among the Icelanders gradually vanished.[9] Briem's continued accusation against the Synod in _Framfari_ were therefore unjustified and although he frequently maintained that he knew of immigrants in the United States who had accepted assistance from the Synod and later found themselves helpless under its power, he never provided any evidence or substantiated his allegations.[10]

Briem's writings on the Synod were often lacking in logical coherence and seemed primarily designed to malign Thorlakson and the Synod. It certainly seems undoubtful if Briem, in his opposition to Thorlakson, ever received any encouragement from Bjarnason; their strategies were quite different. Briem, a quick-tempered man, often reacted spontaneously to views opposing his own and he was reluctant to accept advice from others. He had the

---

[9] In 1885, the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America was founded; in which all Icelandic congregations in North America joined (the congregation in Shawano no longer existed as the majority of the Icelanders had moved to North Dakota).

[10] _Framfari_, May 18, 1879, pp. 2-3.

opportunity to study the Synod and claimed that he had learned enough to criticize it,[11] so any consultation on his part with Bjarnason seems improbable.

Bjarnason, on the other hand, made his statements cleverly and argued them logically. For example, in his Necessary Exhortation, in which he expressed his reasons for opposing the Synod, he never maintained anything without supporting it with examples: various passages from the Bible and scientific facts.[12] The name of Bjarnason's article indicates that what Briem had written, in Bjarnason's opinion, had in no manner clarified the difference of opinions between the pastors. Although Bjarnason never expressed any dislike of Briem, at least not in writing, it may perhaps be suggested that through this article he silently disapproved of his methods.

Others, however, did not hesitate to express their views; for example, Fridjon Fridrikson. Bjarnason later decided to leave the New Iceland colony for his homeland, but in order not to leave his congregations without the services of a pastor he ordained Halldor Briem.[13] In a letter to Bjarnason from Gimli, on December 19, 1880, Fridrikson expressed his dislike of Briem, criticized his

---

[11]Ibid., January 11, 1878, p. 3.

[12]For example in his attempt to prove the Synod wrong in maintaining that the Sun was orbiting the earth Bjarnason discussed Copernikus' discovery and fate.

[13]Halldor Briem graduated from the Theological Seminary in Reykjavik, Iceland, 1875 and emigrated the same year without ordination.

immature conduct and his inability to stir the hearts of the members of his churches. Even though he did not mention Briem's editorship, Fridrikson must have held similar views and possibly exchanged opinions with Bjarnason. This letter, at least, indirectly reflected previous discussions between the writer and the recipient of Briem's position. Bjarnason may indeed have been waiting for a conclusive assessment of his colleague. Fridrikson's comments further emphasize the very shortcomings earlier attributed to Briem.

Even though Halldor Briem advocated unity among the New Icelanders, his contributions had a contrary effect. He appears to have wanted Thorlakson and his strongest supporters to move out of the colony. Prospects of unity were perhaps never good and Thorlakson may also have stood in the way.[14] However, hopes of reconciliation were high at the first meeting which addressed itself to this problem despite differences between the two leading pastors. On the other hand, Briem's articles in Framfari aggravated an already sensitive situation since they were excessively critical of the Synod and its interference in the affairs of the Icelanders.

This chapter has dealt with the origins of a serious religious dispute among the Icelandic immigrants

---

[14]Thorlakson's co-operation in New Iceland was very limited in every respect. For example, it was suggested that both religious groups used the same cemetary but Thorlakson refused. See also other examples in previous chapter.

in America and the thesis has in general traced its development, both in the United States and in New Iceland, Canada. Particular attempts have also been made to determine public reactions to the debate. During its course the majority of the Icelanders realized that before coming to North America their participation in religious affairs had been very limited and that in the absence of meaningful individual contributions their church in the New World could not provide the foundations for an active religious life.

This new awareness undoubtedly had some disturbing effects. In Iceland the general membership of churches had always been essentially passive in religious matters. In the new land the congregations themselves had to contribute to and organize their church, secure the services of pastors, and provide other related amenities. As a result of all this, religion became more important to them than ever before and the disagreement between the pastors undoubtedly contributed to the crystallization of a new religious awareness which in fact marked the beginning of a continuing process that led to renewed religious controversies for years to come.[15]

However, the encounter between Bjarnason and Thorlakson came to an end with the departure of Thorlakson from the colony, in 1879, and Bjarnason's return to Iceland, in 1880. It is now appropriate to examine briefly the

---

[15] See pp. 128-29 of this chapter.

conditions among the Icelanders, both in New Iceland and North Dakota, following the removal of Thorlakson's people to the United States from the colony.

In the beginning the limited qualities of farmlands in Keewatin brought disappointment. However, those who remained in New Iceland after 1879 were soon to see signs of improvement. Despite a wet summer that year, dry spells in August and September made harvest possible.[16] The land improved from year to year as areas of increasing size were ploughed and cultivated. Cattle slowly increased in number and in 1879 beef became part of the settler's diet.[17] After a certain number of the settlers left for North Dakota and when a few signs of improvement had become visible, a sense of relief and guarded optimism swept through New Iceland but only for a short while.

Hopes of better times were dimmed as the winter of 1879-1880 turned out to be unusually cold. In November a major flood in the area destroyed haystacks and large portions of valuable pasture land with the result that a large number of cattle either perished or had to be killed. In the spring of 1880 the farmers had such a late start in the spring that their harvest completely failed.[18] As the summer advanced many of the immigrants lost faith in

---

[16] _Framfari_, October 14, 1879, p. 2.

[17] _Ibid_.

[18] The weather during the summer was also extremely unfavourable, wet and so the land never dried.

the colony and either sought employment in Winnipeg or prepared to move to the Tiger Hills District (this came to be referred to as the Argyle settlement).[19]

Again the future of New Iceland appeared to be bleak. Nonetheless, several people remained in the colony out of pride and loyalty. These took a long range view of existing conditions, hoping that they would gradually learn to come to grips with the land, the lake, and the extremes of the prairie climate.[20] They certainly did and during the next two decades New Iceland gradually became the major Icelandic settlement in North America, many people returning from Dakota or Argyle. A steady stream of immigrants from Iceland also reached the colony.

The Dakota settlers also fell on hard times during their first years; many had been forced to leave their belongings behind as they left New Iceland as payment of the Government Loan[21] but everyone had his share of hardship. The land had to be cleared and broken before any harvest could be expected. The threat of starvation certainly followed them south and had it not been for Thorlakson's tireless efforts to acquire help from his Norwegian friends, the Icelanders would not have survived their first year in North Dakota. He travelled around in Minnesota and Wisconsin

---

[19]The first Icelandic group left New Iceland for Argyle in March, 1881. Many others were to follow and so this new Icelandic settlement gradually was enlarged, both in size and number. Although some returned to New Iceland when conditions there had improved this settlement remained inhabited by many Icelanders.

[20]Kristjansson, _op_. _cit_., p. 128.

[21]_Framfari_, October 24, 1879, p. 1.

seeking assistance for his countrymen. Once again the response from Norwegians was a most generous one. Food, tools and other necessary supplies were sent to Mountain, North Dakota, and gradually this settlement became the largest one among Icelanders in the United States. Many Icelandic immigrants still in Wisconsin gradually moved to the North Dakota settlement. Thorlakson again founded congregations and enacted laws which of course were in complete harmony with the Norwegian Synod.

Tragedy was very much a part of the history of the Icelanders during their first decade in North America. Their dream of an exclusive settlement failed to materialize and although they settled in small homogeneous groups in Canada or the United States, many of them seemed to have accepted the fact of gradual integration into North American society. This problem may have caused considerable anxiety, particularly among those who so vigorously had fought for the establishment of an exclusive settlement. In its last year of publication, 1879,[22] Framfari, edited by Sigtryggur Jonasson, frequently published, for example, articles expressing bitterness and disappointment with the handling of controversial issues in the immediate past. Several sources of the major problems were singled out, with Thorlakson and the Norwegian Synod being the most conspicuous among them.[23]

---

[22]Three issues were published in 1880.

[23]For example, February 8, 1879, July 17, 1879, September 2, 1879 and April 10, 1880.

However, the animosities among the Icelanders gradually decreased. Even Sigtryggur Jonasson admitted defeat and moved from New Iceland to Selkirk. He maintained his business enterprizes in New Iceland and certainly watched over its progress as the years passed. Bjarnason had realized as early as 1878 that the colony could not survive without external support and Halldor Briem, determined as he had appeared, left New Iceland in the spring of 1881.

Who or what, then, is to be blamed for the plight of New Iceland? Was the land not arable? Was it the inexperience of the Icelanders in agriculture? Was it the weather? Was it the controversy? These questions seem endless and the answer to all of them is undoubtedly that all these factors contributed greatly to the problems of the people of New Iceland. The colony was quite isolated from the outside world. There were several Indians to the north of it[24] but hardly anybody else lived near the area. The construction of roads from outside and from within the settlement was very slow,[25] greatly inhibiting all transportation to Winnipeg or Selkirk. The selection of the New Iceland area, it must be recalled, was done in times of desperate need, and although at that time people envisaged several points of advantage, these did not have many beneficial effects during the years in

---

[24]Thorsteinsson, Saga Islendinga i Vesturheimi, op. cit., p. 97.

[25]Kristjanson, op. cit., p. 106.

question. The Icelanders certainly lacked all knowledge in the field of agriculture so their agrarian enterprizes frequently failed.[26] Last, the population became divided into two factions as a result of a religious controversy. This prevented people from working together for the promotion of useful social concerns and the improvement of living conditions. This was to be disastrous for an immigrant community in totally unfamiliar surroundings. In reminiscing about these years, one of the immigrants probably summed up the problem completely when he mentioned the plagues, the frost, the heat, the insects, the poverty, and the homesickness. But he concluded by stating that worst of all was the dispute between the pastors.[27]

It is now appropriate to follow the two pastors a short distance beyond the precincts of New Iceland and to describe briefly how they came to view their stay there in retrospect. In the autumn of 1879, Bjarnason reported to his congregations that he was forced to return to Iceland. The reasons he gave were of an entirely personal nature but there were undoubtedly others as well; for example, the generally difficult economic circumstances in New Iceland. His congregations had been spread throughout

---

[26]Their biggest mistake was that they planted their seed in a waterlogged ground which did not dry. Their efforts to dry it were very little. (See Jonasson's article in Framfari, November 18, 1879.)

[27]Eylands, op. cit., p. 77.

the colony so he had to travel great distances on foot. In addition, he had not received more than a small portion of the fees he had been promised.[28] He left the colony on March 23, 1880.

In his Apologia Pro Vita Sua[29] Bjarnason briefly discussed his first years in North America. He admitted that in the beginning in Wisconsin a new world revealed itself to him through the strong, active independent church. Back in Iceland he had realized that church life there lacked something, but what it was did not occur to him until he became acquainted with the Norwegian Synod. His appreciation, however, gradually yielded to his conviction that its doctrines were too fundamental for his own faith.[30] He maintained that he had hoped he might have come to a different conclusion and at times he thought his own doubts might vanish. This was not to be, so he gave up any thought of becoming a pastor in America. His post at Budstikken in Minneapolis was much to his liking but the call from New Iceland soon terminated it.

As a pastor among his countrymen in Canada he realized what were the principal qualities of Christianity and what were less important. He was convinced that the Lutheran Church had discovered this quality and preserved it through the centuries while various extraneous features had changed. These latter features, such as sermons,

---

[28] Minningarrit, Sera Jon Bjarnason, op. cit., p. 17.

[29] Aramot 1909, pp. 18-56.

[30] Ibid., p. 36.

canonicals and church buildings were, in his opinion, of less significance. In this brief article he mentioned his controversy with Thorlakson and stated, among other things:

> There are many who consider this religious dispute a misfortune, but the blessing was greater than the misfortune or rather the misfortune turned out to be a blessing for the immigrants. The importance of Christendom has probably never in the history of the Icelandic people been pondered as much. We all had to go through that experience.[31]

This quotation needs a brief assessment. Bjarnason was convinced that the controversy was, after all, of considerable benefit to the Icelanders. As far as their faith was concerned, at least they had to consider its values, search for some answers, and eventually make up their minds. Bjarnason was certainly able to see how this controversy had affected them and perhaps what its effects were in the years to come. He was back in Winnipeg in 1884, after four years in Iceland. In the article mentioned above he maintained that this controversy was in fact of the utmost importance.[32] From that time on, he insisted, this small portion of the Icelandic nation began to open its eyes and to examine its role in a new world, which to him was a sign of survival in this country. The people had come from Iceland where, spiritually, they had been between faith and infidelity. Both pastors and laymen had been equally lost; a grey mist rested over their church. In the

---

[31] _Ibid_., p. 43.

[32] _Ibid_., p. 49.

isolation of the district of Keewatin they suddenly saw new light; the difference between faith and infidelity suddenly appeared out of the mist, confusing them at first. But gradually the truth planted itself in their souls and from then on the battle was won.[33] Upon his return to Manitoba in 1884, Bjarnason's first task was the founding of "The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America" in 1885. His dream of uniting all Icelanders[34] in one religious organization thus came true although this unity did not long endure.

In 1891 another controversy among the Icelanders in North America began. This time the Reverend Magnus J. Skaftason[35] withdrew from the Synod, as did four of his congregations in New Iceland. For several years Skaftason had examined the doctrines of Unitarians in Winnipeg and eventually accepted their faith. There was a long debate but Skaftason remained firm in his conviction and did not return to the Icelandic Synod.

Again in 1909 Bjarnason found himself in opposition to another Icelandic pastor, the Reverend Fridrik Bergmann.[36]

---

[33] Ibid.

[34] Thorlakson's congregations in North Dakota happily joined the Icelandic Synod after a brief discussion on the church laws; one of the biggest issues was the rights of women within the churches.

[35] Magnus Skaftason emigrated from Iceland in 1887 upon a request from the congregations in New Iceland.

[36] The Reverend Fridrik Bergmann emigrated at the age of 17 from Iceland in 1875. He attended the Seminary at Decorah from 1876 to 1881, when he graduated. In 1883 he

Bergmann had for some time led a liberal religious movement, The New Theology Movement, among his countrymen in Winnipeg. Bjarnason strongly denounced the teachings of this movement, and following a vicious debate Bergmann was forced to leave the Icelandic Synod.[37] Bjarnason gradually became conservative and in his dispute with Bergmann he ironically found himself in the position of Thorlakson in the early years in New Iceland.[38]

Bjarnason's long and illustrious career came to an end with his death in 1914. Ever since his address in Milwaukee in 1874, he had remained a strong spiritual leader among the Icelanders in North America. In his comments on Bjarnason's life in America Wilhelm Kristjanson concludes:

> He was strong in his faith and he engaged in strenuous controversies first against those he considered reactionary in their religious views later with those whom he denounced as agnostic and enemies of the true faith. Those who stood for freedom of belief viewed him as a conservative in religious matters and a wrathful warrior, but he was highly respected in the community and was revered by his large following.[39]

---

went to Norway where he studied for two years and became a pastor in Manitoba the same year. For many years he was Bjarnason's assistant and good friend but gradually Bergmann's theology became too liberal for Bjarnason, resulting in the above-mentioned dispute.

[37] Minningarrit Hins Evangel. Luth. Kirkjufelags Islendinga i Vesturheimi, op. cit., p. 48.

[38] Bjarnason had, during his dispute with Thorlakson, maintained a tolerant, liberal faith but became the conservative one in his controversy with Bergmann in 1909.

[39] Minningarrit Hins Evangel. Luth. Kirkjufelags Islendinga i Vesturheimi, op. cit., p. 29.

As for Thorlakson, the harships in New Iceland gradually began to affect his health[40] and during his short stay among his people in Dakota he was forced to spend a considerable length of time in bed. Yet whenever he roused, he faithfully attended to his countrymen's needs. Finally in the spring of 1882, 33 years old, he lost his battle against illness. As a result of this illness, Thorlakson wrote nothing about his religious dispute with Bjarnason or about his years in New Iceland.[41] He died in 1882.

However, many Icelanders have described their acquaintance with him and have expressed their views on his character.[42] Fridrik Bergmann probably gave the best account in a speech he made at Mountain, North Dakota, in 1894.[43] He began by accounting briefly for Thorlakson's education in Iceland, his emigration to North America, and his training at Concordia University, Missouri. Then he discussed how his character harmonized with the seriousness at the University and the doctrines of the Missouri Synod and how certain Thorlakson was in his faith once he graduated.

---

[40]In his church register Thorlakson briefly discusses his declining health, stating that ever since 1877 he had suffered from tuberculosis.

[41]Thorlakson's father worte, in 1882, his sons memoirs but does not discuss his son's controversy with Bjarnason.

[42]For example, Jon Bjarnason and Stephan G. Stephanson. Several members of Thorlakson's congregations similarly expressed their appreciation.

[43]The reason for his speech was the unveiling of a monument to Thorlakson at Mountain, North Dakota.

He always was a serious individual and certainly remained so as a pastor, Bergmann continues.[44] This manifested itself both in his services and in his discussions with people, whether on religious matters or not.

Those who exchanged opinions with Thorlakson soon realized that they were talking to a man who was certain that his cause was the right one; a man who had escaped from the doubts which frequently worried many of his Icelandic contemporaries.[45] Thorlakson, Bergmann noted, was always prepared to defend his cause and also to attack those contradicting it. In this manner he was not tolerant; anyone who ever argued with him felt immediately that in his own mind his opinion was the only truth. He always remained calm, however, during any argument and even more so as his opposition grew fiercer.

It is necessary to pause for a moment to examine what Bergmann had stated. Thorlakson's determination during his years in New Iceland is certainly in accordance with Bergmann's views as expressed above. Whether in the public meetings at Gimli or in an article in Framfari, this firm belief that he was always correct appears. If Bjarnason can be accused of having started the controversy, Thorlakson can certainly be blamed for its seriousness. He was never willing to make any concessions as, for example, when he refused to join Bjarnason in a prayer at the first

---

[44] Sameiningin, March 1894-February 1895, p. 169.

[45] Helgason, op. cit., p. 96.

meeting at Gimli and in his determination of excluding Bjarnason as a brother in Christ. Such occurrences certainly did nothing to improve the situation in the colony, but they were indeed quite characteristic of Thorlakson.

Bergmann maintained that it was characteristic for Thorlakson to overemphasize minor points, sometimes even making them fundamental to his arguments. This certainly is quite different from Bjarnason's experience when he claimed that his years in New Iceland taught him the essential truths in Lutheranism as well as what was of less importance.

The two pastors, opponents in the religious controversy, always respected each other and may have remained friends in spite of all. Bjarnason, for example, travelled south to North Dakota before he left for Iceland, and spent some time among his countrymen there. He always thought highly of Thorlakson's faith and his sacrifices for his countrymen in North America. Once he wrote, for example:

> The Reverend Thorlakson participated whole-heartedly in his countrymen's struggle and sacrificed everything for their welfare, both spiritually and physically. To the last day he attended to his vocation with such strength of faith, with such perseverance and patience which only those who know they serve God are able to.[46]

---

[46] _Minningarrit Hins Evangel. Luth. Kirkjufelags Islendinga i Vesturheimi_, _op. cit._, p. 84.

When this controversy among Icelandic immigrants in North America is examined one wonders if it was not inevitable. Most of these thousands of Icelanders, in the 1870s hoped for an exclusive Icelandic settlement. They were convinced that somewhere on this large continent was an area isolated enough to fulfill their dream. Inescapable reasons, however, already mentioned, prevented them from achieving their goal. Nonetheless, the problems during the early years, once overcome, were perhaps after all "a blessing," as Jon Bjarnason once stated. Spread throughout western Canada and the United States, as they later became, they have managed to preserve their language and culture. Two Icelandic newspapers Logberg and Heimskringla, were established in the late 1880s and brought news from both the old country and the various Icelandic settlements in North America. Many of them soon participated in public affairs. In 1896, for example, Sigtryggur Jonasson, was elected to the Manitoba Legislature. On the whole, the history of Icelandic people in North America shows them as hard working, well-educated and generally great contributors to both American and Canadian Societies.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The sources used for this study are mostly in the Icelandic language, available at Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba. These are mostly books, weekly newspapers, monthly periodicals, annuals and various magazines published in Canada ever since 1875. A great deal of unpublished material such as personal letters, petitions and church registers similarly available at Dafoe Library were of utmost value for this thesis. Quotations used in this work are mostly Icelandic and were translated under the supervision of Professor Haraldur Bessason, Head of the Icelandic Department at the University of Manitoba. Similarly titles of Icelandic works had in some cases to be arranged according to the English Alphabet since Modern English does not include some common letters of the Icelandic language.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahlstrom, S.E. (ed.). Theology in America. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merill Co., Inc., 1965.

Bergmann, F.J. Tru og Thekking. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1917.

Bildfell, J.J. (ed.). Jon Bjarnason Rit og Raedur. Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1946.

Bjarnason, Jon. Gudspjallarmal: Predikanir. Reykjavik: Isafold Printing Press, 1900.

Eylands, Valdemar. Islensk Kristni i Vesturheimi. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1977.

________. Lutherans in Canada. Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1945.

Gimli Saga. Gimli: Gimli Women's Institute, 1975.

Helgason, Jon. Kristnisaga Islands. Reykjavik: Felagsprentsmidjan, 1925.

________. Almenn Kristnisaga. Reykjavik: Felagsprentsmidjan, 1912.

Jackson, Thorstina. Saga Islendinga i Nordur Dakota. Winnipeg: The City Printing & Publishing Co., 1926.

Johannesson, Jon. A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth. (Translated by Professor Haraldur Bessason, University of Manitoba), University of Manitoba Press, 1974.

Joakimson, Thorleifur. Brot af Landnamssogu Nyja Islands. Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1919.

Jonsson, Jonas. Saga Islendinga 1820-1874. Reykjavik: Felagsprentsmidjan, Iceland, 1957.

________. Vestan Um Haf. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1921.

________. Hallgrimur Petursson. Reykjavik: Leiftur Iceland, 1947.

Martensson, R. (ed.). Minningarrit Sera Jon Bjarnason. Winnipeg: Columbia Press, 1917.

Mayer, F.E. The Religious Bodies of America. Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1956.

Merkir Islendingar. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1960.

Meyer, Carl Stamm. Pioneers and Friends. Minneapolis: Luther College Press, 1962.

________. Moving Frontiers. Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1965.

Minningarrit Hins Evl. Lutherska Kirkjufelags i Vesturheimi. Winnipeg, 1910.

Morton, W.L. Manitoba. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961.

Nordal, J., & Kristinsson, V. (eds.). Iceland 1966. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1967.

Norlie, O.M. History of the Norwegian People in America. Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1925.

Olason, P.E. Saga Islendinga. Vol. 8. Reykjavik: Gutenberg Press, Iceland.

Palsson, Hjortur. Alaskafor Jons Olafssonar 1874. Reykjavik: Sogufelagid, Iceland, 1975.

Stefansson, J. America i Ljosi Sannleikans. Reykjavik, Iceland, 1927.

Stephanson, S.G. Umhleypingar. Reykjavik: Gutenberg Press, Iceland 1949.

________. Bref og Ritgerdir. Reykjavik: Gutenberg Press, Iceland, 1938-1939.

Teitson, Bjorn. Eignahald og Abud a Jordum i Sudur Thingeyjarsyslu. Reykjavid: Oddi Press, Iceland, 1973.

Thompson, S. Riverton and the Icelandic Settlement. Riverton, Manitoba, 1976.

Thoroddsen, Th. Dr. Petur Petursson Aefisaga. Reykjavik: Gutenberg Press, Iceland, 1953.

Thorsteinson, Th.Th. _Aevintyrid Fra Islandi til Brasiliu._ Reykjavik, Iceland, 1938.

________. _Saga Islendinga i Vesturheimi._ Vol. 1, 2, 3, 4. Reykjavik: 1940-1945.

________. _Vestmenn._ Reykjavik, Iceland, 1935.

Walters, Thorstine. _Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America._ Fargo: North Dakota, 1953.

Werbeck, W. (ed.). _Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart._ Stuttgart, Germany, 1960.

Articles - Periodicals

Bergmann, F.G. "Sera Pall Thorlakson," _Sameiningin_, No. XI, (Winnipeg, 1895), 165-170.

________. "Sigtryggur Jonasson," _Almanak_, (Winnipeg, 1907), 21-43.

________. "Saga Islendinga i Winnipeg," _Almanak_, No. I, (Winnipeg, 1906), 52-86.

________. "Landnam Islendinga i Nordur Dakota," _Almanak_, (Winnipeg, 1902), 17-83.

________. "Saga Islendinga i Winnipeg," _Almanak_, No. II, (Winnipeg, 1903), 34-76.

________. "Saga Islendinga i Winnipeg," _Almanak_, No. III, (Winnipeg, 1903), 48-103.

Bjarnason, Jon. "Apologia Pro Vita Sua," _Aramot_, No. V, (Winnipeg, 1909), 18-56.

Frjettir fra Islandi 1871-1877.

Jonasson, Sigtryggur. "John Taylor og Elizabeth Taylor," _Syrpa_, No. IV, (Winnipeg, 1920), 97-102.

Jonsson, B. "Addragandi og Upphaf Vesturferda af Islandi a Nitjandu Old," _Andvari_ 1975, (Reykjavik, Iceland, 1975), 3-23.

Jonsson, Bjorn. "Landnam Islendinga i Argyle-Bygd," _Almanak_, No. VII, (Winnipeg, 1901), 23-36.

Magnusson, G. "Landnam Islendings i Nyja Islandi," _Almanak_, (Winnipeg, 1899), 24-52.

Petursson, R. "Upphaf Vesturferda og Thjodminningarhatidin," Timarit Thjodraeknisfelags Islendinga, (Winnipeg, 1933), 66-78.

Thorgrimson, A. "Islenskt Thjoderni Vestan Hafs," Syrpa, No. VIII-IX, (Winnipeg, 1920), 232-243.

Thorlakson, Pall. "Fyrstu ar Islendinga i Dakota," Almanak, No. VII, (Winnipeg, 1901), 37-51.

Weekly Newspapers

Budstikken. 1874-1877. (Minneapolis).

Framfari. 1877-1880. (New Iceland).

Gongu-Hrolfur. 1873. (Iceland).

Heimskringla. 1898-1913. (Winnipeg).

Isafold. 1874-1883. (Iceland).

Leifur. 1883-1886. (Winnipeg).

Logberg. 1895-1914. (Winnipeg).

Nordanfari. 1864-1885. (Iceland).

Nordlingur. 1875-1882. (Iceland).

Thjodolfur. 1871-1884. (Iceland).

Letters, Reports and Other Published Sources

Bref Matthiasar Jochumsonar. Letters to Jon Bjarnason. Akureyri: Oddur Bjornsson Press, Iceland, 1935.

Jonasson, Sigtryggur. The Early Icelandic Settlements in Canada. An essay on Icelandic settlements in Canada. Winnipeg: Manitoba Free Press Co., 1901.

Nya Island i Kanada. Two reports on the Icelandic Settlement in New Iceland. Ottawa: 1875.

Skyrslur um Landshagi 1861-1875. Vols. 3-5. Denmark: S.L. Mollers, Copenhagen, 1875.

Unpublished Material

Fridrikson, Fridjon. Letters to Jon Bjarnason 1874-1881.

Jon Bjarnason Clipping File. A collection of letters, articles to and by Bjarnason.

Motmaelaskjal Baenda ur Arnesbyggd. A farmers' protest against H. Briem's accusations against P. Thorlakson.

Olafson, Jon. Letters to Jon Bjarnason 1873-1875.

Thorlakson, Pall. Letters to Jon Bjarnason 1873.