

**Pilgrims to Thule:**  
**Religion and the Supernatural in Travel Literature about Iceland**

**Matthias Egeler**

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

**Abstract**

*The depiction of religion, spirituality, and/or the ‘supernatural’ in travel writing, and more generally interconnections between religion and tourism, form a broad and growing field of research in the study of religions. This contribution presents the first study in this field that tackles tourism in and travel writing about Iceland. Using three contrasting pairs of German and English travelogues from the 1890s, the 1930s, and the 2010s, it illustrates a number of shared trends in the treatment of religion, religious history, and the supernatural in German and English travel writing about Iceland, as well as a shift that happened in recent decades, where the interests of travel writers seem to have undergone a marked change and Iceland appears to have turned from a land of ancient Northern mythology into a country ‘where people still believe in elves’. The article tentatively correlates this shift with a change in the Icelandic self-representation, highlights a number of questions arising from both this shift and its seeming correlation with Icelandic strategies of tourism marketing, and notes a number of perspectives in which Iceland can be a highly relevant topic for the research field of religion and tourism.*

**Introduction**

England and Germany have long shared a deep fascination with Iceland. In spite of Iceland’s location far out in the North Atlantic and the comparative inaccessibility that this entailed, travellers wealthy enough to afford the long overseas passage started flocking to the country even in the first half of the nineteenth century. In tandem with the rise of a regular Icelandic tourism, a standard circuit of tourist attractions already became established by the early decades of the nineteenth century, which visitors from both countries equally frequented, including sights such as the Geysir and the historic assembly site of Þingvellir, which became a ‘must’ and were (and are) visited by virtually every traveller coming to Iceland.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lerner 2015:141–144.

This development of regular tourism and a regular tourist route was accompanied by the creation of a vast body of travelogues that recounted the traveller's experience in Iceland.<sup>2</sup> This literature claims to describe the country visited by its authors, but of course these texts, being predominantly based on short-term visits of generally not more than a summer season at most, are no in-depth ethnographies. Rather, their focus is on the specific travel experience of the respective writers, and thus it comes as little surprise that these books quite strongly reflect the preconceptions of their various authors. In much travel writing, Iceland, to a large extent, seems to function as a foil of the interests and preconceptions of the men and (less often) women visiting the island. This means that travelogues are probably not the best source if one wants to understand Iceland, but they are one of the most interesting corpora of material available if one wants to understand how Iceland was and is viewed by the people visiting it.

The following discussion, therefore, will not aim, nor could it aim, to gain insights into Iceland as such. Rather, I will attempt to give an overview of how Iceland – or more specifically: Icelandic religion and religious history, and the supernatural in Icelandic folklore – were viewed from the outside. The question here will be: what mythology was projected onto Iceland, and how did this projection change over time?

Projecting mythologies on faraway countries, including northern ones, has a long tradition. Since the Middle Ages, Iceland had been identified with the *ultima Thule* of classical Greek and Roman geography: the last inhabited country in the farthest North. This *ultima Thule* in some accounts took on traits of a mythical land in whose description elements of the geographical reality of the Far North were intermingled with elements of myth. In one of the extant versions of the geographical treatise *De mirabilibus mundi* of the Roman writer Gaius Iulius Solinus, Thule is described as an island five days' sailing beyond Orkney which is vast and rich in long-lasting fruit (*larga et diutina pomona copiosa*); its inhabitants can live off milk in summer and off this fruit in winter. Thus, the people living in Thule seem to be able to live the whole year off the land without much need for the labour which elsewhere is necessary to make a living (*De mirabilibus* 22.17 [9]).<sup>3</sup> This quite remarkably misses the reality of living in a northern environment, but it strikingly mirrors the Graeco-Roman geographical myth of the Islands of the Blessed, which were imagined as a paradisiacal island world of utmost fertility

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<sup>2</sup> Important publications on travel literature about Iceland are Lerner 2015; Biró 2011; Schaer 2007; Willhardt 2000; Sumarliði Ísleifsson 1996. Cf. also Bauer, in press.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. by Brodersen 2014.

generally located somewhere to the west in the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>4</sup> In Solinus, it seems, the distant island of Thule had in effect become an island of myth: a variant version of the Islands of the Blessed.

Iceland had not yet been discovered when Solinus was writing in the fourth century AD; but after its discovery, and later throughout the Middle Ages, Iceland was identified with Thule,<sup>5</sup> and just like Thule, this northern island seems to have become a kind of screen on which ideas about remote mythologies could be projected. Drawing on a number of examples taken from English and German travel writing, the present article will pursue how this was done from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. It will highlight some main lines and fundamental changes in the perception of Icelandic religion, religious history, and the supernatural in Icelandic folklore. This, arguably, will not tell us anything much about Iceland as such; but it will allow a glimpse of the changes in what European travellers hoped to find in this part of the Far North, or to put it differently: of the fascinations and desires which they articulated through the medium of travelogue.

An engagement with religion and the supernatural is a common phenomenon in travel literature. In the fifth century BC, the *Histories* of the Greek traveller-historian Herodotus already oftentimes combined their author's travelling experience with mythological tales, and Pausanias's *Description of Greece* from the second century AD is, more than anything else, a guide to the sanctuaries, myths, and legendary sites of Greece during the time of its Roman occupation. Likewise, in modern travelogues, religion and the supernatural have a central, if strikingly varied,<sup>6</sup> position – irrespective of whether one may think of, say, the pervasive encounters with local sanctuaries and religious history in William Dalrymple's *In Xanadu* (1989) or of the foundational role of Buddhism for Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978). This being so, the role of religion, religious history, and the supernatural in travelogues has time and again been studied. In the most recent years, to name but a few examples, such research has been undertaken by Catherina Wenzel on the early modern travel report of Pietro della Valles (1586-1652)<sup>7</sup> and on Aby Warburg's classic text *Schlangenritual: Ein Reisebericht* ("Snake Ritual: A Travel Report", 1923);<sup>8</sup> Maren Eckart has presented research on accounts of

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<sup>4</sup> On this mythological complex, cf. Egeler 2017b.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., *Landnámabók* (ed. by Jakob Benediktsson 1968) chapter SH1.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Norman 2016:483.

<sup>7</sup> Wenzel 2017a.

<sup>8</sup> Wenzel 2017b.

pilgrimage on the Way of Saint James by female pilgrims;<sup>9</sup> and Asha Sen has published on postcolonial travel writing and spirituality.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the relationship between religion and tourism more generally has in recent years also found increasing interest in the scholarly discourse. The work of Michael Stausberg in particular has been fundamental in promoting tourism as an object of study in the history of religions, as he has produced both fundamental general research and surveys on the topic<sup>11</sup> as well as, most recently and in collaboration with Knut Aukland, work on religion in tourism specifically in China and India.<sup>12</sup> Yvonne Pröbstle has studied spiritual elements in ‘cultural tourism’,<sup>13</sup> and other topics that have been explored in recent years include the touristic-spiritual landscapes created around the Way of Saint James and the use of Old Norse mythology for promoting tourism in the Harz mountains in eastern Germany.<sup>14</sup> Since 2013, the Dublin Institute of Technology has even been publishing a journal specifically dedicated to the topic of religious tourism, the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*.<sup>15</sup> For Iceland, however, this subject area has remained entirely unexplored thus far. Thus, this contribution will present a first attempt at approaching religion and the supernatural in travelogues about Iceland. It hopes both to show that interesting trends can be made out in travel writing about Iceland, and to ensure that this literature about the North takes its due place in the emerging scholarly discourse about religion and tourism. However, the nature of the present study as very much a first attempt, as *prolegomena*, entails that its conclusions in many cases will not so much be conclusions, strictly speaking, but rather consist in highlighting questions that deserve further study. I hope the reader will take this as an incentive to further research rather than as a point to be criticised.

Given the sheer number of travelogues about Iceland that have been published since the early nineteenth century (and in fact even before, though before that the most important authors were Scandinavian), no attempt could be made to present a survey of the corpus of travel

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<sup>9</sup> Eckart 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Sen 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Stausberg 2011; Stausberg 2010; Stausberg 2008. For a recent short general survey see also Norman 2016, who even in 2016 still concludes (p. 487) that “religion and tourism is surprisingly understudied” and “demands further scholarly attention”.

<sup>12</sup> Stausberg and Aukland 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Pröbstle 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Egeler 2016; Egeler 2017a.

<sup>15</sup> *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, <https://arrow.dit.ie/ijrtp/about.html>, accessed 28/12/2018.

literature about Iceland as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Rather, the discussion will be restricted to selected examples, which can be taken as representative of wider trends. To underline both the density of travel writing about Iceland in German and English and the close interconnectedness of these two strands of travel writing, the examples selected are three parallel pairs of travelogues: from the 1890s, the travelogue of Bernhard Kahle on the one hand and the co-authored book by William Gershom Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson on the other, who accidentally met in the Hótel Island in Reykjavík in 1897; from the 1930s, the two travelogues of Wystan Hugh Auden, Louis MacNeice and Otto Rahn, whose travel groups met in Hólar; and from the 2010s the accounts of a whole year spent in Reykjavík by Tina Bauer and Sarah Moss, who don't mention meeting but, spending the same whole year in Reykjavík, and with Reykjavík being what it is, must have. These three pairs of texts will illustrate a number of shared trends in the treatment of religion, religious history, and the supernatural in German and English travel writing about Iceland, as well as a marked shift that happened in the last decades, when writers' interests in this topic seem to have narrowed down from a broad engagement with the Icelandic protestant Church, its Viking Age religious history, and the supernatural in Icelandic folklore to a much more limited fascination with the topos of Iceland as a country 'where people still believe in elves'.

### **11 June 1897, Hótel Island, Reykjavík**

After his arrival in Iceland in the early days of June of the year 1897, Bernhard Kahle, a German scholar of Scandinavian languages and literatures, took lodgings at the Hótel Island in Reykjavík, one of the very few such establishments then available on the island. A couple of days into his stay, he noted:

Heut kamen nun noch ein paar Engländer dazu, von denen einer mit einem Isländer zusammen, Dr. Stefánsson, eine Reise durch Island macht. Er ist Maler und beabsichtigt, die historisch wichtigen Stätten des Landes aufzusuchen, und will dann ein Buch herausgeben, zu dem Dr. St. den Text schreiben wird.<sup>17</sup>

(Now today a few Englishmen joined us, one of whom is undertaking a journey through Iceland together with an Icelander, Dr. Stefánsson. He is a painter and intends to visit the historically

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<sup>16</sup> For broad general surveys of Icelandic travel literature, cf. Willhardt 2000 and Sumarliði Ísleifsson 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Kahle 1900:36–37.

significant places of the country, and then wants to edit a book, the text for which Dr. St. will write.)

This ‘Englishman’ whom Kahle mentions meeting was none other than William Gershom Collingwood, who would indeed publish the travel book that he and his companion Jón Stefánsson had announced to Kahle. This travel book, *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland* (1899), co-written by Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson,<sup>18</sup> was to become the great classic of nineteenth-century British travel writing on Iceland,<sup>19</sup> whereas Kahle’s own *Ein Sommer auf Island* (“A Summer in Iceland”; 1900) is now largely forgotten.

Irrespective of their very different literary success, in terms of their backgrounds and interests these authors had much in common. All three of them were academics. Collingwood was the personal secretary and biographer of the immensely influential John Ruskin as well as a noted antiquarian in his own right, and later in his life he became Professor of Fine Arts at Reading University.<sup>20</sup> Jón Stefánsson, among other academic activities, worked at the British Museum and for a while lectured on Icelandic and Danish at King’s College, London.<sup>21</sup> Both men were early and indeed founding members of the *Viking Club*,<sup>22</sup> which as the *Viking Society for Northern Research* is, to this day, the foremost Anglophone association of researchers working on topics of the Scandinavian Middle Ages, and they collaborated in publishing an English translation of the medieval Icelandic *Kormáks saga* (*The Life and Death of Cormac the Skald*, 1902).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Kahle, while as an academic not quite the same calibre as Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson, soon after his journey to Iceland became supernumerary

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<sup>18</sup> The division of labour between the two authors that Kahle mentions in the above quotation – Collingwood being in charge of the illustrations and Jón Stefánsson writing the text – is also stated by another contemporary: Eiríkur Benedikz 1946–1953:365. In spite of this distribution of labour, the modern Anglophone reception of the book written by Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson tends to speak only of Collingwood and often does not even mention Jón Stefánsson, suggesting a remarkable arrogance which a priori assumes that a non-English collaborator of an Englishman – a ‘native’ – cannot have played any significant role in their common undertaking (e.g. Moss 2012:4; Auden and MacNeice 1937:60; 1967:58).

<sup>19</sup> On Collingwood and his contemporaries cf. Townend 2009; specifically on Jón Stefánsson cf. Eiríkur Benedikz 1946–1953. The letters that Collingwood wrote during his journey to Iceland are published in Lea and Lea 2013. The influence of this book reverberates all the way through to the present day; recent travel- and book-projects inspired by the *Pilgrimage* are Einar Falur Ingólfsson 2010 and Emily Lethbridge’s *The Saga-Steads of Iceland: A 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Pilgrimage* (<http://sagasteads.blogspot.com/>, accessed 22/12/2018). Both later examples of British travel writing about Iceland discussed here make reference to Collingwood: Auden and MacNeice 1937:60; 1967:58; Moss 2012:4.

<sup>20</sup> Lea and Lea 2013:6.

<sup>21</sup> Eiríkur Benedikz 1946–1953:365.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Townend 2009:228; Eiríkur Benedikz 1946–1953:364.

<sup>23</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1902.

professor at the University of Heidelberg, where he worked on Scandinavian literature.<sup>24</sup> So all three men approached Iceland with a highly informed, essentially (in the cases of Kahle and Jón Stefánsson) or almost (in the case of Collingwood) professional interest – something that was characteristic of much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travel writing about Iceland.

The two books by Collingwood/Jón Stefánsson and Kahle are, at first glance, very different in character. While the former is a lavishly produced art volume featuring more than 150 illustrations of Icelandic landscapes and historical sites, many of them in colour, Kahle's book is a small-format, chatty travel account. As contemporaries with similar backgrounds, however, these three men's two books also show close parallels. Both volumes have a strong focus on providing the reader with cultural and historical background knowledge, and this includes aspects of Icelandic religion, religious history, and Icelandic attitudes to the supernatural. More specifically, religion and the supernatural are prominently present in both volumes in three forms:

- encounters with the Icelandic Church, its history, and contemporary Christianity;
- encounters with sites connected with tales about the supernatural in Icelandic folklore;
- and encounters with sites that the Old Norse-Icelandic literature of the Middle Ages connects with pre-Christian (Viking Age) religion and mythology, and with the putative remains of pre-Christian cult buildings.

In Kahle's *Ein Sommer auf Island*, these three aspects of an interest in religion, religious history, and the supernatural take on as broad a spectrum of forms as one could expect from the topic.<sup>25</sup> To pick just a few examples, Kahle – not without some teasing and ironic distance – describes encounters with missionaries of a Christian fundamentalist group on a mission to save the souls of the Icelanders,<sup>26</sup> and a slightly riotous evening meeting of the Reykjavík branch of the Salvation Army.<sup>27</sup> He gives an account of a Lutheran Protestant Sunday morning service he attends in the cathedral of Reykjavík, noting lots of detail and commenting on the superficially Catholic-looking elements he perceived in the Icelandic manner of celebrating a divine

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<sup>24</sup> Kahle 1900, title page.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed survey of the pertinent passages of his book see the Appendix, Table 1.

<sup>26</sup> Kahle 1900:4.

<sup>27</sup> Kahle 1900:37.

service.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Kahle generally is fond of recounting meetings with members of the clergy, whose hospitality he enjoyed in many places during his journey, and describes a range of countryside churches. In doing so, however, he does not always stop himself from making condescending comments on the quality of the art he sees there; the altar piece in the church of Möðruvellir, for example, he judges to be “ziemlich mässig” (“quite mediocre”).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, he does not always seem to approve of the way in which he finds countryside churches being used: in Stórinúpur, he not only complains about the (in his opinion) taste- and worthlessness of the art, but also about the clothing and saddles that are scattered across the floor of the church.<sup>30</sup> Yet while Kahle is consistently unimpressed by Icelandic material culture, he shows a marked enthusiasm for Icelandic Christian spiritual poetry, which he repeatedly makes much effort to introduce to his readers, spending much space on the biographies of and quoting whole poems by Valdimar Briem, Hallgrímur Pétursson, and Matthías Jochumsson.<sup>31</sup>

Literature and storytelling generally are close to Kahle’s heart, and thus he also spends many pages recounting stories from Icelandic folklore. Here, revenants, magicians, ghosts, and trolls feature large. Thus, for instance, he includes a full translation of a long story about the important waterfall of Selfoss, black magic, a woman turning into a troll, and how the river Öxará got its name (which is the most important river flowing through the historical and political heart of Iceland in Þingvellir).<sup>32</sup> Kahle also summarises a story about omens presaging the loss of a ship at sea;<sup>33</sup> a tale about the life and death of a kindly troll who wants to be buried where he can hear church bells ringing;<sup>34</sup> and translates several stories involving a *draugur*, i.e. a dead corpse revived to do the bidding of a sorcerer.<sup>35</sup>

It is worth noting here that, while Kahle’s interest in folktales of the supernatural is pervasive, ‘elves’ or ‘fairies’ hardly feature at all. In fact, there are only two short mentionings of this type of beings. The one consists in a footnote(!) placed at the end of a folk story about outlaws living in a hidden valley, which notes that in another version of the tale the outlaws

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<sup>28</sup> Kahle 1900:42.

<sup>29</sup> Kahle 1900:193.

<sup>30</sup> Kahle 1900:86.

<sup>31</sup> E.g., Kahle 1900:83–85, 156–160, 211–215.

<sup>32</sup> Kahle 1900:60–63.

<sup>33</sup> Kahle 1900:139.

<sup>34</sup> Kahle 1900:99–100.

<sup>35</sup> Kahle 1900:247–251, 255–257.



have become elves.<sup>36</sup> The other appearance of elves is the following short remark, consisting of a single sentence inserted into an account of how Kahle, accompanied by a local farmer, rode to Húsavík:

Wir kommen zuerst an einigen Felsen vorbei, in denen – wie man früher glaubte, sagte der Bauer – Huldufólk wohnte.

(First we pass a number of rocks, in which – as the people used to believe, said the farmer – *Huldufólk* lived.)

So while Kahle spends many pages on tales of ghosts and trolls, the *huldufólk* or ‘hidden people’/‘elves’/‘fairies’ are barely mentioned. They literally appear only in passing, and even then only as a belief of the past.

The deeper past of the Middle Ages features most prominently in Kahle’s account through his recurrent references to characters and occurrences from medieval Icelandic saga literature and skaldic poetry. These references are not restricted to, but very much include the supernatural in this literature. Thus, Kahle recounts the fight of the saga-hero Grettir against monsters living in a cave hidden beneath the waters of the waterfall Goðafoss;<sup>37</sup> later, he tells of the death of this hero through witchcraft;<sup>38</sup> he talks about the burial of the early Christian settler Unnr and about how her Christian burial place later on became a site of pagan worship;<sup>39</sup> he quotes in full translation two poems by the late pagan skaldic poet Egill Skallagrímsson, both of which are deeply infused with pre-Christian mythology;<sup>40</sup> and more than once he muses about the interdependence between pre-Christian Icelandic mythology and the peculiarities of the Icelandic natural environment.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Kahle adds a third layer of religious history and ideas about the supernatural to his account: not only is he interested in the Church and its clergy and the supernatural folklore of the nineteenth century, but also the supernatural of the pre-Christian period of Iceland features large.

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<sup>36</sup> Kahle 1900:202 (note).

<sup>37</sup> Kahle 1900:224–226.

<sup>38</sup> Kahle 1900:262.

<sup>39</sup> Kahle 1900:269–270.

<sup>40</sup> Kahle 1900:143–152.

<sup>41</sup> Kahle 1900:132–133, 236–237.

All three aspects – Christianity, the supernatural in nineteenth-century folklore, and the supernatural of the time of the medieval sagas – also feature prominently in W.G. Collingwood’s and Jón Stefánsson’s *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steeds of Iceland*. Their priorities are a bit different, however. While in Kahle’s account the sagas and their time took an (if prominent) second place behind the present of the nineteenth century, the *Pilgrimage* inverts this hierarchy and places the sagas centre-piece.<sup>42</sup> Already in their preface, the authors of the *Pilgrimage* describe the aim of their book as being “a picture book to illustrate the sagas of Iceland”,<sup>43</sup> and while the *Pilgrimage* is much more than that, this is what it is at its core: a lavish art volume whose 187 pages are illustrated by 151 illustrations plus a map and frontispiece. Thirteen of the illustrations were even printed as full-page colour plates.

The main purpose of these illustrations is to give the reader an impression of what the landscapes look like in which the medieval Icelandic sagas are set.<sup>44</sup> The text of the book works in tandem with the illustrations, providing retellings of the relevant saga narratives and commenting on where present-day Icelanders locate their happenings. In introducing the landscapes of the sagas, both the text and the illustrations of the *Pilgrimage* touch on a wide variety of (broadly speaking) religious and/or supernatural themes. For instance, there is a large-scale illustration of the alleged burial-mound of the saga-hero Gunnar of Hlíðarendi together with a retelling of the story of his death, of how one night the mound was seen opening and the dead hero spoke to the men who were to avenge him, and of how those men then rode off to do murderous deeds, accompanied by an omen indicating that their undertaking was favoured by the god Odin.<sup>45</sup> Generally, burial mounds of saga-heroes feature prominently, including those of the “were-wolf” Kveldúlfr,<sup>46</sup> of Skallgrímr (the father of the poet Egill Skallagrímsson mentioned above),<sup>47</sup> of Kǫrtan,<sup>48</sup> or of the revenant Þórólfr Twist-Foot (buried at Bægifót’s Head, “Twist-Foot’s Head”).<sup>49</sup> The book’s narration in the text accompanying the pictures generally gives much background from medieval literature, such as a long account of how

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<sup>42</sup> For a detailed survey of religion, religious history, and the supernatural in the *Pilgrimage* cf. the Appendix, Table 2.

<sup>43</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:v.

<sup>44</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:v.

<sup>45</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:28–29 with fig. 25.

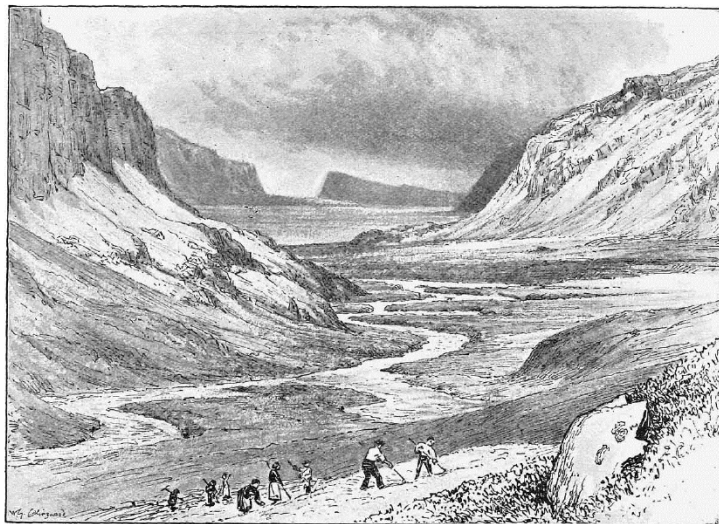
<sup>46</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:56–57 with fig. 48.

<sup>47</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:58 with fig. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:59 with fig. 51.

<sup>49</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:103 with fig. 88.

Þórólfr Twist-Foot haunted the area where he was buried after his death, and of how he came back from the dead in the shape of a bull.<sup>50</sup> Another prominent theme are saga-age magic and sorcery; one example is the witch Þordís after whom the “Seeress’s Mountain” Spákonufell is named, which is represented by a picture as well as described.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, alleged sites of pre-Christian worship also feature large. The longest single section dealing with the locations of an alleged pre-Christian cult probably is the discussion of the peninsula of Þórsnes and the surroundings of the “Holy Mountain” Helgafell, which is richly illustrated with a whole sequence of views of the various purported ancient sacred sites.<sup>52</sup> Yet other ‘cult sites’ get individual portraits as well, such as the alleged ruins of a temple at Ljárskógar,<sup>53</sup> or the alleged altar-stone of the saga-hero Bersi (Fig. 1).<sup>54</sup>



Valafall to left hand: Tjaldanes, Hvol, Brekka: Bersi's Altar-stone.

121. LOOKING DOWN THE VALLEY FROM BESSA-TUNGA:

Fig. 1: Fig. 121 (p. 143) from W.G. Collingwood's and Jón Stefánsson's *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland* (1899): an alleged pagan altar-stone in the landscape of an Icelandic valley.

Icelandic Christianity plays a role in the *Pilgrimage* on several levels. The encounters with priests that had been so prominent in Kahle's narrative are present but fewer, as Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson focus on historical background over travel narrative, only

<sup>50</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:102–104.

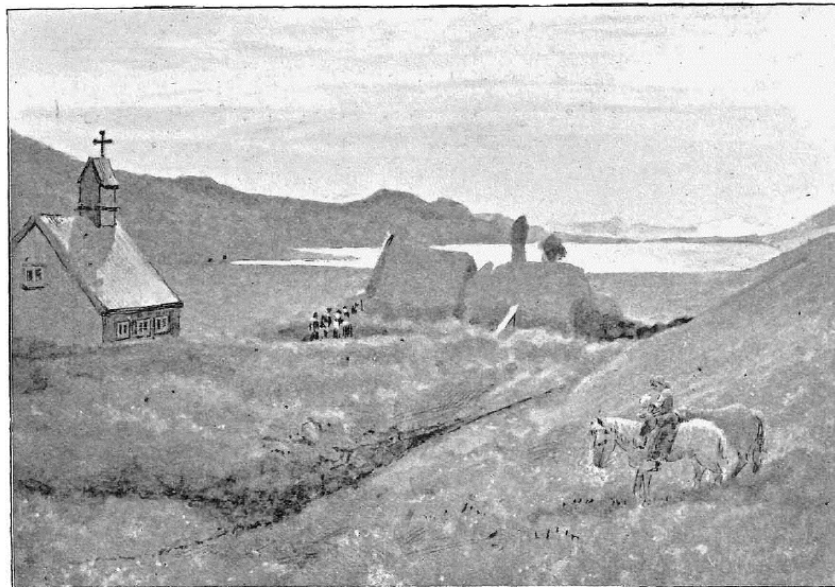
<sup>51</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:114 with fig. 98.

<sup>52</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:82–100 with figs 72–87.

<sup>53</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:129 with fig. 111.

<sup>54</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:143 with fig. 121.

interspersing elements of actual travel description here and there to lend colour to their narration. Even so, churches, parsonages, and the occasional helpful parson keep being mentioned.<sup>55</sup> In a historical perspective, churches and the Church form part of the narrative of the *Pilgrimage* as early Christian settlers and the conversion to Christianity in the year 999/1000 are central topics of medieval Icelandic saga literature, and as such in fact they belong to the core topics of the *Pilgrimage*: in this book, Þingvellir, where the conversion of Iceland to Christianity took place,<sup>56</sup> or the alleged grave of the first woman who became a nun in Iceland,<sup>57</sup> are just as important as the burial-mounds of pagan heroes. Furthermore, in the contemporary landscape that Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson were travelling through, church buildings were landmarks which were impossible to overlook. Correspondingly, churches recur time and again in the illustrations of the *Pilgrimage*: eleven of the prospects painted by Collingwood show ecclesiastical buildings. In fact, churches often form central elements of the composition (Fig. 2).



103. VATNSHORN IN HAUKADAL.

Fig. 2: Fig. 103 (p. 119) from W.G. Collingwood's and Jón Stefánsson's *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steeds of Iceland* (1899): the church of Vatnshorn dominates the view.

Just like Kahle, Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson also had an interest in the Icelandic folklore of their day, though a somewhat less marked one. They mention folklore such as a

<sup>55</sup> See the Appendix, Table 2.

<sup>56</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:9–10 with figs 8–14 (pp. 11–16).

<sup>57</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:92–93 with fig. 81.

tradition about how a clergyman predicted his own death,<sup>58</sup> places named after giants,<sup>59</sup> places connected with saga-incidents by popular tradition,<sup>60</sup> how a mountainside was devastated by the destructive gaze of a sorcerer,<sup>61</sup> or how a certain field was considered to be too sacred to be mown.<sup>62</sup>

In spite of this interest in folklore, and just as in Kahle's book, elves or fairies do not play much of a role in the *Pilgrimage*. They only make one single appearance when Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson discuss the church at Breiðabólstaður: there, they mention that the chalice and paten of this church were widely believed to have miraculous powers, which was thought to be the case because they at some point were stolen by the elves who used them to celebrate their own mass, or (according to others) who had given them as presents. As Collingwood finds these liturgical instruments to be of particularly outstanding workmanship, he also illustrates them (Fig. 3).<sup>63</sup> This is the only appearance of an Icelandic fairy belief in the *Pilgrimage*.



Fig. 3: Fig. 24a (p. 27) from W.G. Collingwood's and Jón Stefánsson's *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland* (1899): the "fairy chalice" from the church of Breiðabólstaður.

<sup>58</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:6.

<sup>59</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:38, 76.

<sup>60</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:62, 86.

<sup>61</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:118.

<sup>62</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:141.

<sup>63</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:27 with fig. 24.

### Summer 1936, the school house (probably), Hólar

In 1936, the two modernist poets Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973) and Louis MacNeice (1907–1963) spent their summer travelling in Iceland in order to write a travel book which was to become another classic of British travel writing, even though (or because) it broke with most conventions of the genre:<sup>64</sup> instead of presenting a continuous first-person account of a journey and its happenings, the volume consists of various letters in prose and verse addressed to a number of historical and contemporary persons, most prominently the long-dead Lord Byron. To a large part, these letters are only tangentially related to being in Iceland, and they are interspersed with (primarily funny) quotations anthologised from a broad range of travelogues and sundry other materials. The latter include anything from warnings against Icelandic soups (deemed to be “very unfortunate”)<sup>65</sup> to an excerpt from a parish register. While visiting the old episcopal see at Hólar, where they seem to have taken lodgings in the school house, Auden and MacNeice met with a group of Nazi grandees on a tour of Iceland:

Great excitement here because Goering’s brother and a party are expected this evening. Rosenberg is coming too. The Nazis have a theory that Iceland is the cradle of the Germanic culture. Well, if they want a community like that of the sagas they are welcome to it. I love the sagas, but what a rotten society they describe, a society with only the gangster virtues.

I saw Goering for a moment at breakfast next morning, and we exchanged politeness. He didn’t look in the least like his brother, but rather academic.<sup>66</sup>

This German travelling party had a writer among its ranks who, at the time, enjoyed a certain fame within the leading echelons of the NS regime: the luckless Otto Rahn (1904–1939).<sup>67</sup> Rahn was to use this visit to Iceland as the basis for the concluding chapters of a travelogue he published in 1937, the same year in which Auden and MacNeice published their *Letters from Iceland*. So again, as it had been the case in the Hôtel Island in June 1897, English and German travel writers met while travelling in Iceland to research a travel book. That neither Rahn nor Auden and MacNeice mention each other by name in spite of having shared accommodation,

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<sup>64</sup> For biographical overviews see *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon Online* ([www.kll-online.de](http://www.kll-online.de), accessed 07/12/2018), s.v. “Auden, Wystan Hugh”; “MacNeice, Louis”.

<sup>65</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:42; 1967:40.

<sup>66</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:119; 1967:117.

<sup>67</sup> For a biographical overview, on which the following is based, cf. Lange 1999; Franz 2009:492–538. Cf. also the summary account, which puts special focus on the later reception of Rahn’s biography, in Egeler 2019:89–101, and Kurlander 2017:162–163, 173–176, 186–187.

an objective, and probably a meal, reflects the ideological gulf that had opened up between Britain and Germany in the forty years since Kahle had met Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson.

Early on in life, Otto Rahn had become obsessed with the medieval heretic movement of the Cathars and the legends about the Holy Grail.<sup>68</sup> He came to believe that the religion of the Cathars essentially was a worship of the Holy Grail (which Rahn believed was real and had been in the possession of the Cathars), and that the Cathar fortress of Montségur in the French Pyrenees should be identified with the Grail Castle of the thirteenth-century epic *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach.<sup>69</sup> In 1933, Rahn published his first book *Kreuzzug gegen den Gral* (“Crusade against the Grail”), in which he sought to establish this connection between the Cathars and the Grail. While none of his arguments hold up against scholarly scrutiny, this book brought Rahn to the attention of high-ranking ideologues of the NS regime and set in motion a string of events which led to Rahn becoming an officer of the SS and a member of the personal staff of the *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler.<sup>70</sup> Through these connections, he became a member of the party of SS-men which Auden and MacNeice met in Hólar.<sup>71</sup> After his return to Germany, Rahn finished his second book, *Luzifers Hofgesind: Eine Reise zu Europas guten Geistern* (“Lucifer’s Court: A Journey to the Good Spirits of Europe”), which was published in April 1937. This book was essentially a National Socialist propaganda text. In its original 1937 edition, it is dedicated to Rahn’s comrades – i.e., the men of the SS – and as an epigraph it quotes a sentence ascribed to Schopenhauer in which he expressed his wish that Europe be “cleansed of all Jewish mythology”.<sup>72</sup> Heinrich Himmler rated the book so highly that he gave a luxury edition bound in parchment to Adolf Hitler as a birthday present.<sup>73</sup> Even in the late stages of the war, when the military defeat of NS-Germany was already foreseeable, Himmler

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<sup>68</sup> For a detailed study of the reception of the Grail legend in Germany by nationalist and esoteric writers including Rahn, see Franz 2009.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Lange 1999:48.

<sup>70</sup> Lange 1999:61.

<sup>71</sup> On this SS-organised trip to Iceland, see Lange 1999:62; Franz 2009:520.

<sup>72</sup> “Wir dürfen hoffen, daß einst auch Europa von aller jüdischen Mythologie gereinigt sein wird (Schopenhauer)”: Rahn 1937:7; cf. Franz 2009:521. This sentence, as well as the dedication to Rahn’s SS-comrades which precedes it (“Meinen Kameraden zugeeignet”: Rahn 1937:5), have been left out of the re-issue which was published by the *Verlag Zeitenwende* in 2004; a PDF of the second edition of the latter text (2006) is currently (2018) circulating widely on the internet. While this text is only moderately reliable, I include references to its pagination as it is much more easily accessible than the original edition. On other post-War re-issues of *Luzifers Hofgesind*, of which there were surprisingly many (including a French translation), see Franz 2009:537. To her list, an English translation can now also be added, which was published by the American publisher *Inner Traditions* in 2008 (Rahn 2008).

<sup>73</sup> Lange 1999:65.

and the Ministry of Propaganda instigated two attempts to reprint the book, though neither of them succeeded: an attempt late in 1943 failed as the publisher undertaking the task was bombed out before the reprint was completed, and another reprint undertaken in the summer of 1944 was never delivered.<sup>74</sup> That such attempts at a re-issue were still made at this stage of the war underlines like nothing else the importance that Himmler ascribed to the book as a work of NS propaganda. Rahn himself, however, did not live to see these reprints attempted: he committed suicide in 1939, possibly being forced to do so after it had become known to his superiors that he was homosexual.<sup>75</sup>

That Rahn was not a happy man was quite impossible to miss even a few years before his suicide, when he wrote the Icelandic chapters of his travelogue *Luzifers Hofgesind*.<sup>76</sup> His impression of the country is as negative as can be: he complains bitterly about the absence of trees and flowers;<sup>77</sup> he is scathing about Reykjavík, which he finds dominated by “the most garish cheap copying of the worst of Europe” (“den protzigsten Abklatsch des schlechtesten Europas”);<sup>78</sup> the women wear yesteryear’s fashion;<sup>79</sup> the music is hackneyed (“abgedroschen”);<sup>80</sup> and all in all he finds: “ich habe hier nichts zu suchen” (“I have no business here”),<sup>81</sup> and “[i]ch glaube nicht, daß ich hier mein Leben freiwillig verbringen könnte” (“I don’t think that I could, by my own choice, spend my life here”).<sup>82</sup> Given his disgust with the real Iceland he encounters, it comes as little surprise that Icelandic folklore and folk-belief have no place in his account: the Iceland he is interested in is entirely the Iceland of the past, or rather the *gleichgeschaltete* version of it that he imagines through the fog of this NS-thinking.

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<sup>74</sup> Franz 2009:536–537.

<sup>75</sup> Lange 1999:79–83. Rahn has a remarkable afterlife in contemporary popular culture (see Egeler 2019:89–104); cf., for instance, his appearance in Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (Eco 2001:142), first published in 1988 as *Il pendolo di Foucault*, or the pivotal role he plays in Kate Mosse’s bestselling novel *Citadel*, first published in 2012 (Mosse 2014), whose author was awarded an OBE in 2013. Incidentally, even though *Citadel* is outspokenly anti-fascist, this novel in particular could potentially also act as a multiplier for *Luzifers Hofgesind*, as it lists both the original and its recent English translation in its bibliography (Mosse 2014:926) and arguably de-emphasises Rahn’s entanglement in NS ideology.

<sup>76</sup> The following discussion will be restricted to the Icelandic sections of *Luzifers Hofgesind* (pp. 372–405 in the original 1937 edition; pp. 220–239 in the 2006 re-issue). Travels in other parts of Europe that Rahn describes in this book will be left aside here.

<sup>77</sup> Rahn 1937:381; 2006:225.

<sup>78</sup> Rahn 1937:382; 2006:225.

<sup>79</sup> Rahn 1937:385; 2006:228.

<sup>80</sup> Rahn 1937:385; 2006:228.

<sup>81</sup> Rahn 1937:382; 2006:225.

<sup>82</sup> Rahn 1937:388; 2006:230.



In this NS-fantasy of Iceland, there is a bit of Christianity. Rahn mentions the idea that the volcano Hekla was an entrance to Hell,<sup>83</sup> and he recounts the medieval tradition that before the advent of the Norse settlers in the ninth century, Iceland had already been frequented by Irish hermits.<sup>84</sup> Yet mostly, Christianity is the enemy. St Olaf is described as “einer der vielen Heiligen, deren die katholische Kirche sich nicht rühmen sollte” (“one of the many saints that the Catholic Church should not be proud of”), and the earliest generation of Icelandic settlers, according to Rahn, emigrated to Iceland in order to be able to escape Christian religious persecution and to freely practise the pagan faith of their forefathers.<sup>85</sup> (In contrast to this, the medieval Icelandic historical accounts, especially the Book of Settlements which Rahn elsewhere quotes,<sup>86</sup> state clearly that the first generation of settlers was partly Christian already.<sup>87</sup> Rahn markedly overstates the degree to which early Iceland was pagan, and maybe knowingly so.)

Focusing on Old Norse pre-Christian religion and mythology, Rahn paraphrases medieval accounts of the use of high-seat pillars as pagan oracles to determine the best place to settle down in Iceland;<sup>88</sup> he gives an account of the first settlement of the peninsula of Þórsnes, its dedication to the god Thor, and the pagan sacred mountain Helgafell;<sup>89</sup> and he claims that Snorri Sturluson, the author of the mythological treatise that is the Prose-Edda, wrote his book of Norse myths because of a longing for the faith of his forefathers –<sup>90</sup> which is a rather bold claim to make about a Christian author who wrote more than two centuries after the conversion of Iceland to Christianity.<sup>91</sup> Rahn also repeatedly voices his enthusiasm about spending “the night of the solstice in the country of the Edda”,<sup>92</sup> even though the solstice played no role at all in Old Norse culture and mythology. Into the detailed description he gives of this night, he inserts a long quotation spanning half a dozen pages taken from an article by the Austrian

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<sup>83</sup> Rahn 1937:386; 2006:228.

<sup>84</sup> Rahn 1937:376–377; 2006:222.

<sup>85</sup> Rahn 1937:373; 2006:220.

<sup>86</sup> Rahn 1937:373, 412; 2006:221, 245.

<sup>87</sup> Cf., e.g., Egeler 2018:110–187, 250–256, et passim.

<sup>88</sup> Rahn 1937:374–375; 2006:221–222.

<sup>89</sup> Rahn 1937:374–375; 2006:221.

<sup>90</sup> Rahn 1937:389; 2006:230.

<sup>91</sup> For a recent biography of Snorri Sturluson see Óskar Gudmundsson 2011.

<sup>92</sup> Rahn 1937:389 (“Es ist die Nacht der Sommersonnenwende im Lande der Edda...”), 392, 404; 2006:230, 232, 239.

anthroposophist Otto Julius Hartmann. This passage elaborates an interpretation of Old Norse mythology and ancient Germanic religion that simply projects National Socialist blood-ideology, National Socialist militarism, and the National Socialist contempt for the individual onto prehistory.<sup>93</sup>

Auden and MacNeice were cut out rather differently. When Rahn visited Þingvellir, the most prominent of all Icelandic historical sites, he was horrified to find a graffiti, in large red characters, hailing “the most notorious former communist leader of Germany” (“den berüchtigsten früheren Kommunistenführer Deutschlands”).<sup>94</sup> Auden and MacNeice didn’t mind finding communist graffiti here and there:<sup>95</sup> in their book, they make an explicit stance for a socialist order,<sup>96</sup> and throughout their text they make fun of Nazi attitudes and Nazis they meet in Iceland, and sometimes also voice more sombre outright condemnations of Nazism.<sup>97</sup> Auden, in fact, was an ardent anti-fascist who, in the year of the publication of the *Letters from Iceland* (1937), went to fight as a volunteer in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>98</sup> Of an approach to Iceland which views going there as a source of deep meaning, Auden and MacNeice are rather critical. Both Collingwood and Rahn use the term ‘pilgrimage’ to describe their journey to Iceland;<sup>99</sup> Auden, in contrast, calls his and MacNeice’s journey “a fancy turn [...] Sandwiched in a graver show”.<sup>100</sup> As Auden and MacNeice themselves put it with some implied self-criticism: while Seville falls and Hitler holds his Olympic Games, they enjoy setting forth on the relationship between the landscape of the north and the style of medieval Icelandic saga literature.<sup>101</sup> Programmatically, Auden doggerels:

Holidays should be like this,  
Free from over-emphasis,<sup>102</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Rahn 1937:392–404, cf. p. 412; 2006:232–239, cf. p. 245.

<sup>94</sup> Rahn 1937:382–383; 2006:226.

<sup>95</sup> Which they did notice: Auden and MacNeice 1937:180; 1967:178.

<sup>96</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:219; 1967:215.

<sup>97</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:57, 61, 75 (“Spread of Nazi Doctrines among the Icelandic ponies”), 94, 109, 119, 136, 146, 160, 257; 1967:55, 59, 73, 92, 107, 117, 134, 144, 158, 249.

<sup>98</sup> *Kindlers Literatur Lexikon Online* ([www.kll-online.de](http://www.kll-online.de), accessed 07/12/2018), s.v. “Auden, Wystan Hugh”.

<sup>99</sup> Rahn 1937:382 (“Wallfahrt”); 2006:225.

<sup>100</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:259; 1967:251.

<sup>101</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:259; 1967:251.

<sup>102</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:260; 1967:252.

and MacNeice chimes in:

Three months ago or so  
Wystan said that he was planning to go  
To Iceland to write a book and would I come too;  
And I said yes, having nothing better to do.<sup>103</sup>

Thus, the reason for going to Iceland is not a (quasi-?)religious ‘pilgrimage’, but “having nothing better to do.” Yet in spite of the lightness that becomes tangible in such statements, a strong undercurrent of cultural and social criticism permeates Auden’s and MacNeice’s book. An encounter with the butchery happening at a whaling station is stylised into an icon of the human potential for cruelty that, again and again, is taken up as a leitmotiv,<sup>104</sup> and, as already mentioned, Nazism remains a topic throughout the volume. The *Letters from Iceland* have a strong moral base, which sometimes takes on an almost desperate urgency: in an interesting twist, Auden and MacNeice make the ghost of the saga-hero Grettir the Strong (by no means a pacifist character) voice an exhortation that “Hatred of hatred, assertion of human values / Which is now our only duty” is humankind’s most pressing obligation and, in fact, its only chance.<sup>105</sup> The two authors also voice a thinly-veiled critique of totalitarian sympathies in Britain and of the simplicity with which the call for ‘security’ can turn the kindest man into a monster.<sup>106</sup>

Of all texts discussed here, Auden’s and MacNeice’s book probably takes the strongest moral stance. Maybe this makes it interesting that religion, religious history, and the supernatural play virtually no role in this moral enterprise. Contemporary Christianity, the mythology of the Eddas and sagas, and the supernatural in Icelandic folklore all are touched upon repeatedly, but with the exception of the ghost of Grettir, they seem to play no moral role. Current and classic theorising on religion oftentimes sees an exposition of the fundamental order of things and a ‘provision of orientation’ as a central task of religion and myth;<sup>107</sup> yet this certainly does not hold true for much of its representation in the *Letters from Iceland*. Christianity and contemporary religion in Iceland never feature as attendance at a church

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<sup>103</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:33; 1967:31.

<sup>104</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:149–150, 208, 223–224, 225, 260; 1967:147–148, 204, 219–220, 221, 252.

<sup>105</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:134–135; 1967:132–133.

<sup>106</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:56–57; 1967:54–55.

<sup>107</sup> E.g., Mohn 2007:333; Bolle and Ricoeur 2005:6359; Maier 1994:245; classically already Geertz 1973.

service or as deep respect for a member of the clergy or for Christian doctrine, nor do they provide much in terms of moral guidance or of an explanation of the world. In Reykjavík, Auden and MacNeice are enthralled by a piece of ecclesiastical art in the museum, but not by its church buildings or religious practice.<sup>108</sup> Quite to the contrary, they find Reykjavík “Lutheran, drab and remote”:<sup>109</sup> what religious element they perceive as leaving its mark on the town they clearly find less than endearing. In the old episcopal church in Hólar, we even see Auden standing with stockinged feet on the altar trying to photograph details of the carved altar piece mounted above it, and exchanging pleasantries with a member of the leading cadre of Nazi Germany;<sup>110</sup> the juxtaposition tempts the reader to draw a connection to Auden’s decision, made not much later, to join the Spanish Civil war, fighting Franco’s Catholic dictatorship.

Throughout the book, engagements with contemporary religiosity are ambiguous at best. In Kleppur, the Icelandic penchant for spiritualism is introduced on the occasion of a visit to the local “Lunatic Asylum”.<sup>111</sup> In Ísafjörður, Auden and MacNeice flaunt the house rules of the Salvation Army Hostel, where they are staying, by enjoying brandy and games of cards even more for being forbidden pleasures.<sup>112</sup> On the Hvalfjörður fjord, the former parsonage of Iceland’s most famous ecclesiastical poet, Hallgrímur Pétursson, is passed by in a bus without stopping and brushed off with all of half a sentence (“the farm where a seventeenth-century clergyman called Peterssen wrote some famous passion hymns and died of leprosy”).<sup>113</sup> As something that vexed him throughout the journey, Auden complains that most of the sheet music available in Icelandic farms to play on the ubiquitous harmoniums consists of psalm tunes.<sup>114</sup> The single longest passage that deals with contemporary Icelandic religiosity is a collection of quotes where headings like *Concerning their literary criticism* introduce curious excerpts from older travelogues which appear to have a strongly ironic slant – as in the example about *Literary criticism*, which is about an alleged public whipping of a man who had made a mistake in a translation of Genesis.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:39 and plate facing p. 33; 1967:37.

<sup>109</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:27; 1967:25.

<sup>110</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:118–119; 1967:116–117.

<sup>111</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:198; 1967:196.

<sup>112</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:220, 226; 1967:216, 222.

<sup>113</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:114; 1967:112.

<sup>114</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:115; 1967:113.

<sup>115</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:66–68, quoted example: p. 67; 1967:64–66, quoted example: p. 65.

The supernatural in folklore fares little better. In the whole book, the supernatural of Icelandic folklore only makes a total of four appearances. One of these is a quote mentioning the historical belief in seacows and seabulls;<sup>116</sup> the other three are about the exposure of children to such folklore, which may happen through a lullaby about ghosts or (in one instance) a folk-tale about trolls and an elf woman.<sup>117</sup> Folklore is not for orientation, it is for kids. (And to make matters maybe worse, in half the instances appearing in the book it is for foreign kids, whom it makes want to go to Iceland. In a way, folklore is for tourists.)<sup>118</sup>

The beliefs and mythology of the Viking Age, as they are described in the medieval Eddas and sagas, are dismissed almost entirely. In the book's epilogue, Auden and MacNeice make an explicit point that they did not visit Iceland as a "mythic shore":<sup>119</sup> their journey was no pilgrimage. In the *Letters from Iceland*, the society for which these myths were a living reality is even explicitly condemned as one of brutal savagery,<sup>120</sup> and it may not be chance that the one passage which seems to be a longer adaptation of actual Norse mythology – i.e., a treatment of the fate of the cosmos – is a description of the end of the world.<sup>121</sup> Funnily enough, the end of the world in Norse myth (or its NS-reinterpretation) is exactly what the Iceland-section in Otto Rahn's *Luzifers Hofgesind* closes with,<sup>122</sup> and at one point Auden and MacNeice include a seemingly offhand but very poignant remark about

Hitler who wants to reclaim this island and will no doubt substitute the Eddas for the Lutheran prayerbook.<sup>123</sup>

Reading this, and having read Rahn's *Luzifers Hofgesind*, one cannot help but wonder whether the three men did not talk over breakfast in Hólar after all. Certainly Auden and MacNeice had a good grasp of where the wind was blowing in Nazi Germany, and when Auden, in the year of the publication of the *Letters from Iceland*, took his gun and went to Spain, this was very much based on an informed political judgement.

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<sup>116</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:62; 1967:60.

<sup>117</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:145, 150, 152–155, 214; 1967:143, 148, 150–153, 210.

<sup>118</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:150, 214; 1967:148, 210.

<sup>119</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:259; 1967:251.

<sup>120</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:194, cf. p. 119; 1967:192, cf. p. 117.

<sup>121</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:230–231; 1967:226–227.

<sup>122</sup> Rahn 1937:403–404; 2006:238–239.

<sup>123</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:160; 1967:158.

## 2010/2011, downtown Reykjavík

The third parallel pair of travel books to be discussed here are the two volumes *Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland* (2012) by Sarah Moss and Tina Bauer's *Ein Jahr in Island: Reise in den Alltag*. ("A Year in Iceland: Journey into the Everyday", 2011). Both books are accounts by female authors describing one year spent in Iceland during the time of the *kreppa*, the Icelandic economic meltdown following the banking crisis that started with the collapse of the main banks of Iceland in 2008, and during the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull, which wreaked havoc with international air travel for weeks. Both women are professional writers, Sarah Moss being a novelist and Professor of creative writing at the University of Warwick,<sup>124</sup> while Tina Bauer describes herself as a freelance journalist.<sup>125</sup> In this case, neither author in her book mentions meeting the other, yet given the size of the city they both spent a year in, their paths must have crossed more frequently than those of the writers mentioned so far. Outside of Reykjavík as well, they both could take similar paths: both Moss and Bauer describe making a tourist trip to see the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull close up,<sup>126</sup> and both Moss and Bauer also quote the same joke then common in Iceland, which goes that England wanted cash from Iceland, but since Icelandic doesn't have a c, they got ash instead.<sup>127</sup>

Sarah Moss in her *Names for the Sea: Strangers in Iceland* gives an account of one year spent teaching English literature at the University of Iceland and of a much shorter follow-up trip in the following year. Moss directly references the English tradition of travel-writing about Iceland. The title of her book and a number of chapter titles are taken from a poem by Auden,<sup>128</sup> who is referenced throughout her narrative.<sup>129</sup> She mentions W.G. Collingwood already at the beginning of her first chapter,<sup>130</sup> and at one point she quotes a long passage from a poem by William Morris that is also quoted in Collingwood's and Jón Stefánsson's *Pilgrimage*.<sup>131</sup> Yet while her relationship to her Anglophone predecessors is close, it is also problematic. The

<sup>124</sup> Sarah Moss: *About*, <https://www.sarahmoss.org/about/>, accessed 28/12/2018.

<sup>125</sup> Tina Bauer: *Über mich*, <http://tibauna.de/ueber-mich/>, accessed 28/12/2018.

<sup>126</sup> Moss 2012:172–180; Bauer 2011:18–20; 2016:18–20.

<sup>127</sup> Moss 2012:256; Bauer 2011:18; 2016:18.

<sup>128</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1937:25; 1967:23.

<sup>129</sup> E.g., cf. Moss 2012:261–263 and Auden and MacNeice 1937:25–26; 1967:23–24. Moss (2012:263) also mentions Auden's and MacNeice's meeting with Goering's brother in Hólar.

<sup>130</sup> Moss 2012:4. Moss ignores Jón Stefánsson, which is particularly poignant as Moss claims that she has "read" Collingwood, while two contemporaries [see above] clearly state that Collingwood was in charge of the illustrations whereas the text that Moss read was written by Jón Stefánsson.

<sup>131</sup> Moss 2012:5, cf. Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson 1899:2.

approach taken by Collingwood and his nineteenth-century contemporaries for her smacks of unnecessary and dishonest pretensions “that we’re all Vikings really”.<sup>132</sup> She herself, she stresses, is interested in something else: “the idea of a better society”,<sup>133</sup> imagined to be characterised by a deep egalitarianism and public art.<sup>134</sup> Vikings, for her, have no place in this.<sup>135</sup> This attitude is also reflected in her treatment of Viking Age mythology and the paganism described in the medieval Icelandic sagas: she ignores this topic almost completely. There is one scathing remark about the Nazis’ fondness for Iceland as “an island of pure Nordic genes where Wagner’s gods hung out”,<sup>136</sup> and in another passage she mentions in passing that the name of the western Icelandic hill Helgafell means “Holy Mountain”, but without explaining why this is so or narrating the mythological saga account that this name is connected to.<sup>137</sup> In Moss’s Iceland, there is no space for the mythology of the Eddas and sagas.<sup>138</sup>

Much more present than the sagas, though in a very specific and significant way, is contemporary Christianity, for Moss mentions a fair number of churches. Generally, however, the churches in her book are nothing more than landmarks on the wayside. In a typical example, not even the name of the church is given:

Consulting the map, we climb up past the church, a modern church with angled white walls and bright windows, and come out above the river.<sup>139</sup>

In Moss’s book, churches are seen, they are passed, they are visible landmarks in the Icelandic landscape, and some of them even are described as being very visible indeed: “the white church at Kópavogur stands like a lighthouse on the headland.”<sup>140</sup> Yet not a single time in her whole

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<sup>132</sup> Moss 2012:6.

<sup>133</sup> Moss 2012:11.

<sup>134</sup> Moss 2012:11.

<sup>135</sup> It does not concern the purpose of the present paper, but it might be worthwhile noting that Morris was not only enthusiastic about Vikings, but also one of the founders of British Socialism, so the dichotomy that Moss builds up between her interest in a society characterised by equality and enthusiasm for medieval Icelandic literature is somewhat unfair.

<sup>136</sup> Moss 2012:214.

<sup>137</sup> Moss 2012:331. Note the implied contrast to Collingwood’s and Jón Stefánsson’s *Pilgrimage*, who dedicate a whole chapter to Helgafell and the mythology connected with it and its surroundings (1899:82–106). Rahn also talks about Helgafell: Rahn 1937:374–375; 2006:221.

<sup>138</sup> Cf. also Moss 2012:248, where she describes herself making fun of “the Icelandic reverence for the sagas”.

<sup>139</sup> Moss 2012:169.

<sup>140</sup> Moss 2012:21.

book does Moss describe entering a church. Similarly, a certain vicar is mentioned, but this vicar only enters the scene as the daughter of a friend and Moss never interacts with her:<sup>141</sup> just as churches are seen only from the outside, priests are talked about but not talked to. Christmas, similarly again, is used as a temporal reference point, but never appears as a religious holiday; quite the opposite, Moss at one point summarises her Icelandic experience of Christmas by remarking that “Christmas in Iceland seems so far to have no religious content at all”.<sup>142</sup> And Christian religious art is only appreciated in the form of a historical exhibit in a museum.<sup>143</sup> Christianity is present in Moss’s book, but only as a sight seen from a distance, and it is never interacted with. For daily life – for a whole year’s worth of daily life –, it plays no more role than furnishing the landscape with some well-placed decoration that is quaint but otherwise has neither impact nor significance.

Yet this does not mean that Moss does not interact with how the supernatural is part of Icelandic culture; in fact, she does so very much. Yet what she interacts with is not the religion of the age of the sagas, nor is it that of the Icelandic Church. Rather, her interest is focused on folk belief and the local folkloric stratum of the Christian religious calendar. In talking about Christmas in Iceland, she is at her most engaged when describing the Icelandic Yule Lads. The Yule Lads are troll-like figures which only leave their normal abode in the mountains during the Christmas period in order to do mischief among human beings, and whose mother Grýla has a particular taste for the flesh of children.<sup>144</sup> To Moss, these beings make Icelandic Christmas appear as an almost pagan celebration. On one occasion, she calls the Christmas celebrations she experienced in Iceland “an apparently atheist celebration of the solstice, dogged by the thirteen Yule Lads”.<sup>145</sup> On another occasion, she remarks about the last day of the Icelandic Christmas period that this “‘last day of Christmas’ [...] – since we are on the edge of Judeo-Christian tradition here – means not Epiphany but the day the Yule Lads return to their lair on Esja.”<sup>146</sup> While in a way Collingwood paganises the Icelandic past through his constant references to the pre-Christian cult and mythology described in the medieval sagas, Moss paganises the Icelandic present by focusing on the beings of folklore while refusing to enter an

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<sup>141</sup> Moss 2012:44.

<sup>142</sup> Moss 2012:123.

<sup>143</sup> Moss 2012:241–242.

<sup>144</sup> Moss 2012:123–124.

<sup>145</sup> Moss 2012:123.

<sup>146</sup> Moss 2012:132.



Icelandic church – a refusal which probably makes it much easier for her to find herself ‘on the edge of Judeo-Christian tradition’.

This focus on what could be called ‘pagan’ elements in the Icelandic present is not restricted to Moss’s engagement with Icelandic Christmas, but also seems reflected by a prominent interest in the Icelandic belief in elves: of the sixteen chapters of her book, two (chs 11 and 12) have people believing in elves as their centre piece, and a third one (ch. 10) in great detail recounts an old woman’s tales about the fairy and other folk beliefs of her childhood. The latter is a deeply sympathetic account of days spent with Vilborg Dagbjartsdóttir, who tells Moss about growing up in pre-War Iceland, when she was afraid when passing stones thought to be inhabited by the hidden people, knew in which boulder on the shore the elves had their church, where one could hear the sound of a fairy woman working at the spinning wheel, how on one occasion the young child believed to have encountered a troll woman, and how people believed in fairies stealing objects, in fortune-telling, ghosts, and unlucky names.<sup>147</sup> Less sympathetic, but no less engaged are the two full chapters focusing on elves. One of these chapters describes a day spent with a woman who thought she was able to see and talk to elves, while the other tells of a visit to a farm-hotel whose main selling point was the alleged presence of a large number of elves, whose dwelling-places on the farm’s land were nicely signposted.<sup>148</sup>

Tina Bauer’s much shorter travelogue about the first year of what was to become a two-year stay in Iceland is part of a series of books about one-year temporary emigration published by the publishing house Herder. This embeddedness in a book series about one-year stays abroad is probably the reason why Bauer’s book ends with the end of her first year in Iceland, even though Bauer doesn’t leave the island at this point but rather looks forward to another summer on the island in the company of a new love. Her treatment of the topic is chatty and focused on the present, with little or no explicit engagement with other travel literature or other writers. (One notable exception is Jule Verne’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, which locates the entrance to this centre in Iceland.)<sup>149</sup> This disinterest in other Iceland literature includes the pagan mythology of the Eddas and sagas: in Bauer’s book, pre-Christian paganism and medieval saga mythology only play the most marginal of roles. On one occasion, Bauer playfully invokes the pagan god of thunder to intervene with a neighbour who does heavy

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<sup>147</sup> Esp. Moss 2012:199–208.

<sup>148</sup> Moss 2012:217–264.

<sup>149</sup> Bauer 2011:28; 2016:28. Verne’s novel has become a central text for the perception of the Icelandic landscape by both Icelanders and foreigners; see Egeler and Gropper, in press, *passim*.

building work at the most inappropriate of hours,<sup>150</sup> and on another she quotes an Icelandic friend as explaining the feast of Þorrablót as derived from pre-Christian sacrificial feasts.<sup>151</sup> Other than this, the pre-Christian past of Iceland does not appear in this book.

Contemporary Icelandic Christianity is present throughout Bauer's book, mostly mediated (in a way not entirely different from Moss's treatment of Icelandic Christianity) by the visual presence of Icelandic church buildings. The extreme visibility of Hallgrímskirkja, the city church of Reykjavík which dominates the town's skyline, plays a particularly important role here.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, Bauer spends much space on describing Icelandic Christmas celebrations. Just as in Moss's account, there is a feeling that Icelandic Christmas is not primarily a Christian religious celebration, even though Bauer does not articulate this quite as distinctly. However, the ascription of Þorrablót to the pre-Christian era, which the first-person narrator ascribes to an Icelandic friend, on some level seems to echo Moss's feeling of being "on the edge of Judeo-Christian tradition",<sup>153</sup> and just as Moss did, Bauer also gives an account of the Icelandic Christmas trolls, the Yule Lads.<sup>154</sup>

In contrast to Moss, Bauer does not only describe churches from the outside, but also enters them. In the small eastern Icelandic hamlet of Borgarfjörður eystri, she describes visiting the little village church to see its altar piece, which was painted by Jóhannes Kjarval (1885–1972), arguably Iceland's most famous painter and a native of Borgarfjörður eystri. This altar piece shows the Sermon on the Mount, which the painter has transferred to his native village. In the painting, the Mount on which Jesus is standing while holding the Sermon has become Álfaborg, the "City of Elves", a prominent rock formation close to the church on the margin of the present-day village, which according to local folklore was the birthplace and home of the local queen of the elves – "Was ich mir sehr gut vorstellen kann" ("As I can well imagine"), comments Bauer.<sup>155</sup> As with the trollish Yule Lads and Christmas, Icelandic Christianity and the belief in elves are again described as almost merging.

Elves and other elements of what one could call 'folk belief' reappear throughout Bauer's account of her stay. Bauer uses such folkloric supernatural elements in a variety of

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<sup>150</sup> Bauer 2011:175; 2016:174.

<sup>151</sup> Bauer 2011:137; 2016:136.

<sup>152</sup> Bauer 2011:15, 16, 17, 21; 2016:15, 16, 17, 21.

<sup>153</sup> See above.

<sup>154</sup> Bauer 2011:126–127; 2016:125–126.

<sup>155</sup> Bauer 2011:53–54; 2016:53–54.

ways. She playfully weaves troll and elf metaphors into her narrative to (it seems) lend it local colour.<sup>156</sup> She describes herself as dreaming about elves.<sup>157</sup> She encounters elves and other supernatural beings in modern and contemporary art.<sup>158</sup> She is told by an Icelandic friend about how this friend is able to communicate with her dead grandmother,<sup>159</sup> and is tutored (though with little success) in how to use a pendulum to divine her future.<sup>160</sup> And not least: some love magic involving elves turns out to be pretty successful.<sup>161</sup>

In some ways, the contrast between Bauer and Moss could hardly be greater. While Bauer throws herself into Icelandic life, enjoys herself, and finds a new love, Moss again and again returns to her anxieties, her feeling of isolation, or her nightmares;<sup>162</sup> the subtitle of Moss's travelogue, *Strangers in Iceland*, is of course programmatic. Nevertheless – and this is particularly interesting because these two authors are so different – both Bauer and Moss show the same interests, and lack thereof, when it comes to religion and the supernatural in Iceland. For both authors, the medieval mythology of the Eddas and sagas and the pre-Christian religion of the Viking Age have become irrelevant to the point that they almost completely disappear from view. Icelandic Lutheran Protestantism is present first, second, and last through the churches which give it presence in the landscape; as doctrine, it is of virtually no interest to either writer, and neither of them interacts with a Christian priest in any way. And in marked contrast to this disappearance of much that stood in the centre of the attention of the nineteenth-century writers discussed above, the picturesque imagery of local Icelandic beliefs in elves, trolls, Yule Lads, and similar supernatural beings has taken a prominent place. Especially the belief in elves that Kahle more than a century earlier only mentioned in a single sentence in the main text of his book, and which he there described as a defunct superstition of the past, has come to take centre-stage and to appear as very much alive.

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<sup>156</sup> Bauer 2011:27, 43, 72, 73, 76, 154; 2016:27, 43, 72, 73, 76, 153.

<sup>157</sup> Bauer 2011:29–30, 32; 2016:29–30, 32.

<sup>158</sup> Bauer 2011:31, 54, 184; 2016:31, 54, 183.

<sup>159</sup> Bauer 2011:134–135; 2016:133–134.

<sup>160</sup> Bauer 2011:135–136; 2016:134–135.

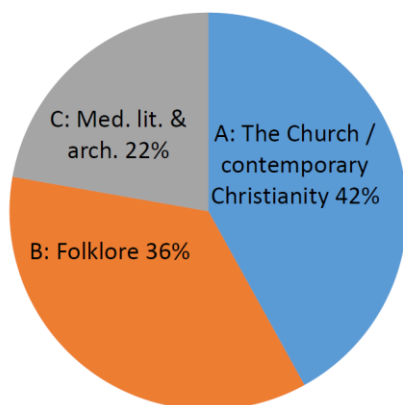
<sup>161</sup> Bauer 2011:28, 89, 186; 2016:28, 89, 185.

<sup>162</sup> E.g, Moss 2012:72, 73, 85, 105.

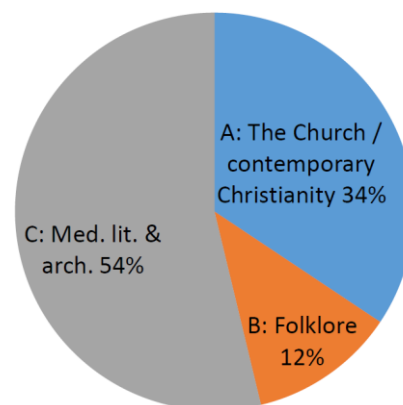
## The lessons of contrasting pairs: conclusions

In the preceding sections, I have tried to outline how Icelandic religion, Icelandic religious history, and the supernatural in Icelandic folklore are portrayed by three contrasting pairs of travel writers: the German Bernhard Kahle and the English-Icelandic co-authors William Gershom Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson, who met in Reykjavík in 1897 and published their travelogues in the years 1900 and 1899 respectively; the National Socialist writer Otto Rahn and the British socialists Wystan Hugh Auden and Louis MacNeice, who met in Hólar in 1936 and published in 1937; and the short-term emigrants Tina Bauer and Sarah Moss, who spent a year in Reykjavík in 2010/11 and published in 2011 and 2012. Looking back over these sometimes very different publications about Iceland, it seems that in spite of the huge differences between them and the sometimes unbridgeable ideological chasms separating their authors, some common lines and a common development emerge.

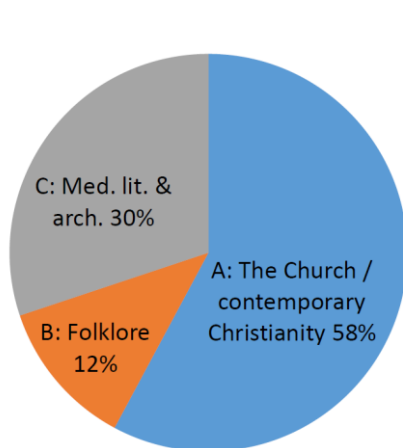
Reading these texts, I have proposed that engagements with religion and the supernatural in travel literature about Iceland generally can be assigned to three overarching categories: (A) Icelandic Christianity; (B) elements of the supernatural in Icelandic folklore, such as ghosts, troll, and elves; and (C) pre-Christian (Viking Age) religion and mythology as described by the medieval Icelandic sagas and approached through archaeology. To get something like an objective (if somewhat crude) impression of how the different authors discussed here prioritise these three categories in different ways, I have tabulated the number of pages on which they touch upon topics that can be ascribed to these three categories; this has been done in Tables 1 to 6 in the Appendix. This material can then be visualised in the form of pie charts, which has been done in Graphs 1 to 6.



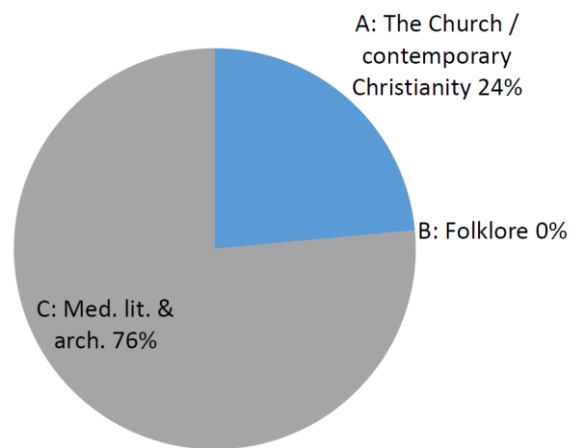
Graph 1: Kahle



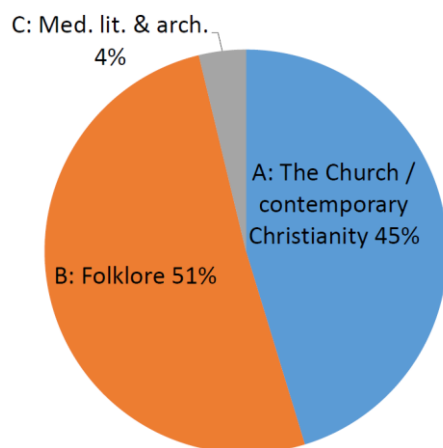
Graph 2: Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson



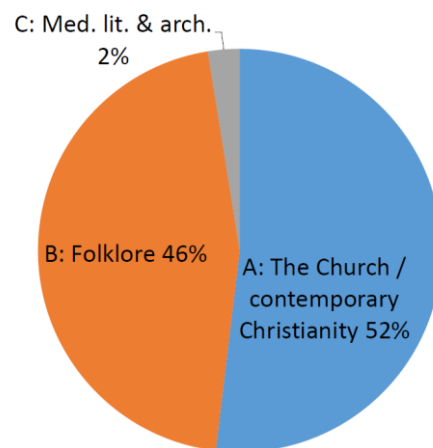
Graph 3: Auden and Mac Neice



Graph 4: Rahn



Graph 5: Bauer



Graph 6: Moss

Graphs 1-6: The relative weighting of Christianity (A), the supernatural in folklore (B), and the 'Viking Age' mythology of the medieval sagas (C) in the three contrasting pairs of travelogues discussed here. In Kahle (Graph 1), category A appears 50 times on a total of 84 pages, B appears 17 times on 46 pages, C appears 16 times on 34 pages. In Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson (Graph 2), A appears 49 times on 55 pages, B 18 times on 19 pages, C 71 times on 86 pages. In Auden and MacNeice (Graph 3), A appears 31 times on 48 pages, B 4 times on 10 pages, C 12 times on 25 pages. In Rahn (Graph 4), A appears 4 times on 4 pages, B 0 times on 0 pages, C 5 times on 13 pages. In Bauer (Graph 5), A appears 13 times on 24 pages, B 23 times on 27 pages, C 2 times on 2 pages. In Moss (Graph 6), A appears 37 times on 41 pages, B 14 times on 36 pages, C 2 times on 2 pages.

Graphs 1 to 6 visualise the relative attention that the writers being discussed give to categories A to C of religion and the supernatural in Iceland by representing the percentages of those pages dealing with religion and the supernatural that address aspects of Christianity (A), the supernatural in folklore (B), and the pagan religious cosmos of the Viking Age, mostly as represented by the sagas (C). In the examples brought together here, there seems to be a clear trend that the older publications of Kahle, Collingwood, Jón Stefánsson, Auden, Mac Neice,

and Rahn all give a varying but overall large space to category C. In marked contrast to this, the recent publications by Bauer and Moss pay almost no attention to category C and focus strongly on category B. It seems that there is a shift from sagas to folklore, and a marked one at that.

Also – and perhaps even more – interesting are some qualitative aspects of this shift which remain invisible in the quantitative graphs above (and thus, as an aside, illustrate the limitations of quantitative approaches for studying the history of religions). Both Bauer and Moss show very high percentages for an engagement with Icelandic Christianity: 45% in the case of Bauer, 52% in the case of Moss. Numerically, Moss's engagement with Christianity even seems to be the highest in any of the writers discussed here. In marked difference to earlier writers, however, neither Bauer nor Moss in any way directly interact with Christian churches, representatives of the Church, or Christian doctrine: the high numerical count of category A in Bauer and Moss emerges even though neither author has much interest in Christianity or engages with it to any noteworthy degree. The seeming prominence of Christianity in Bauer's and Moss's books is due to the role of Christian church buildings as landmarks in the Icelandic landscape, and to Christmas – in whose description, however, neither writer finds much to report about the holiday's Christian symbolism. Rather, both authors focus on the Yule Lads, which are depicted as pagan rather than Christian. While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors closely engage with the Icelandic clergy and even Icelandic Christian poetry, in the twenty-first century Icelandic Christianity in travel writing is a mere empty shell.

The emptying of the engagement with Christianity of any religious significance makes it all the more striking how intensely both Bauer and Moss engage with the category of folklore: in both authors, the category of the supernatural in Icelandic folklore is not merely mentioned, but it is put into the centre of detailed discussions. Here as well, a shift can be observed which escapes the purely numerical approach of the above graphs: the emergence of the elves. In the main text of Kahle's book, there had been one single mentioning of an Icelandic belief in elves,<sup>163</sup> which there, furthermore, is explicitly presented as a belief of the past that had already become obsolete in the writer's present in the 1890s. Similarly, Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson mention elves only once. Auden and Mac Neice have one story about an elf-woman, and Rahn completely ignores the topic. So in this pre-War literature, elves are consistently marginal; where the supernatural in Icelandic folklore is touched upon, sorcerers, witches, and

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<sup>163</sup> There is a second mentioning in a footnote, see above.

especially revenants are much more prominent. In Bauer and Moss, however, elves have become iconic for the supernatural in Icelandic folklore. In the twenty-first century, Iceland, at least in the perception of foreign travel writers, seems to have become ‘the country where people believe in elves’. It is worth highlighting that this is a new development. This is especially striking as the association of Iceland with a widespread belief in elves appears to have become remarkably widespread in popular culture. In Germany, Brigitta Bjarnason’s *Auf den Spuren von Elfen und Trollen in Island* (“In the Footsteps of Elves and Trolls in Iceland”), a folkloristic ‘elf-guidebook’ of Iceland, saw its fourth edition (2017) within four years of its first publication in 2013.<sup>164</sup> Other books with comparable, elf-focused titles swamp the market, such as Thilo Mischke’s (2017) *Huh! Die Isländer, die Elfen und ich: Unterwegs in einem sagenhaften Land* (“Oh! The Icelanders, the Elves, and Me: on the Road in a Land of Legend”),<sup>165</sup> Andrea Walter’s (2011) *Wo Elfen noch helfen: Warum man Island einfach lieben muss* (“Where Elves still help: why one just has to love Iceland”),<sup>166</sup> Wolfgang Müller’s (2007) *Neues von der Elfenfront: Die Wahrheit über Island* (“News from the Elf Front: the Truth about Iceland”),<sup>167</sup> or Erla Stefánsdóttir’s (2018) *Erlas Elfengeschichten: Die »isländische Elfenbeauftragte« erzählt* (“Erlas Tales of Elves: The Icelandic ‘Commissary of Elves’ tells Stories”).<sup>168</sup> The latter book is particularly interesting because ‘Commissary of Elves’ (“Elfenbeauftragte”) is a term coined by a German journalist for the Icelandic medium Erla Stefánsdóttir in the mid-1990s which has virtually become a piece of folklore in its own right: the idea that Iceland has a ‘Commissary of Elves’ has reached such currency in Germany that in 2016, the ARD (the German equivalent of the BBC) even produced a crime mystery set in Iceland in which this commissary of elves is murdered.<sup>169</sup> And this broad and enthusiastic reception of the idea that Icelanders believe in elves is not an exclusively German phenomenon. In its December-issue for 2018, *easyJet Traveller*, the in-flight magazine of easyJet that

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<sup>164</sup> Bjarnason 2017. Note that the author’s *nom de plume* is an Icelandic patronymic meaning “son of Bjarni” – which rather jars with the female Christian name ‘Brigitte’. It seems that the current elf-writers are a different animal entirely from the highly educated artists and academics that had dominated nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travel writing about Iceland.

<sup>165</sup> Mischke 2017.

<sup>166</sup> Walter 2011.

<sup>167</sup> Müller 2007.

<sup>168</sup> Erla Stefánsdóttir 2018.

<sup>169</sup> *Der Island-Krimi: Tod der Elfenfrau*, Germany 2016, director: Till Endemann, <https://www.daserste.de/unterhaltung/film/der-island-krimi/sendung/der-island-krimi-tod-der-elfenfrau-130.html>, accessed 18/12/2018.

describes itself as “a magazine for the get-up-and-go generation” and is very much focused on things that are ‘posh’, ‘vegan’, and ‘hip’,<sup>170</sup> ran a two-page column about a visit to the elves of Borgarfjörður eystri, led by a local Icelandic tourist guide.<sup>171</sup> The topos of the Icelandic elf belief, it seems, has conquered even the world of the hipsters.

The historical perspective provided by more than a century of travelogues about Iceland shows that the prominence of this modern trope of Iceland as a country of elves is a remarkably recent one. Studying the representation of religion and the supernatural in travel literature about Iceland in a long-term perspective thus gives us a possibility to grasp the rapidity of the change that the popular perception of Iceland has undergone since the nineteenth century: from the country of the Eddas and sagas to the country of the elves. This change, and the apparent rapidity and extent of this change, suggests that we encounter a topic here which would deserve further research: why did elves suddenly become such a prominent element in the outside perception of Iceland? What triggered this development, and when exactly did it take place? To what extent was it due to (literary? political?) developments in the countries of origin of travel writers, and to which extent was it fuelled by how Icelanders themselves present their country to foreigners?

It would not be surprising if there was a political aspect to the focus that recent travel literature appears to place on the supernatural in Icelandic folklore rather than the Viking Age supernatural of the sagas: it might well be that authors like Otto Rahn have so deeply tainted the pagan mythology of the Eddas and sagas that this, in the eyes of many writers, disqualifies it as a legitimate object of interest. This suspicion is to some extent supported by Moss’s treatment of the topic, who mentions the pre-Christian gods of Iceland exclusively as “Wagner’s gods” and dear to the Nazis.<sup>172</sup> That she and authors like her turn their backs on the sagas and their mythology clearly seems interlinked with a stain left by how important this material was to National Socialism.

Yet this may not be the whole story. Rather, that Iceland is a country of elves also plays a role in how Icelanders themselves today present their cultural landscape.<sup>173</sup> When Kahle rode through Iceland, the farmer guiding him pointed out an elf-inhabited rock, but only in passing

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<sup>170</sup> *easyJet Traveller* 204 (December 2018), cover.

<sup>171</sup> MacEacheran 2018.

<sup>172</sup> See above.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. Norman 2016:484, who highlights that tourist destinations generally can change their “sense of self” to match the views of visitors – though Norman mentions this for destinations visited “by travelers from a hegemonic visiting culture”, and it is doubtful whether Icelanders would see European visitors as “hegemonic”.



and not without emphasising – perhaps with some embarrassment? – that the belief in elves was a thing of the past. Today, Icelanders seem to be much less coy in capitalising on their elfin heritage. In Borgarfjörður eystri, where Bauer locates one of her encounters with the elf-inhabited landscape of Iceland, the columnist of *easyJet Traveller* was given an elf-tour by an Icelander, and the local community has put up an information board that gives, in both Icelandic and English, the name and a summary of the elf-lore connected with the rock-outcrop Álfaborg (“City of Elves”; Fig. 4): the elves are not ‘hidden people’ any more, but are proudly presented to the visitor. Similarly, and even more prominently, the town of Hafnarfjörður near Reykjavík advertises the elves allegedly living there even on its official homepage: they are marketed through guided tours and the park Hellisgerði, whose lava rocks reputedly are inhabited by elves and whose information centre is advertised as selling elf-themed crafts and “Elf coffee”.<sup>174</sup> It seems to be at least one factor in the emergence of the trope of the Icelandic belief in elves that the Icelanders themselves have started to make elves visible in the landscape of city and countryside alike.



Fig. 4: The context of the traveller’s experience (1): elf-signpost at the “City of Elves” Álfaborg in Borgarfjörður eystri. © M. Egeler, 2014.

<sup>174</sup> *Hafnarfjörður: What to do: Elves and vikings*, <http://www.visithafnarfjordur.is/activities-and-leisures/elves-and-vikings/>, accessed 18/12/2018.

Incidentally, this seems to be part of a broader attempt to market Iceland to tourists by emphasising supernatural elements from folklore and making these elements ‘visitable’. In Hólmavík in the Icelandic Westfjords, a Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft was opened in 2000, supplemented by a ‘Sorcerer’s Cottage’ at Klúka in nearby Bjarnarfjörður.<sup>175</sup> Along some coastal roads in the West Fjords, signs warning of water monsters have been erected (Fig. 5), and on the opposite end of the island in several locations along the shores of the eastern Icelandic lake Lagarfljót, information boards were set up in the early 2010s that give overviews over historical sightings of a local lake monster (Fig. 6). In 2011, Jón R. Hjálmarsson published a guidebook that guides visitors to the sites of Icelandic folk legends.<sup>176</sup> Folklore, and the supernatural in Icelandic folklore, appear to have become a major aspect of Icelandic tourism marketing. It would be an interesting question deserving further study what came first: the change in outside interest or how the Icelanders themselves present the supernatural aspects of Icelandic folklore. The latter – though again more research would be needed – at least does not seem to be a long-established element of Icelandic self-presentation. The author’s impression is that older Icelandic memorials that pre-date the extreme rise of visitor numbers which Iceland has experienced in the 2000s (and especially the 2010s)<sup>177</sup> tend to focus on the history of Christianity in Iceland rather than on ‘magical’ folklore; examples are the stone cross at Krosshólaborg, which since its erection in 1965 memorialises the area’s first Christian settler Auðr the Deep-Minded,<sup>178</sup> and the bronze statue of Helgi the Lean and his wife in Akureyri, erected in 1957, which is a monument to the first Christian settler on the Eyjafjörður fjord.<sup>179</sup> It seems as if public space in Iceland were gradually changing from a Lutheran protestant space in which the local population remembers their Christian history to a tourist space in which the local population satisfies the appetite of foreign visitors for the exotic supernatural. Tourism, in a way, seems to ‘paganise’ the Icelandic landscape by filling it with elves, sorcery, and water monsters. It could yield some interesting results to study whether this change in the presentation

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<sup>175</sup> *The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery & Witchcraft, Hólmavík*, <http://www.galdrasyning.is/>, accessed 18/12/2018.

<sup>176</sup> Jón R. Hjálmarsson 2011.

<sup>177</sup> While in 2010 the official count was at 488,600 foreign tourists, in 2017 a staggering 2,224,600 people visited Iceland; this means that this period experienced an average yearly growth rate of 24.3% (see the official statistics of the Icelandic Tourist Board (Ferðamálastofa) at <https://www.ferdamalastofa.is/en/recearch-and-statistics/tourism-in-iceland-in-figures>, accessed 23/12/2018).

<sup>178</sup> *Nordic Adventure Travel – Iceland Travel Guide and Planner: Krosshólaborg*, [https://www.nat.is/travelguide/ahugav\\_st\\_krossholar.htm](https://www.nat.is/travelguide/ahugav_st_krossholar.htm), accessed 18/12/2018.

<sup>179</sup> Date after the plaque on the statue’s base.

of the Icelandic landscape to outsiders also changes how the Icelanders themselves view their land.



Fig. 5: The context of the traveller’s experience (2): a sign warning against sea monsters on a coastal road in the Icelandic Westfjords in summer 2011. © M. Egeler, 2011.



Fig. 6: The context of the traveller’s experience (3): one of a number of information boards that in the early 2010s were erected around the shore of the eastern Icelandic lake Lagarfljót to provide, in Icelandic and English, information about historical sightings of a lake monster reputed to live in the lake. © M. Egeler, 2014.

Another more general question that arises from the texts discussed above, finally, is what it means that, because of ultimately literary associations, Iceland can be stylised a ‘holy land’ worthy of a ‘pilgrimage’. How, why, and in which sense exactly do countries become ‘sacred’ and tourists turn into ‘pilgrims’?<sup>180</sup> Collingwood and Jón Stefánsson programmatically called their book, which was an account of a journey to visit the places in which the medieval Sagas of Icelanders were set, a *Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steads of Iceland*, and they use the term ‘pilgrimage’ throughout their text. Likewise, Otto Rahn speaks of a “Wallfahrt” (“pilgrimage”),<sup>181</sup> and even the socialist Auden, who pokes so much fun at previous generations of travellers, wrote in his foreword to the 1965 re-issue of his *Letters from Iceland*:

In my childhood dreams Iceland was holy ground; when, at the age of twenty-nine, I saw it for the first time, the reality verified my dream; at fifty-seven it was holy ground still [...].<sup>182</sup>

Just as the ancient, semi-mythical island of Thule in Roman geographical literature could become a wonderland of dreams in which the northernmost of all islands was imagined as an earthly paradise almost akin to the Islands of the Blessed, thus it seems that the North Atlantic island of Iceland in the imagination of European writers could attain an almost mythical quality that justified calling it ‘holy ground’ and the journey there a ‘pilgrimage’ as well.

This use of the term ‘pilgrimage’ for journeys to places of literary or historical rather than clearly religious interest of course is an established trope of travel writing. Thus, Tim Robinson, in his literary ethnography of the shoreline of Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands in Galway Bay in the West of Ireland, found the concept of a ‘pilgrimage’ compelling enough to use ‘pilgrimage’ as the subtitle of his book: *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, W.G. Sebald subtitled his *Die Ringe des Saturn* (“The Rings of Saturn”) as *Eine englische Wallfahrt* (“An English Pilgrimage”).<sup>184</sup> The topos can also be found beyond German and English literature. The Danish writer Poul Vad, for instance, claimed that “the journey to Iceland is a pilgrimage to a literature” (“Rejsen til Island er valfarten til en litteratur.”).<sup>185</sup> None

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<sup>180</sup> Cf. Norman 2016:484–486.

<sup>181</sup> Rahn 1937:382 (“Wallfahrt”); 2006:225.

<sup>182</sup> Auden and MacNeice 1967:10.

<sup>183</sup> Robinson 2008 (first published 1985).

<sup>184</sup> Sebald 2012 (first published 1995).

<sup>185</sup> Vad 1994:36.

of these texts, with the exception of Rahn, had a religious thrust in any classical sense of the word, and yet they all considered travelling to and in a country that held deep (if non-religious) meaning for them as a ‘pilgrimage’. In effect, they all seem to share the sentiment expressed by Lord Dufferin in his *Letters from High Latitudes* (1857), when he remarked that many places in the Icelandic landscape were “consecrated by some touching old-world story”:<sup>186</sup> stories connect places with a meaning that intrinsically ‘consecrates’ them, making them the destinations of journeys which in their intensity of longing for the place were felt to be nothing less than ‘pilgrimages’.

This terminology – ‘holy ground’, ‘pilgrimage’, ‘consecration’ – in a remarkable way blurs the line between touristic and religious travel, just as the Icelandic signposting of elves blurs the line between folk belief and entertainment, and between the landscape as a medium carrying religious significance,<sup>187</sup> which previously had been a space in which the history of Icelandic Christianity had been displayed, and an amusement park for outsiders. This as well might deserve further research: to which extent are religion and religious terminology, rather than being a source and indicator of ultimate meaning, maybe part of a continuum that encompasses entertainment just as much as the provision of orientation? What is the balance between entertainment and orientation? And which of these two extremes, entertainment and orientation, really dominates the role that ‘religion’ plays in tourism – and maybe even in everyday life?<sup>188</sup>

The present study has been a first attempt to approach the engagement with religion, religious history, and the supernatural in Icelandic folklore in travel writing about Iceland. While the preceding pages have asked more questions than they have been able to provide answers to, I still hope that this study has fulfilled its two main objectives: first, to present some prolegomena to the study of religion and the supernatural in travel writing about Iceland; and second, to show that this branch of literature deserves a place in the emerging discourse about religion and tourism, as it has most importantly been propagated by Michael Stausberg.<sup>189</sup> The material discussed here seems to suggest that not only have foreign ideas about religion and the supernatural in Iceland recently undergone remarkable changes in a strikingly fast and thorough

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<sup>186</sup> Lord Dufferin 1857:140.

<sup>187</sup> Cf. Mitchell 2002, esp. p. 14.

<sup>188</sup> Cf. Norman 2016:486, who notes that “we now find leisure as the primary location of religious practice and activity in the West”.

<sup>189</sup> Stausberg 2011; Stausberg 2010; Stausberg 2008. See the introduction above.

way, but also that there may be complex interdependencies between how foreign travel writers see Iceland, how Iceland presents itself to foreigners, and maybe even how Iceland sees itself. Also, the use of terms like ‘pilgrimage’ in this material suggests that the exact relationship between non-religious narratives and feelings of sacrality perhaps deserves some further investigation. Thus, if nothing else, I hope to have shown at least that travel writing about Iceland, and the interactions between Icelandic culture and foreign observers that it reflects, deserve to be an object of study in the history of religions, and can open up vistas just as wide as those Icelandic landscape views that visitors to Iceland have been commenting on since the beginning of Icelandic tourism. Given the drastic changes in Icelandic tourism, which is growing at a dramatic rate and which in 2018 has seen more than 2.3 million visitors travelling to a country of less than 350,000 inhabitants,<sup>190</sup> it is likely that the coming years will present us with many interesting developments that are worth studying as they unfold.

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<sup>190</sup> Visitor numbers after the official statistics of the Icelandic Tourist Board (Ferðamálastofa) at <https://www.ferdamalastofa.is/en/recearch-and-statistics/numbers-of-foreign-visitors>, accessed 27/12/2019).

## Appendix: Tables

**Table 1: Religion, religious history, and the supernatural in Bernhard Kahle's *Ein Sommer auf Island*.**

Pages	Short description of treatment of religion / religious history / the supernatural	Classification: A – the Church / contemporary Christianity; B – folklore; C – medieval literature & archaeology
4	Encounter with missionaries of a Christian group on their way to Iceland to convert the Icelanders	A
35	Appearance of cemeteries	A
37	At a Salvation Army meeting: conversion narratives and a minor riot	A
42– 43	Description of a (Lutheran Protestant) Icelandic Sunday morning service with notes on its Catholic-looking elements; closure of all public houses on Sundays	A
58	Last beer drunk by visiting preachers	(A)
58	The burial site of a Viking-Age settler	C
60– 63	Trolls and destructive magic explaining an important river-name in a folk-tale	B
63	A church	A
64	Revenge taken by the ghosts of drowned men	B
66	A preacher's dwelling-place	A
67– 68	A preacher, description of a church, and coffee and cakes at a vicarage	A
70	Icelandic divine services	A
71	A preacher's hospitality	A
76– 77	The volcano Hekla as an entrance to hell; medieval Icelandic ideas of a hell of ice	B
80– 81	Folklore about semi-supernatural outlaws in hidden valleys with their own priests and churches	B
82	A hospitable priest	A
83– 86	A hospitable priest; staying overnight in a church; contemporary Icelandic spiritual poetry; the appearance of the church and churchyard	A
88– 89	Seeming traces of Catholicism in Iceland misleading; population is overwhelmingly orthodox Protestant	A
99– 100	A troll story	B
105– 106	Odin; a bishop's misdemeanour	C / A
108	A church farm	A
110	Former use of churches as accommodation for travellers	A

118– 119	The conversion of Iceland from paganism to Christianity	C / A
123	History of the episcopal see in Reykjavík	A
124	A priests' seminary	A
126	A collection of old ecclesiastical items	A
130	A service as part of the opening of parliament	A
131	Lunch with (among others) the Bishop	A
132– 133	Dependency of the pre-Christian mythology of Iceland from its natural environment	C
134	A cemetery (with the grave of a famous poet)	A
138	A church	A
139– 140	A ghost story	B
143– 152	Two pre-Christian poems by Egill Skallagrímsson	C
154	A story about a clairvoyant priest	A / B
156– 160	Hallgrímur Pjetursson: priest, spiritual poet, and magician	A / B
162, 164	A sick priest's hospitality	A
165– 166	A corrupt priest	A
172	A church farm	A
172– 175	Priests, bishops, poets, and magicians	A / B
176	"holy fish"	A?
179, 181– 182	A former monastery	A
188	Omens announcing a medieval battle	B / C
193	A church	A
194– 195	A former monastery	A
195– 202	A folk story about hauntings at Christmas, outlaws (which in a variant of the story are replaced by elves), and a hidden valley	B
209	A collection of baptismal fonts	A
211– 215	Séra Matthías Jochumsson, priest and poet	A
219	The Christianisation of Iceland	A / C
220	The putative remains of a pagan temple	C
221– 222	The adjacent church and its tomb stones; mixing of pagan and Christian memories at the same place	A



222– 226	Goðafoss, “waterfall of the gods”: the drowning of pagan idols in the fall at the coming of Christianity; the saga-hero Grettir fighting monsters in a cave hidden under the fall	C / A
227	A parsonage	A
229	The leading figure of Christianisation ordering a murder	A / C
232	A church	A
236– 237	The interdependence of Icelandic pre-Christian mythology and the Icelandic natural environment	C
243	Pagan mythology and the Icelandic landscape in contemporary Icelandic poetry	C
244	An alleged pre-Christian burial mound	C / B
245	A priest	A
246	Some rocks formerly believed to have been inhabited by elves	B
247– 251	Two ghost stories	B
251	A church and beautiful cemetery	A
252	Another ghost story, a saint, and a healing well	A / B
255– 258	Hospitable reception in a parsonage and a ghost story about this parsonage; the local cemetery	A / B
262	The death of the saga-hero Grettir through sorcery	C
265	A former monastery	A
266– 269	The Snæfellsjökull mountain and its giant	C
269– 270	The burial place of the early Christian settler Unnr turned into a pagan sacred site	A / C
273	A trip with the provost of the cathedral of Reykjavík	A
275, 278	A miracle-working bishop, a former monastery, and a little church	A / B

**Table 2: Religion, religious history, and the supernatural in W. G. Collingwood’s and Jón Stefánsson’s *A Pilgrimage to the Saga-Steeds of Iceland*. Illustrations are given separate entries (on gray background).**

Pages	Short description of treatment of religion / religious history / the supernatural	Classification: A – the Church / contemporary Christianity; B – folklore; C – medieval literature & archaeology
2–3	A saga-age technique to divine a place of settlement	C
4	A saga-age sorcerer	C
6	A clergyman predicting his own death	A / B
7	A saga-age technique to divine a place of settlement; Reykjavík cathedral	A / C

9–10	The conversion of Iceland	A / C
11	A church	A
12	A church and parsonage	A
14	The conversion of Iceland	A / C
17	A church	A
18 Fig. 15	The church at Haukadal	A
18	A saint, a missionary, and the conversion of Iceland	A
19	The church at Haukadal	A
19 Fig. 16	Ringplate of Haukadal church door	A
20–21	The episcopal see at Skálholt	A
20 Fig. 17	The church at Skálholt	A
22	Saga-age omens	C
24	The church at Oddi; the magician Sæmund	A
24 Fig. 21	The church at Oddi	A
25 Fig. 22	View from the churchyard at Oddi, with tombs	A
26 Fig. 23	View from the parsonage at Breida-Bolstad	A
27	The church at Breidabolstad; its ritual vessels connected with stories about the fairies; the church at Keldur	A / B
27 Fig. 24a	The fairy chalice from the church at Breidabolstad	A / B
27 Fig. 24b	Central enamel of the paten from Breidabolstad, which has “mysterious powers”	A / B
28–29	Saga-age pagan burial and a visionary appearance of the buried hero; good omen evoking the god Odin	C
29 Fig. 25	Gunnar’s burial mound	C
29	Friendly priest helping travellers	A
37	The undead inhabitant of a burial mound; the alleged ruins of a pre-Christian temple	C
38	The peak of the ogress	B
39 Fig. 35	The peak of the ogress	B
39	Saga-age murder at a temple	C
44	The author of the Edda	C
45 Fig. 39	View of Reykholt with its church	A
48	The church and parsonage of Gilsbakki	A

48 Fig. 41	View of the church and parsonage of Gilsbakki	A
49–50	A mysterious, paradisiacal hidden valley from <i>Grettis saga</i> ruled by a “half-troll” and “giant”; the cave of Surt	C
51 Fig. 44	Surt’s cave	C
52	A lava-field named from a “landwight”	C
56	A saga-age werewolf, a burial mound, and dealing with a dangerous corpse	C
57 Fig. 48	There werewolf’s alleged burial mound	C / B
58	The alleged grave of Skallagrim	C / B
58 Fig. 49	The alleged grave of Skallagrim	C / B
Fig. 50 (colour plate)	A view of Borg with its church	A
59	The grave of the saga-hero Kjartan	C
59 Fig. 51	The grave of the saga-hero Kjartan	C
61	The friendly “landwight” of Snæfellsjökull	
62	A stone connected with the translation of the body of a saga-protagonist to Skálholt	C / B
64–65	A saga-story about witches	C
65 Fig. 56	The abode of one of the witches	C
66–67	A saga-story of hauntings	C
71	An excavation of a Viking Age burial and a saga-story about a dead man complaining from the grave	C
75	Places with names with religious referents: Stöd, “the Coffin”; Helgrindur, “Hell gates”; Kirkjufell, “Kirkfell”	B
75 Fig. 65	Kirkjufell and Stöd	B
76	A place named from giants; a fairy horse from the medieval Book of Settlements	B / C
80	Saga-age immigration to Iceland by a pagan settler because of disgust with the spread of Christianity elsewhere	C
82	Thorsnes: important pagan place of worship and later monastery	A / C
85	Hofs-vog, “Temple-voe”	C
86–87	Thórólf Most-beard, his “Temple-steads” Hof-stadir, his settlement following an oracle, and the site which tradition indicates as the site determined by this oracle; Thórólf’s temple	C / B
86 Fig. 75	The place of the oracle	C
87	Kirkju-flót, “Kirk-field”, the probable site of the temple	C / A

87 Fig. 76	Hof-stadir from the shore, with Kirkju-flót, “Kirk-field”, the probable site of the temple	C / A
88–91	Stories and views connected with the pagan temple of Thórólf Most-beard and related sites	C
89 Fig. 78	Dritsker, a site connected with the pagan temple	C
90 Fig. 79	Helgafell, a site connected with the pagan temple	C
91–95	The conversion and building of a church and monastery at Helgafell; Guðrún, the first nun in Iceland; dream-appearance of a witch; the modern church	A / C
93 Fig. 81	The grave of the first nun in Iceland	A / C
94 Fig. 80	The church at Helgafell	A / C
95–98	Places connected with pagan human sacrifice	C
96 Fig. 82	The altar stone on which humans allegedly were sacrificed	C
97 Fig. 83	The place where victims allegedly were doomed to be sacrificed	C
98 Fig. 84	The place where victims allegedly were doomed to be sacrificed	C
99	Saga-age magic	C
102– 104	A saga-age revenant	C
103 Fig. 88	The revenant’s burial place	C
105	A monastery	A
106 Fig. 91	Patreks-Fjord	A / C
107	A Christian settlement story involving Patreks-Fjord	A / C
108	A saga-age dream-vision	C
113	Difficulties of performing normal religious observances in the climate of Hornstrandir	A
114	A witch	C
114 Fig. 98	A mountain named from the witch	C
117 Fig. 101	The church of Saudafell	A
118	The death of a sorcerer	B
119 Fig. 103	The church of Vatnshorn	A

121	A saga-age mentioning of a temple	C
121 <i>Fig.</i> 105	The alleged remains of a temple	C
124	A church	A
126 <i>Fig.</i> 109	Hjardarholt with its church	A
129 <i>Fig.</i> 111	Ljárskógar: the temple	C
129– 131	A saga-age church	A / C
131 <i>Fig.</i> 113	The alleged ruins of this church	A
132	A saga-age settlement oracle	C
133 <i>Fig.</i> 114	Hvamm with its church	A
135	Krosshólar: a saga-age Christian place of worship	A / C
136 <i>Fig.</i> 116	A panorama including Krosshólar	A / C
141	The ruins of an alleged saga-age temple, its altar stone, and a formerly sacred field still treated as untouchable	B / C
143 <i>Fig.</i> 121	Panorama with the alleged altar stone	B / C
146	A saga-age pagan priest	C
150	A witch	C
151	Tröllakirkja, “giants’ kirk”	B
161	The miracle-rich settlement of Ingimund the Old; a church ruin	C / A
165– 166	Grettir and Glám: a saga ghost story	C
169	The death of Grettir by curse and witchcraft	C
170	Hörgárdal, a pagan sacred place	C
171– 173	The churchyard of Akureyri	A
172 <i>Fig.</i> 146	The churchyard of Akureyri	A

173	The partly-Christian settler Helgi the Lean founding his farm Krists-nes, "Christ's ness"	A / C
174	The coming of Christianity	A / C
176	A sorcerer; a temple; Hrafnkel, the priest of Frey	C
178	The sorcerer Lodmund the old and the naming of his fjord	C
178 <i>Fig.</i> <i>149</i>	Lodmundar-Fjord	C

**Table 3: Religion, religious history, and the supernatural in W.H. Auden's and Louis MacNeice's *Letters from Iceland*.**

Pages (1st ed. 1937)	Pages (rev. ed. 1967)	Short description of treatment of religion / religious history / the supernatural	Classification: A – the Church / contemporary Christianity; B – folklore; C – medieval literature & archaeology
—	10	Iceland as holy ground	—
25	24	The bagging of a saga-age bishop	A
27	25	First impression of Reykjavík: "Lutheran, drab and remote"; the Roman Catholic church one of its main buildings	A
31	29	Irish saints in early Iceland	A
32	30	Irish hermits in early Iceland	A
39 (ill. inserted on plate before p. 33)	37 (no ill.)	A painting of the Last Supper in the museum in Reykjavík	A
62	60	Seabulls and seacows; lack of religious attitude in Reykjavík	B / A
Plate facing p. 65	—	Landscape drawing with church	A
66	64	Representation of the clergy in Icelandic chess pieces	A
66–67	64–65	Absence of nudity from Eddic mythology	C
67–68	65–66	Dominance of Lutheran Protestantism; survivals of Catholic elements; behaviour during church services; literary activity of the clergy; etc.	A
72	70	An Icelandic translation of a papal text	A
73	71	Icelandic Christian behaviour	A
74	72	Sleeping in churches and meeting clergymen	A

78–79	76–77	Divine service in Reykjavík; flag-hoisting on Sundays	A
83–87	81–85	A minister's account of a volcanic eruption which started during a service	A
88	86	Extract from a parish register	A
92	90	An Icelandic church service	A
94–96	92–94	A saga-age legal formula containing Christian religious elements	A
95	93	Pagan elements in said formula	C
96	94	Pagan magic and sacrifices	C
114	112	The farm where Hallgrímur Pétursson lived	A
115	113	Books of psalm tunes common in Icelandic households	A
117	115	The oldest church in Iceland; embroidery with Christian mottos in a hotel room	A
118–119	116–117	The episcopal church in Hólar	A
124–135	122–133	A discussion with the ghost of the saga-hero Grettir	C
124, 127, 131, 133, 134	122, 125, 129, 131, 132	Christian motifs used in this discussion	(A)
139	137	Ásbyrgi created by Odin's horse	C
140–141	138–139	Icelandic clergy; Norse attitudes to orthodoxy; Icelandic private cemeteries	A
Plate facing p. 144	—	“Christian and Mr. Worldly Wiseman”	A
145	143	Ghosts in an Icelandic lullaby	B
148–149	146–147	Dreaming of ghosts after reading a book about spiritualism	—
150, 152–155	148, 150–153	An Icelandic folk story about trolls and an elf-woman	B
151–152	149–150	Icelandic proverbs about St. Olaf, the devil, and bishops	A
160	158	Hitler wanting to substitute the Eddas for the Lutheran prayerbook in Iceland	A / C
184	182	Tourists singing Christian hymns	—
189	187	Valhalla (the name of the hotel at Thingvellir)	(C)
190	188	The church at Thingvellir	A
194	192	Iceland likeable because of the absence of oppressive religiosity there; introduction of Christianity a step forward in comparison to the world described in the sagas	A / C

198	196	Spiritualism and mysticism in vogue in Iceland	A
205	200	Northern myths influenced one of the authors already when he was little	C
214	210	The tourist's early-childhood exposure to Icelandic folk-tales and mythology	B / C
220, 226	216, 222	The authors breaking the house-rules in an Icelandic Salvation Army Hostel by drinking and playing cards	A
223	219	Icelandic picture of a girl protected by a guardian angel	A
230– 231	226– 227	The end of the world according to Norse mythology	C
259	251	Iceland a land of myth – but not for the authors	C

**Table 4: Religion, religious history, and the supernatural in Iceland in Otto Rahn's *Luzifers Hofgesind*. (Only the final chapters of the book, which deal specifically with Rahn's visit to Iceland as part of an NS-delegation, have been considered.)**

Pages  (re- ed. 2006)	Short description of treatment of religion / religious history / the supernatural	Classification: A – the Church / contemporary Christianity; B – folklore; C – medieval literature & archaeology
220	Ship passage to Iceland under the sign of the swastika; suppression of Norwegian paganism by the evil Christian saint St. Olaf; settlement of Iceland by Norwegian pagans fleeing religious suppression	A / C
221	First settlement of Iceland guided by pagan oracles; the pagan holy mountain Helgafell and the settlement and sacralisation of the peninsula of Þórsnes	C
222	More early settlers of Iceland guided by pagan oracles; presence of Irish anchoritic monks in Iceland before the Norse settlement	A / C
225	Negative experience of a Christian pilgrim to Palestine set in parallel to Rahn's negative experience of Iceland	—
228	Hekla as entrance to Hell	A
230	Snorri Sturluson driven by a longing for the pagan faith of his fore-fathers; night of the solstice in the land of the Edda	C
231– 232	The spirituality of ancient India	—
232– 239	A visit to rock formations near Reykholt as starting point for quoting a long excerpt from a work by the Austrian anthroposophist Otto Julius Hartmann: Germanic paganism as a blood-based nature religion; importance of the landscape for the cult of the pre-Christian deities; the religiosity that characterised prehistory inaccessible to modern man; prioritisation of the <i>Volk</i> over the individual; the <i>Volk</i> created by the revelation of its deity; the greatness of ancient cult, now	C



	misunderstood; a theory of sacrifice; the importance of mythical powers (gods and heroes); the Edda as a reflex of National Socialist blood ideology. The night of the solstice in Iceland characterised by a singing like the music of the spheres	
237	Destruction of pre-Christian sanctuaries by the Church	(A)

**Table 5: Religion, religious history, and the supernatural in Tina Bauer's *Ein Jahr in Island*.**

Pages (1st ed. 2011)	Pages (rev. ed. 2016)	Short description of treatment of religion / religious history / the supernatural	Classification: A – the Church / contemporary Christianity; B – folklore; C – medieval literature & archaeology
12	12	A church	A
15	15	Reykjavík city church (Hallgrímskirkja)	A
16	16	Reykjavík city church (Hallgrímskirkja)	A
19	19	Reykjavík city church (Hallgrímskirkja)	A
21	21	Reykjavík city church (Hallgrímskirkja)	A
27	27	Whaling as a sacred tradition; trolls (metaphorical usage)	B
28	28	Love magic	B
29– 30	29–30	A dream of elves and trolls	B
31	31	Supernatural beings in Kjarval's paintings	B
32	32	A dream of elves	B
43	43	Trolls (metaphorical usage)	B
53	53	A church with an altarpiece painted by Kjarval depicting the local elf mountain	A / B
54	54	The elf mountain from the altar piece	B / A
58	58	Evoking the queen of the elves	B
61	61	A ghost (specifically, a granny's ghost)	B
68	68	Elves, sorcery, and the museum of sorcery	B
72	72	Trolls (metaphorical usage)	B
73	73	Elves (metaphorical usage)	B
76	76	Trolls (metaphorical usage)	B
84	84	Angels (metaphorical usage)	A
89	89	Elves and love magic	B
119– 129	118– 128	Christmas	A
126– 127	125– 126	Icelandic Christmas trolls	A / B

133	132	Elves, trolls, and other supernatural beings on the 13 <sup>th</sup> day after Christmas	A / B
134– 136	133– 135	Elves, trolls, contact to a dead granny, and contemporary Icelandic witchcraft (including a failed prophecy by pendulum)	B
137	136	A contemporary feast as a continuation of a pagan custom	B / C
154	153	Trolls (metaphorical usage)	B
158	157	A priest helping with establishing an anthroposophical children's home	A
165	164	Elves and trolls	B
175	174	Playful invocation of Thor against an annoying neighbour	C
184	183	A mermaid in art	B
186	185	Elves and a church	B / A

**Table 6: Religion, religious history, and the supernatural in Sarah Moss's *Names for the Sea*.**

Pages	Short description of treatment of religion / religious history / the supernatural	Classification: A – the Church / contemporary Christianity; B – folklore; C – medieval literature & archaeology
21	The church at Kópavogur	A
23	An old cemetery	A
43	Hallgrímur Pétursson and Hallgrímskirkja; the church farm on Heimaey	A
44	A vicar	A
55– 56	The graveyard on Heimaey	A
82	A church	A
83	Protestant faith	A
86	Hallgrímskirkja	A
93	Christmas paraphernalia	A
103	The church at Kópavogur; the graveyard	A
116	American Protestant attitudes of a foreigner living in Iceland	A
118	Christmas decorations	A
123– 124	Advent celebrations without religious content; the Yule Lads	A / B
125– 126	Run-up to and going home for Christmas	A
132	The retreat of the trolls and fireworks at the end of Christmas	A / B
133	The church at Seltjarnarnes	A
136	A relative of a priest	A

138	Christmas break	A
139	A Christmas tree used for a bonfire	A
152	Independence Party patriotism described as a cult	—
154	Xenophobic fear of Muslims	A
169	Passing a church	A
177	Driving past churches	A
191	Joking reference to elves	B
199	Stones inhabited by elves; fear of the Devil	B / A
200– 201	A pond inhabited by a monster; a fairy woman living in a stone; a stone that is the church of the elves	B
202– 205	A woman thought to be an elf woman; elves stealing objects; a clairvoyant woman seeing elves; belief in ghosts	B
206– 207	Belief in dreams and fortune-telling	B
208	Prohibition against using the names of drowned men	B
209	Seyðisfjörður church	A
214	Nazis liking Iceland as the land of Wagner's gods; no Jews in Iceland	(C)
215	Discussion of the author's partly Jewish background	(A)
217– 237	Chapter <i>The Hidden People</i> : the author visits a clairvoyant woman; the Icelandic belief in elves	B
239	The episcopal centre of Skálholt	A
241– 242	A medieval church door	A
243– 244	Visit to a hotel which markets a landscape filled with elves and elf stones	B
250– 261	Visit to a hotel which markets a landscape filled with elves and elf stones (part 2)	B
262	Quoting Auden on the death of a bishop	A
264	Fairy stories as a way of domesticating fear and an instinct about the landscape	B
293	Anti-Catholic snipe	— (not descriptive of Iceland)
295	A playful reference to elves	B
318	The church at Kópavogur and the spire of Hallgrímskirkja	A
321	Christmas back at home (without doing anything religious)	—
324	The church in Seltjarnarnes	A
325	Wandering a road in the direction of the cathedral	A
326	The church at Kópavogur	A
331	Helgafell, the Holy Mountain (but without mention of the mythological saga-story about why it is holy)	C
332	The church in Stykkishólmur	A
333	The church in Stykkishólmur	A
334	Christmas ornaments in July	A

337	Passing through the Icelandic landscape for the author like watching God in the act of creation	—
348	Giant (metaphorical usage)	B
350	Birth of Christ as a temporal reference point	—
351	Parking beside a church	A
352	Smell of a greenhouse in winter like the breath of God	—
353– 354	The church at Siglufjörður as the end point of a street	A

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