

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

THE RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT OF HALLDÓR LAXNESS  
IN HIS FICTIONAL PROSE WORKS

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Hilary Virginia Carby-Hall BA

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used for references to Laxness's novels and collections of short stories:

|         |                                  |
|---------|----------------------------------|
| ATÓ     | <i>Atómstöðin</i>                |
| BAR     | <i>Barn náttúrunnar</i>          |
| BRE     | <i>Brekkukotsannáll</i>          |
| FÓT     | <i>Fótatak manna</i>             |
| GER     | <i>Gerpla</i>                    |
| HEF     | <i>Heiman eg fór</i>             |
| HEI, I  | <i>Heimsljós, Part 1</i>         |
| HEI, II | <i>Heimsljós, Part 2</i>         |
| ÍSL     | <i>Íslandsklukkan</i>            |
| KRI     | <i>Kristnihald undir Jökli</i>   |
| NS      | <i>Nokkrar sögur</i>             |
| PAR     | <i>Paradísarheimt</i>            |
| SAL     | <i>Salka Valka</i>               |
| SJÁ     | <i>Sjálfstætt fólk</i>           |
| SSK     | <i>Sjöstafakverið</i>            |
| TÖF     | <i>Sjö töframenn</i>             |
| UND     | <i>Undir Helgahnúk</i>           |
| VEF     | <i>Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír</i> |

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the religious and spiritual development of Halldór Laxness, the Icelandic novelist, poet, playwright and essayist, who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1955. He was born into a Lutheran family in Iceland in 1902. In his teens he began to move away from the religion of his parents and grandparents, and in 1923 he became a Catholic, reverting to the earlier religion of Iceland. This was a somewhat remarkable step for an Icelander to take in those days. After some time spent in a monastery in Luxembourg, a time of great fervour and study, the young man distanced himself from the Catholic Church, moved by the condition of the people in post-First-World-War Europe and America. He seemed unable to see any practical, workable way emerging from the teachings of the Church; they were fine teachings, but irreconcilable with the nature of man, and, moreover, there seemed to be a lack of living examples to serve as models for him for the Christian life to be led in the world. There were models of monks and contemplatives, but that seemed all. Laxness became a socialist; man became his highest ideal at this, his next stage. He then flirted with Communism, but did not commit himself further. During and after the Second World War, throughout his middle years, he strove and campaigned as a pacifist. A wide reader and an inveterate traveller, he came under the influence of much Eastern thought. This influence first showed itself in his work in 1932, but became more pronounced later on. The fiction of his later years is characterised by a serenity: earlier tensions and dilemmas seem to be resolved; man is no

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longer the only goal; there is balance and harmony; there seems little doubt that Laxness returns to God, but this time to an uncanonical God, the 'Wisdom and Spirit of the universe'.<sup>1</sup>

In writing of Laxness's religious views the idea of religion should not be limited to theology or doctrine or any strictly applied or accepted formula, but should be understood in a much wider and all-embracing sense as a pulling of man towards God, on the one hand, and because of this pull towards God, as a pulling of man towards man on the other. It is a dual attraction, a related compulsion and devotion. For any searcher with a background in Christianity, it is hard to separate the first two commandments, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart . . . and thy neighbour as thyself'.<sup>2</sup> Laxness is seen to obey the first in his youth, the second in his manhood, and to combine the two in his maturity. His love of God in his early years is marked by his zeal as a Catholic, which comes over in his novels, his social articles, his private correspondence. His love of man, which follows, is marked by an indignation on behalf of suffering mankind and this deepens into a rare quality of compassion. Although his work in his second phase seems to be cut off from religion, it is only cut off from formal religion and his compassion is of a religious, almost holy nature. For this reason it is desirable to look at his developing attitude to suffering and to the sorrows of the people whose cause he speaks for. His love of God combined with a love of man is seen in what seems to me his greatest work, *Kristnihald undir Jökli*.

Because this wider kind of religion is really about relationship

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with God, this means that there is not a simple and passive, unquestioning acceptance on the part of the seeker. On the contrary, everything is questioned and put to the test. All the stages of relationship are present in Laxness's religious life as it is reflected in his fictional prose: first love, high expectation, disillusion, doubt, anger, resistance, rebellion, new and unique experiment, rediscovery, acceptance, capitulation and joy, all in varying degrees. For this reason, Laxness's reactions against the Church and established religion are as much part of his spiritual journey as his youthful conversion; his anger and his cynicism are as important as his early enthusiasm, as are his irreverences and jibes. But his anger is often righteous and not only personal, and as such it is the expression of a religious feeling for the sacredness of life; such is the case when it comes to war; and his love of peace is thus the dream of the good. Therefore his attitude to war and to peace is examined in this study, but only to the extent that it is an expression of a religious quality. The political expression of these views I have not touched upon, because this has been done by others, and it does not fall within the scope of the work. The same pertains to his treatment of women, his views on the education of children, his nationalism and his role as an artist; in as much as they demonstrate a religious quality, a quality of soul, a profound and deeper than humanist love or reverence for the creature and for life, then they too have been examined.

I have paid particular attention to what would appear to be the deep impression made on Laxness by the mystical. There are signs

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of this during the writing of *Undir Helgahnúk* and *Heiman eg fór*, that is at the very start of his Catholic phase. But unlike the formalism of Catholicism, this fascination with the mystical endures and deepens. His perception becomes like that of Wordsworth, when 'with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony and the deep power of joy', he sees 'into the life of things' <sup>3</sup> and shows knowledge of the 'types and symbols of eternity'. <sup>4</sup>

The mystical attraction in Laxness is coupled with a struggle to forge a way to the One Supreme and Unifying Spirit beyond and on the other side of a sometimes restricting religious thought. 'Struggle' is the right word to use, for such a quest is never plain, and necessarily brings much conventional criticism in its wake. But Laxness does not stand alone, and I have turned to other seekers and discoverers to support his own endeavours. Kazantzakis and Hermann Hesse I have found especially thought-provoking and stimulating; but it is the Christian theologians and spiritual leaders that I have found most helpful in this matter. Walter Johnston's works on East-West mysticism, Bede Griffith's on the comparableness of Hinduism and Christianity, Juan Mascaró's sensitive admiration for all religious truth have all helped me to see that Laxness is one of them, one of those prepared to mine for the gold of universal worth. It is the tendency of the religious thinkers of this age to seek in this way; too much has been destroyed by division in the past. Men of vision seek underlying unity, and where there is difference - respect.

The tendency of the twentieth century to turn to the East for spiritual and philosophical inspiration and direction seems

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generally to be caused by a disillusionment with Western culture and Western Christianity. As far as Christianity is concerned it is my view that there are grounds for much of this disillusionment, in that the Western Churches have become preoccupied with regulations, scholasticism and action. By doing so they have left unfulfilled the spiritual longings of man; God is remote and associated with punishment; man is seen solely as a sinner; God is not within. To turn away is a very natural reaction, but it is a simplification; it is a giving up. That which is sought for in the non-Christian East is already contained in Christianity; it has never been lost in the Eastern Churches, and it is preserved in many traditions in the West too, though, lamentably, little prominence has been granted the spirituality of the West, so that an enormous dimension has been neglected, or altogether passed by. Laxness is one of these who appeared to have turned away from Christianity. My argument is that his apparent turning away is only a superficial reaction; he protests too much for it to be an abandoning; what he seeks is not anything new but that which he loved before; he seeks confirmation for old ideas in a new atmosphere. He may have laid aside the external Christianity of the West, but he was bred a Christian, he has a Christian mentality, and he cannot seek as anything other than a Christian. That he seeks tranquillity and spiritual values is a desirable redressing of the balance.

I have examined each of Laxness's fictional prose works in turn, in chronological order. I have finished my study with *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, although there are semi-fictional works after this



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date. This seems to me to be the crowning point on Laxness's spiritual road. After this there is descent. There is the parish chronicle *Innansveitarkronika*, and a series of what Laxness refers to as 'essay-romans' <sup>5</sup> of which *Guðsgjafapula* is the first. The style is a blending of recollections and fiction, and the works seem to appeal almost exclusively to Icelanders; there is little of religious significance, except an intensifying of cynicism, which matches ill with the mood of *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. It is as if Laxness has said all that was of the greatest importance to him, and having said it, he retreats, almost in embarrassment, and indulges in trivialities. I have therefore chosen to close at his highest point. Laxness has also written a number of plays, but I do not deal with them here. Not having had the opportunity to see them performed, I should be considering them at too great a disadvantage.

Little research has been made into Laxness's religious development. It is not an aspect of his writing that interests the Icelander on the whole. I am, however, much indebted to the work of Erik Sønderholm, always perceptive and deeply rooted in the Bible, and to the wide, thorough and reliable studies of Peter Hallberg. Séra Gunnar Kristjánsson's personal help and writing have been stimulating and supportive. He is of the opinion that Laxness's work cannot be properly appreciated without a good understanding of his religious background, and feels, in accordance with T.S.Eliot, that 'literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint'. <sup>6</sup> I am indebted also to the studies of Sigfús

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Daðason and Kristinn Jóhannesson relating to Laxness and Taoism, and Hermann Pálsson's enlightened article on *Atómstöðin* has greatly encouraged me, in the face of criticism which has generally seen nothing but Taoism in Laxness's later work.

I should like to thank Sveinn Skorri Höskuldsson and Finnbogi Guðmundsson for their friendliness and help at the University of Iceland and the National Library respectively.

Finally I should like to express my most sincere thanks to Halldór Laxness and to his wife Auður Sveinsdóttir for their welcome and encouragement, and their patience before my impertinence at undertaking this task - with my especial gratitude to Halldór Laxness for a life's work that has embodied and put before us so much that is the greatest and the smallest in man.

1. William Wordsworth, 'Influence of Natural Objects', *Poetical Works*, p. 70.
2. Matthew 37-39.
3. William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey', *Poetical Works*, p. 163.
4. William Wordsworth, 'The Simplon Pass', *Poetical Works*, p. 147.
5. Postscript to *Guðsgjafapula*, p. 305.
6. T. S. Eliot, 'Religion and Literature', quoted by Gunnar Kristjánsson in 'Religiöse Gestalten und christliche Motive im Romanwerk "Heimsljós" von Halldór Laxness', p. 18.

## CHAPTER 1 - BARN NÁTTÚRUNNAR 1919

*Barn náttúrunnar* was published in 1919. Laxness was only sixteen at the time of writing it. In the preface to the third edition in 1964 Laxness writes that on rereading this, his first published novel, he has come to the conclusion that this is his best book, for the reason that 'hún geymir óm bernskunnar'. He relates here that a friend of his considers the book to be 'í senn útdráttur, niðurstaða og þversumma af öllu því sem [Halldór] hefði skrifað síðan; að síðari bækur [Halldórs] væru allar eintóm greinargerð fyrir þeim niðurstöðum, sem komist er að í Barni náttúrunnar'. It is indeed the work of a young boy yet it shows remarkable maturity, in spite of understandable psychological chasms. The author has the vision of youth on his side but he lacks experience. It is a work about seeking: seeking the meaning of life, about the choice to be made between gathering or wasting, creating or destroying, between reality or illusion, between being a labourer, a tiller of the soil or a parasite. The value given to manual work becomes central, while the search for God is central all the time, so that Matthías Johannessen can say 'loks er guð svo nálægur, án þess honum séu gerð sérstök skil, að vel mætti komast svo að orði að hann sé aðalpersóna sögunnar. Leitin að honum er leiðsögustef bókarinnar'.

While Matthías Johannessen suggests that God is the principal character, Peter Hallberg considers that it is Randver.<sup>2</sup> But of the human beings in the novel, Randver and Hulda are of almost equal importance. Randver is an Icelandic businessman, a capitalist, recently returned from Canada, disillusioned and with the burden of the guilt of the exploiter and, in addition, the

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guilt of a man's death upon him; Hulda is a child of nature, untamed, spontaneous, almost totally, but not entirely lacking in moral sense, who even as a teenager has the guilt of a young man's suicide on her conscience, for some small conscience she has. Each of them comes to a cross-roads in life. Randver is consciously seeking to rectify the course of his life and comes to his decision first. After his decision, there is clearly going to be some tension between the two - who become engaged - for Hulda is only seeking freedom and pleasure. After a crisis there is a rift between them and Hulda in her turn is left to review her own life and the catastrophes that she has caused. She opens herself to conversion and to a new outlook, but even this she cannot do without causing further tragedy. However, the unhappy couple become happy again and set out on a new path of work, giving thanks to God.

In *Heiman eg fór* Laxness writes, 'tali ég um viðburði og æfintýr, þá á ég við eitthvað sem borið hefur fyrir sál mína' (HEF,11). This interest in the soul rather than in the external events of a character's life is marked even in *Barn náttúrunnar* as soon as Randver is introduced: 'Svipur hans bar óneitanlega merki um að sál hans hefði margt að geyma' (BAR,17). Laxness already has insight into the central core of the man's potentiality. He can already write of such things as 'insta eðli sitt, hið sanna, einlæga og góða' (BAR,77). Randver does not return to Iceland for material reasons. His is a moral and religious return. While working abroad he has become deeply conscious of moral obligations to one's neighbour within one's

work. His early conversation with Stefán, Hulda's father, demonstrates this. Stefán is portrayed as a harsh man to deal with: 'Ég hef . . . hvergi gefið grið, hvorki ekkjunni né auðmanninum' (BAR, 24), and when he speaks of America as being a place where profits can be made, Randver replies seriously: 'Já. Fyrir þá sem eru séðir og lægnir í því að véla náúngann' (BAR, 25). It is worth noting at this stage that Laxness's vocabulary is heavily religious throughout the novel. So here in these few lines the allusions to widow and neighbour are not without significance. <sup>3</sup> Randver has experienced the emptiness of a life led in service only to himself and money and now he looks for a new direction in which opposite values must come to the fore: 'Það er einhversstaðar spurt á þann veg hvað manningum gagnaði, þótt hann eignaðist allan heiman, ef hann biði tjón á sálu sinni' (BAR, 27). <sup>4</sup> He continues 'Líklega er það nú svo með okkur flesta að það er meira hugsað um að safna í kornhlöður heldur en þeim fjársjóðum sem hvorki mölur né ryð fá grandað' (BAR, 27). <sup>5</sup> He has gained gold but not happiness. Now he is looking for 'andlega korn' (BAR, 28). This is happiness: 'Lífsgleðin er hið eina sem getur gefið okkur himnaríki. Ekki það himnaríki sem prestarnir prédika okkur, land hinna útvöldu fyrir ofan stjörnurnar, því satt að segja trúir ég ekki að slíkt himnaríki sé til, heldur býr hún okkur himnaríki í sál okkar sjálfra, land friðar og sælu . . . Nú er ég í leit lífsgleðinnar; leit að guði' (BAR, 28-29). Here right at the start of his literary career Laxness's dislike of preaching and the evasion of reality comes out clearly. God is not seen in terms of a heavenly compensation for earthly tribulation. This is

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carried through all his work, with the exception of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, until Jón Prímus in *Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968) stands as a figure embodying the very idea of the kingdom of God being not beyond but within.

Throughout *Barn náttúrunnar* the actual idea of God is somewhat vague. God is not the god of Christian doctrine, nor biblical scripture, though the text is impregnated with scriptural quotations; nor is He discovered through any private revelation or religious experience; He is not specifically the Creator, nor in any sense a Redeemer or Sanctifier. God is perhaps a nice feeling you get when everything is going well and when you are contributing to the well-being of your fellow-men as a result of physical labour on the land. It comes over quite positively that it is necessary to be leading the right sort of life to be happy at all, and then, and only then can God be found. The steps are in that order. As Randver says at the end of the book: 'Sá sem hefur fundið gleðina, - hina sönnu lífsgleði, hann er á veginum til guðs' (BAR, 203-204); by contrast, he recalls his time in America, when he degraded his human nature, with these words: 'Þá finnst mér ég hafi staðið niðri í helvíti' (BAR, 29).

Randver returns to his homeland, in search of God, but with deadened feelings. He suffers from a cold intellectualism, and he believes he is a confirmed misogynist. It is when he has recovered his human feelings that he is able to make some movement towards belief in God. The two people who are instrumental in bringing about this thaw in him are Hulda, the child of nature, and an elderly Icelandic farmer.

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To begin with Randver wavers between a poetic idea of God and downright disbelief. He recalls the memory of his mother and the Christian faith she had instilled into him: 'Hann mintist enn trúnaðartraustins til guðs sem hún hafði fyllt sál hans með á hverju kveldi. Hvað það hafði þá verið örugg sannfæring hans að varðeingill frá guði vekti við höfðagafli hans' (BAR,32). His mother had set before him Christ as a model for his life, but he has failed all her Christian expectations: 'Hann var trúlaus, ekki efandi, heldur bölsýnismaður. Guð var ekki til, forsjón ekki heldur' (BAR,33). Nevertheless, there is a deposit of faith within him. In his despair he calls on darkness and storm to comfort him, for, as Laxness puts it: 'enginn gat lífað nema hann ætti athvarf', and he cries out, 'Hret! Ó, ljá mér huggun! Hregg! Ó, gef mér aflíð!' (BAR,35). This deposit of faith is drawn on again when he is led to examine his past life and compare its barrenness with the fruitfulness of the farmers'. Here there is a conflict between his intellect, which denies, and his irrational inner man, which confirms:

Raunar trúði hann hvorki á guð né eilíft líf. Og hann fann sárt til þessa trúleysis síns. Hann ófundaði þá sem lifðu og störfuðu í sælli trú, trú á eilífð, guðlega gæsku, himnesk laun. Þeim yrði stríðið sælt.

En hann átti eftir vonina.

Hann vonaði að lífið endaði ekki með dauða þessa jarðneska líkama. Hann vonaði að hann hefði ódauðlega sál sem á dauðstundinni svífi til æðri sælli heima, þar sem guð mundi

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verða alt í öllu. Hann óskaði þess og vonaði, en hann trúði ekki að þetta gæti átt sér stað. (BAR, 80)

A further proof of his latent belief in God is demonstrated in the incident when, in alarm at the danger that Hulda puts herself in on the cliff, Randver cries out aloud to God: 'Ó, drottinn guð almáttugur! Hjálpaðu henni!' (BAR, 58). Considering this behaviour afterwards, Laxness writes: 'Hættan sem hún var í og vanmáttur hans að hjálpa henni hafði komið honum að ákalla drottin. Nú hafði hann sama sem þreifað á þessum gamla sannleika, að í hóglífinu kemur mannum ekki til hugar að ákalla drottin, en á hættustundinni vaknar trú hans á æðri mátt' (BAR, 62).

The God that Randver hopes for is not so much a God of mercy as a God of justice, handing out to each his just deserts. It seems to him that 'laun sálarinnar eftir dauðann hlyti að fara eftir breytni hennar gagnvart öðrum sálum hér á jörðinni' (BAR, 80). This idea is endorsed by the old farmer who looks forward to the day of reckoning: 'Ég vona að fyrir efsta dómi muni verða tekið tillit til þess að ég hef verið sá þjónn sem ávaxtaði sitt pund, og var trúr yfir litlu. Og ég er farinn að hlakka til þess að komast til fððurhúsanna' (BAR, 73). In consideration of this connection between behaviour and reward Randver makes a solemn vow 'að bæta fyrir brot sín með því að vinna nú allan daginn og fram á nætur; að hann skyldi verða góður maður - lifa til að styrkja lífið' (BAR, 81).

Randver's meeting with the elderly farmer is crucial. The farmer gives an account of the growth of his smallholding and of



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his own trials and hardships. Ólafur Jónsson sees him as a forerunner of Bjartur in *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934-35), 'þótt ævi þeirra ráðist með alls ólíkum hætti'.<sup>6</sup> He also sees a shadow of the glacier couple from *Heimsljós* (1936-40) here, 'og með þeim alls hins lífspaka alþýðufólks og einstæðinga Halldórs Laxness, alla götu fram til séra Jóns Prímusar'.<sup>7</sup> There are indeed striking similarities between these simple people. Bjartur must be left aside. He is the model of unflinching labour and determination, but it is the spirit of gladness as a result of such labour that impresses Randver, not Bjartur's kind of deadening and isolating toil. The old man describes the elementary dwelling that he was to take his young wife to: 'Ég man eftir hvað ég kveið því að konunni minni sælu mundi nú ekki lítast á að fara að búa þarna og að hún mundi ef til vill afsegja með öllu að setjast þarna að' (BAR, 69). But the young wife is as undemanding as he himself: 'Jón! Hvað við verðum svo sæl!' (BAR, 70). Such simplicity, reassurance and support are more highly valued by the farmer than 'fullur poki af gulli' (BAR, 70). When Randver asks him if he has found happiness in life, he replies in the same tone as the old woman near the glacier, 'Ég held að ég þekki ekkert annað en lífsgleðina' (BAR, 73). This is the voice of unspoiled country wisdom and simplicity. As yet it cannot be regarded as anything else.

From the old man Randver begins to understand the value and the dignity of manual labour, both as its own reward and as a means of service to others. In an inner dialogue he reviews his position: 'Þú stendur á krossgötum lífsins. Við þér blasa tvær leiðir. Önnur

er vegurinn niður í helvíti eigingirninnar og sjálfseðskunnar, hins versta í sjálfum þér, og þar ber sál þín úr bítum óróleika og lífsleiba. Hin er vegurinn inn í paradís göfgunnar og ósérhlífnninnar, vegurinn til hins sanna guðdómlega eðlis mannsins, og þar fyllist sál þín gleði og sælu yfir vitundinni um að þú sért að vinna heiminum gagn' (BAR, 78). He realises that he has lived unethically until now; that he has been an exploiter living on the blood of his fellow men. He thinks further: 'Sem braskari lífirðu á blóði náúngans sem bóndi hjálparðu honum til þess að lifa' (BAR, 79). Considering the old man, Laxness says: 'á slíkum mönnum hafði Randver lifað' (BAR, 75). Here are early indications of the author's later commitment to socialist views, but much more important here, to a general concern for integrity and brotherly solidarity.

Randver's decision to become an Icelandic farmer is surely strengthened by his reading of Selma Lagerlöf's *Jerusalem*. Laxness writes of the influence on him of Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Knut Hamson and Selma Lagerlöf, "among others, and it is the emphasis that Lagerlöf lays on work that seems to be passed on here. At the end of *Jerusalem* Lill Ingmar comes to realise God's wisdom in allowing him to lose his inheritance: 'Det är en människas största lycka att få bygga upp vad hon själv behöver och visar vad hon duger till . . . Han [Gud] vill inte, att vi ska gå till ärvda gårdar och uppröjda hemman, utan han vill, att vi ska vinna åt oss på nytt det, som ska vara vårt'. " The general religious tone of the Swedish novel, as well as that of Bjørnson's *På Guds veje*, must have made their mark on the work also.

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The second person who leads Randver towards happiness, and thus towards God, is Hulda. Under her influence he loses his misogyny and he regains the feelings of his heart. It is difficult to see if he actually learns anything else from her, possibly he *only* learns to feel, but this is of course precisely what is necessary. Hulda is almost literally a child of nature; she even refers to the natural world as her mother: 'Jæa, ertu að kalla á mig, mamma' (BAR, 154). She is unbaptised, unconfirmed and apparently ignorant of such matters as formal religion or prayer, none of which her father has any time for. However, when Randver's faith in the existence of a good God, in justice and in eternal life revives, then he feels able to trace the cause of the revival back to his relationship with Hulda. This must in fact be the result of a renewed life-force in him, not any religious influence on her part. His faith is temporarily dependent on the whim of a young girl, so that when she leaves him, that is also the point when his life-force leaves him and consequently his faith falls to pieces too. In his despair he feels that 'hann hafði aldrei verið sannfærðari en nú um að hvorki guð né forsjón væri til' (BAR, 124). When, at the very end of the book, their love is restored and they begin to work the land, then, as might be expected, his faith returns and Randver is able to say: 'Og um leið fínt mér himinninn opnast' (BAR, 203). These are almost the last words of *Jerusalem*: 'Nu ser Stark Ingmar hela himmelen öppen'. '° Erik Sønderholm sees in the couple an image of Adam and Eve. '1

Hulda goes through a process of self-discovery in much the same way that Randver has done before. Her upbringing, with its total

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lack of restraint, has allowed her to lead a life of complete selfishness. Laxness's interest in the influences of nature and religion and civilisation on children, particularly on young girls, is a constant theme in his work, so that we have a line of portraits: Salka Valka, Ásta Sóllilja, Jasína, Uglá etc.

The idea of working for her living is totally foreign to Hulda. However, when her indignation at the suggestion that she should become a farmer's wife has subsided, she begins to understand some of the value of Randver's thought. She too goes through a crisis of conscience, in much the same way that she suffered remorse over the death of her first suitor, and, abandoning Ári, she returns to the man whose philosophy will save both herself and Randver. Laxness, in a comment on his work, explains away Ári's suicide, as he saw it at the time: 'Fésýsla hans gengur á móti móral sögunnar, þar sem lögb er áherzla á leitina að guði og þá hugmynd, að guð sé að finna í dyggðugu líferni og heilbrigðu starfi í náttúrunni'.<sup>12</sup> It is hardly to be expected that a young writer, a boy of sixteen, would have had a fine understanding of female psychology, but, although Hulda seems to undergo a miraculous change in personality, almost over night, there are indications that she had some small untrained conscience even before Randver's arrival, and before her knowledge of his moral downfall. She is, therefore, wild, but not beyond taming or redemption. During the painful task of self-examination, her reflections lead her to the following conclusions:

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Og líklega voru allir að leita gleðinnar, flestir óafvitandi, og hver á sinn hátt.

Sumir leituðu hennar með opin augu og eyru - en lokað hjarta. Aðrir leituðu með hjartað hálfopið, og þeir þriðju leituðu hennar með upplöknu hjarta, en byrgð augu og eyru.

Og það voru þeir sem leitaði vísvitandi.

Það voru þeir sem hlúðu að blómunum í hjarta sínu - blómunum sem andinn mikli hafði gróðursett. Þessi blóm voru þrjú. Það voru rauð blóm kærleikans, hvít blóm trúarinnar og ljósgul blóm vonanna. (BAR, 186)

Hulda understands now that she has been in the world, pursuing pleasure, but with her heart locked, and that the flowers of her heart have withered in her selfishness. Only the recognition of emotion can unlock the closed heart, and she sees that happiness can only come by reviving the flowers of the virtues. The idea of the reawakening of a sterile heart appears again in *Undir Helgahnúk* (1924). But the prime importance of the heart is expressed most clearly in Ásta Sóllilja and her little brother in *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1931-32) and in Ólafur Kárasón in *Heimsljós* (1936-40).

Hulda's change of heart means in effect a total capitulation; it is not just her emotions that alter. Matthías Johannessen, writing about the fundamentally Christian fabric of the book, has this to say about Hulda: 'Hún skildi kristindóminn að lokum. Hún sem hafði neitað "að trúlofast" og undirgangast aðra síði venjulegs fólks, því að "síðir eru ekki annað en hnapphelda sem

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ræflar og heimskingjar hefta sig með" - jafnvel hún skildi þetta að lokum'.<sup>19</sup> For Hulda the change is a completely new outlook on the meaning of life and her relationships with people.

*Barn náttúrunnar* is a work with a strongly moral purpose. It presents three characters, each at a different stage on the right road of life, and a fourth one, Ári, definitely on the wrong one. He is the bad influence, the weak man who becomes infatuated with Hulda but who lacks moral strength. It is he who encourages Randver in his drunkenness. The farmer, through his endeavours and simplicity, enjoys the happiness which is shown to be the reward for honest work; Randver is seen to come to self-knowledge and a new understanding, as well as opening his heart to its true emotions; Hulda frees her emotions too and is also seen to realise the futility of a life based uniquely on self-gratification. It is debatable who is actually responsible for saving who. It is easy to see that Hulda saves Randver from further decadence and death through alcohol, but, as with Lill Ingmar in *Jerusalem*, much of the role of strong saviour is the man's, Randver's. At the very end Hulda expresses the change that has come about in her as a victory: 'Það er þér að þakka að ég hef sigrað - sigrað sjálfa mig' (BAR, 204). Ári, on the other hand, does not overcome himself, so the author allows him to be destroyed; he is a destructive force, the first of Laxness's tempters, leading to Dr Búi in *Atómstöðin* (1961). The God of justice that watches over the whole drama of life rewards the virtuous and punishes the worthless.

The answers to the problems of life are finally found to be two: the first is found in an acknowledgement of God, who is not

to be discovered in churches. At this stage it is almost only an acknowledgement of His existence; there is not yet submission to His will and there is no idea of worship; there is a simple idea that God is there. Even this plain acknowledgement seems necessary and important for any kind of progress in the life of the characters. The second answer is found in working for one's daily bread, preferably in the natural world, in cultivating the soil of one's fatherland. Erik Sønderholm's footnote on this question runs: 'Voltaire: Rousseau er bogens litterære antitese. Tolstoy er løsningen'.<sup>14</sup> Hulda is initially a child of Rousseau, living in the wildness of nature, unrestrained by civilisation, but the author rejects this way of life. Voltaire's recommendation that we should cultivate our gardens, work with our own hands, disregarding worldly distractions, is more acceptable. This idea, like most of those suggested or presented in this early work, never seems to have left Laxness, and returns in *Innansveitarkronika* (1970). At this stage in his life Laxness had not read Voltaire or Tolstoy, but he was to do so with eagerness a little later.<sup>15</sup> The idea of return to the soil and the dignity of labour comes from himself and from his childhood influences. The novel displays many traits in the young author which are seen to develop or incline one way and then another in his later work, but the chief influence to be noted is not literary but is that of Halldór's grandmother, Guðný Klængsdóttir, who appears frequently in his work, most noticeably in *Heiman eg fórr* (1924), and in the short story 'Tryggur staður' (1964), though she is felt elsewhere as well. She appears to have been a woman from another century,

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thoroughly Icelandic, greatly detached from the happenings in the outside world, more than touched with cynicism and yet imbued with great compassion and serenity. These are the qualities that have made their stamp on the young writer already, so that later on it is easy to understand that what may appear to be a new influence is not in fact new, but a continuation of an original one, stemming from her.

The book ends with the words from the Lord's Prayer: 'Gef oss í dag vort daglegt brauð!', to which Hulda, with two suicides on her conscience, adds the words 'Og fyrirgef oss vorar skuldir!' (BAR, 204). Laxness draws heavily on the Lord's Prayer throughout his writing, and his spiritual development can be observed as he appeals now to one, now to another of its clauses. Here the appeal is simply for the sustenance and forgiveness of those concerned.

As I have shown above, many of the themes that continue to engage Laxness's interest are present here in embryonic form. It is strange that Peter Hallberg should write of this early work; 'As we should expect, *Barn náttúrunnar* gives no foretaste of the mature Laxness'.<sup>16</sup>

1. Matthías Jóhannessen and Halldór Laxness, *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, p. 7.
2. Hallberg, *Den store vævaren*, p. 22.
3. Widows: Matthew 23. 14; Mark 12. 40, 42; Luke 18. 3; Luke 21. 2; Luke 20. 47.



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Neighbour: Mark 12.31; Matthew 19.19; Matthew 22.39; Luke  
10.29.

4. Cf. Luke 9.25.

5. Matthew 6.19,20.

6. Ólafur Jónsson, 'Í heimi sagnamanns', p.69.

7. 'Í heimi sagnamanns', p.69.

8. *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, pp.14-15.

9. Lagerlöf, *Jerusalem*, Volume II, p.249.

10. *Jerusalem*, Volume II, p.261.

11. Sönderholm, *Halldór Laxness*, p.89.

12. *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, p.18.

13. *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, p.12.

14. Sönderholm, p.95, note 2.

15. *Den store vævaren*, p.16.

16. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), p.28.

## CHAPTER 2 - NOKKRAR SÖGUR 1923

Between the novels *Barn náttúrunnar* (1919) and *Undir Helgahnúk* (1924) comes a collection of short stories *Nokkrar sögur* (1923). With the exception of 'Júdítt Lvoff' (1922), they were written in 1919 and 1920, that is when Laxness was seventeen or eighteen years old, so it is only to be expected that they should still show signs of immaturity. However, his ideas have progressed. For one thing his attention now begins to rest on the outcasts and victims of society. The influence of Einar Hjörleifsson Kvaran (1859-1938) is evident here. Kvaran's short stories and his double novel *Ofurefli - Gull* (1908-11) preach a gospel of forgiveness and love which is so wide and all-embracing that the priest in *Gull* can say: 'Eg held, að trúin sé í sínu insta eðli sama sem elskan. Eg held, að öll önnur trú sé falstrú. En eg held að öll sönn trú sé góð og komi mönnunum að lokum til guðs', 'but this theology was considered too liberal for the Reykjavík of his day. Laxness wrote of him affectionately in an article in 1938: 'Margir á mínu reki munu frá bernskuárum minnst með unaði hins töfrandi, sveimhugula huldukennda Jesú úr skáldsögum Einars Kvarans', and he describes him not as a political spokesman for the oppressed proletariat, 'en hann er vinur "hins minnsta bróður", samkvæmt skilningi sínum á hinum mannúðlega Jesú frá Nasaret'. <sup>2</sup> Laxness's stories now take on a new compassion, that stays with him, even if it changes with time. In *Nokkrar sögur* it is simple and has its model in Christ, but as Peter Hallberg says: 'Síðar átti Halldór eftir að fjarlægast þá tegund kristinnar lífsskoðunar, sem einkennir ritverk Kvarans. En hin næma meðaumkun með lítilmagnanum og hinum undirokuðu var þeim áfram sameiginleg. Þar gátu áhrifin

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frá Kvaran síðar runnið saman við áhrifin frá Gorkij og Chaplin'.<sup>3</sup>

In *Barn náttúrunnar* God is shown mainly as the giver of daily bread and the administrator of justice, and the solution for spiritual unrest is the return to the soil and work. This romantic picture of life on the land now makes way for a harsher reality. Christ and his teachings had no prominent place in the earlier work, but now they are accepted. The Gospel teaching makes a particular appeal to the young writer with a growing social conscience. But the new awareness evident in the stories, linked with an awareness of Christ, is not confined to social injustice. It is also a growing feeling for personal responsibility towards the individual. It calls not only for a large and perhaps impersonal response to society, but also for one that is direct and individual and which is seen to be much more difficult to come to terms with.

The first two stories, 'Jarðarför Laugu í Gvönnarkoti' (1920) and 'Kálfkotúngaþáttur' (1919), present no particular problem. They expose destitution and show Laxness's disquiet in the face of it. The inequality and unfairness of life are especially brought out in 'Kálfkotúngaþáttur' by the satirical portrait of the well-fed priest, so impeded by his own good living that he is unable to see practical ways of relieving his neighbours' distress. He pushes from his mind the uncomfortable question of what return one should make to God for the lot one has received:

Alvara lífsins er óttaleg, segir presturinn.

Sá veit gerst sem reynir, séra Kjartan.

Ég þekki það Snjólfur minn, ég þekki það! Æ. við skulum ekki tala um það. Við skulum heldur lofa guð fyrir húsaskjólíð og hitann.

En hinir, þeir sem pabbi segir að alvara lífsins reki útfí óveðrið, ættu þeir þá að bölvu guði?

Æ farðu nú ekki að rugla neitt við mig, Ása! segir presturinn, spilaðu heldur eitt lag eftir Bellman. (NS, 26)

The priest is spiritually and psychologically rusted up. He closes his eyes to what is going on. Laxness is not yet suggesting that God is to blame for the misery of the world, but, so far, only that those who expound certain doctrines bear a definite guilt if they do not, at the same time, contribute to the bettering of the material welfare of the unfortunate.

The problem in these two stories, in general, is social. The world is a bit wrong. The wrong is hardly helped by the ill-will of the well-to-do, but neither is it caused directly by it, more by an agglomeration of different evils. In four stories, however, 'Jólakvæði' (1920), 'Ása' (1920), 'Synd' (1919), and 'Júdit Lvoff' (1922) the pain comes as a direct result of a lack of responsibility. Tragedy as the outcome of irresponsible behaviour is hinted at in *Barn náttúrunnar*, when Ari commits suicide, but the incident is improbable and melodramatic and, moreover, it is

examined in little depth. The suffering in these later stories is less extreme and consequently more relevant to ordinary life. The fundamental message is that we should so order our dealings with others that we avoid inflicting pain. That the young Laxness refers to different aspects of avoidable pain here, shows that he was coming to a serious consideration of responsible adult behaviour in society, and his choice of religious vocabulary and the religious overtones throughout indicate that he was thinking from a specifically Christian point of view.

'Jóla kvæði' was inspired by the experience of a friend. <sup>4</sup> It is the account of a Christmas spent by a young Icelander in a city abroad. The young man is filled with a sense of self-pity for his isolation amidst general festivity. Yet the spirit of Christmas captivates him too. He recalls with nostalgia his childhood Christmas<sup>s</sup> at home and he is filled with happiness. He is the brother of mankind, brother to thousands that he does not know. On Christmas morning he will compose a poem in honour of Jesus Christ. But things go wrong. On Christmas Day he is more of an outcast than before; he is attacked and robbed in the street and only saved through the compassion of a prostitute.

Essentially 'Jóla kvæði' is a study in pride. The young man is concerned to keep a flawless reputation for material independence, and this is coupled with overconfidence: 'En einginn skal hafa hann að skotspæni vorkunnsemi sinnar, og þegar hann verður jarðsúnginn skal verða sagt: Hann var ekki beiningamaður og flýði aldrei á náðir annarra' (NS, 65). He has all the ideals of youth and all its intolerance. He is quick to condemn. He hates all

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those who allow the laughter of the world to drown the groan of the wretched. He expresses his solidarity with the distressed, but cries woe to the indifferent élite: 'Vei yður, þér útvaldir, er njótið ódáinssælu himnaríkis í sama mund sem á jörðunni undir fótum yðrum ríkir böll og sársauki og sorg!' (NS, 67).

The young man assumes the role of the prophet. Like the Pharisee he justifies himself and thanks God 'that he is not as other men', <sup>5</sup> and he comes crashing down. When the woman rescues him after an assault in the street, the following exchange takes place:

Hver ert þú?

Katrín - stúlka af götunni.

Skækja?

Já, bara skækja. (NS, 67)

Up until now he has despised the exploiters in the world. Now he falls from his imagined position of moral superiority and is shocked into the realisation that, he, too, is guilty of abusing the weak. In exchange for help, he gives judgement; he calls the woman a tart. Now he begins to examine his integrity, he takes a lesson in self-knowledge and humility, and learns to extend his sympathies in a truer sense than before:

Hversvegna hafði ég sagt þetta orð? Eða var ég ekki bróðir als heimsins, allra þessara þúsunda sem ég þekki ekki? Ég fékk kökk í hálsinn svo ég gat ekki komið upp orði til að biðja hana

fyrirgefningar.

Þetta er kvæðið um Jesúm frá Nazaret, konúng gyðinga. (NS, 67)

Peter Hallberg writes: 'Hela skildringen stállis ju med en f.ð. nágot oklar symbolik under Jesu tecken'.<sup>6</sup> I would suggest that this uncertain symbolism could be clarified in the following way: the young man understands that the message of Christmas is goodwill towards all men and the inspiration behind his convictions lies in the person of Christ and in his teachings. But happy theories are no good on their own and, when put to the test, he fails. He fails the Christ for whom he has intended a poem of praise, the Christ who turned theory into action, disregarding barriers and taboos, who consorted with prostitutes and sinners and who gave the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the Publican and the Pharisee; and of course he fails the brotherhood of man itself. It is through humiliation that we arrive at self-knowledge and through deeds that conviction is tried. In the story the attention shifts from the happiness of Christmas to the acceptance of suffering in life, in the Crucifixion, for this is where its final words, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' belong. The young man is a forerunner of Steinn Elliði, to whom the monk says: 'guð biður ekki um gjafir þínar, heldur um sjálfan þig' (VEF, 105).

Thoughtless behaviour as the source of suffering occurs again in 'Ása'. In this instance it is not momentary but lasting. The narrator of the story fails to appreciate the effect that his friendship will have on a young girl. He does not recognise the true value of friendship and his levity allows the girl to slip

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through his fingers with the result that when he sees her again after many years he sees that he has tarnished her innocence and turned her trust to disillusionment. But there is more than a regret for lost opportunity. There is also the idea that we have a solemn obligation towards our true partners and to desert a true partner, for whatever reason, is a crime, or, in Laxness's religious terminology, an arch-sin: 'dýrsta gjöf örlaga minna varð höfuðsynd lífs míns' (NS, 69).

Irresponsible treatment of others is handled yet again in 'Júdítt Lvoff' in which a Russian girl dallies with the affection of one of Iceland's sons. There is little that merits close attention here, but there is one small point of interest. In one scene the narrator visits Júdítt in Copenhagen in order to translate a letter from her fiancé. In a corner of her room stands an icon of the Virgin Mary. Júdítt's manner throughout is heartless and frivolous. By drawing attention to the icon on two occasions, Laxness once again illustrates the poor testimony often shown by those who have all the outward trappings of religion. By contrast, the visitor crosses himself before the icon on leaving. This is an action inadmissible for an Icelandic Lutheran,<sup>7</sup> but it must be considered that the story was written in the spring of 1922 and Laxness was already coming under the influence of Catholicism and had begun reading *The Imitation of Christ*.<sup>8</sup> Even so the gesture he describes belongs to the Eastern Church and not the Roman. Perhaps Laxness has picked up something here from his reading of Gorky and Dostoyevsky. In any event it is a reverence that is described without irony and is an indication that the writer is



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open to the influence of religion that is less cerebral, more demonstrative, and perhaps more emotional than that under which he had been brought up.

Sin in its more conventional form is treated in 'Synd', which tells of a young man's visit to a prostitute, and their awareness of shame in the light of day. The couple are united in their shame and there is also a feeling that each is guilty of a wrong towards the other.

In these four stories irresponsible behaviour or sin are not portrayed primarily as something that destroys the sinner, or that is chiefly an offence against God. They are shown as something which hurts our fellow men.

'Steinninn minn helgi' concerns a childhood vision of Christ. According to the author, it is fiction, but Hallberg argues, and I would agree, that it is doubtless founded on some personal experience. <sup>9</sup> If indeed it is fictional, then it is a matter of interest that such scenes are fabricated by the author so often in his work.

The stone in the story is directly associated with either a dream of Christ or a vision of him, experienced by a boy of seven. The boy is filled with trust, innocence and purity and the Christ he meets is so strong and so beautiful that he seems almighty to him. His goodness is the reason for his power. The boy is gripped with awe in the vicinity of the stone, and, in some mystical way, enters into nature, understanding bird-song and believing that even the berries derive their sweetness from the acknowledgement of the sacredness of the stone. Christ then appears to him from

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the stone itself. 'Og í augum hans bjó slíkt vald, slík fegurð, að mér fanst það hlyti að geta sigrað allan heiminn, jafnvel hin ystu myrkur' (NS, 59). The boy is filled with such love and a feeling of such power, that it is as if he himself is God. He desires nothing further after this and the whole world lacks significance in comparison.

*Nokkrar sögur* is an interesting collection because it contains the seeds of much of Laxness's future work. Quite central now is Christ, not a figure of dogma, morality or theology, but a model for goodness and compassion towards the suffering world. The language of the stories is especially rich in religious imagery.

1. Einar Hjörleifsson Kvaran, *Gull*, p. 344.
2. 'Af skáldum', *Þjóðviljan*, 28 May 1938, quoted by Hallberg in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I, p. 151, reprinted in *Vettvangur dagsins* (1942), pp. 132-38.
3. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I, p. 152.
4. Preface to second edition.
5. Luke 18. 11.
6. Hallberg, *Den store vävaren*, p. 40.
7. Séra Gunnar Kristjánsson in personal conversation with me in 1982.
8. *Den store vävaren*, p. 88. Letter to Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 15 March 1922.
9. *Den store vävaren*, p. 37.

In 1919 Laxness left Iceland and began his travelling abroad. He saw Europe devastated by the First World War - crippled victims and ruined cities. He spent much time in Denmark and Germany and in 1921-22 he was occupied with a work entitled *Rauða kverið* which was never published but which indicates the confusion that his mind underwent in the face of many conflicting impressions. There are signs of pessimism, but the manuscript ends in a positive mood. Laxness wrote that the work describes how a young man finally discovers the power of prayer; <sup>1</sup> he wrote this after he had arrived at Clervaux Monastery in Luxembourg in 1922. He was to stay here for some time, being received into the Catholic Church early in 1923. He was led towards Catholicism through the influence of the Danish Catholic writer Johannes Jørgensen, whom he had met and whose work he had read in Denmark during the summer of 1922. Here he had also moved in a Catholic atmosphere in the home of the sculptor Júlíus Schlou, where he was surrounded by Catholic books and where he met Catholic priests and began to attend the Church. <sup>2</sup> In a letter to Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 3 July 1922, he writes: 'Mér finst ég varla geta orða bundið yfir því hve mikið religiös þroski minn hefur aukist . . . Jafnmerkilegir atburðir hafa ekki hent þessa svokölluðu sál mína síðan ég lærði faðirvorið'. <sup>3</sup> But a religious unsettledness had been present in him for a while before. Speaking of his adolescence in *Dagar hjá múnkum*, Laxness says: 'Hugurinn leitaði sífelt að andlegri fullnægju sem ekki fanst'. <sup>4</sup> The spiritual needs of the young man were strong, but Laxness also speaks of a curiosity 'að vita meira um þá einkennilegu kirkju sem ótal

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pokaprestar á Norðurlöndum höfðu ekki gert annað en fussa við og sveia í mín eyru'.<sup>5</sup> He sees the Catholic Church as largely responsible for Icelandic culture, and the Protestant Church as responsible for doing it great and brutal damage. His sympathies are wholly with the Catholic Church of Iceland that was beaten down and he describes how he wished to sink himself 'niðri þessa trú og kynnast því á hvaða grunni hún væri reist'.<sup>6</sup>

Laxness worked on a new manuscript, *Heiman eg fór*, during the autumn of 1924. In November he wrote to Jón Helgason saying that his book would deal with the maturing of a man's soul and would culminate in Catholicism.<sup>7</sup> Only one extract of the manuscript appeared in print before 1952 however, and this was in *Morgunblaðið*, under the title 'Um drottinn,' on 3 December 1924. It was only after nearly thirty years that Laxness was prevailed upon to publish the book, to which end he revised the manuscript to a certain extent. In his foreword to the 1952 edition Laxness describes the work as 'sjálfsmynd úr æsku, dichtung und wahrheit æskumanns um gelgjuár sín fram til seytján ára aldurs'. He continues: 'Ég hef dregið út aðeins örfáar setningar í handritinu, annars látið prenta textann orðréttan'. But there is ground for agreeing with Peter Hallberg when he writes: 'Det visar sig, att han i förordet kanske något har förringat den avslipning han låtit manuskriptet undergå'.<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to study the alterations and omissions that he has made.

Laxness was twenty-two when he wrote *Heiman eg fór*. As he intended it to be, so it is indeed a novel about the spiritual development of a young Icelandic boy in the country and later in

Reykjavík. There is much that is autobiographical in it. By his seriousness of approach and his pre-occupation with the soul, the narrator shows himself to be of the same type as Randver in *Barn náttúrunnar* and thus too 'í . . . leit að guði' (BAR, 29). In the first chapter the young man speaks of himself as a pilgrim at the time of writing. It is not inappropriate to apply the word to the adolescent throughout the work. He writes further, in the second chapter: 'Andleg hamskifti eða endurfæðing er eitt hið stórkostlegasta er ég veit' (HEF, 10). What might normally be considered as events of significance in the life of a young writer seem to be matters of no importance to him and they are largely forgotten. 'En tali ég um viðburði og æfintýr, þá á ég við eitthvað sem borið hefur fyrir sál mína' (HEF, 11). The author dissociates himself from the crowd in his inability to understand its fascination for what he considers trivialities and false values. It is the soul that counts, 'því það er einginn vafi á því að ég hef sál' (HEF, 10).

By the age of twelve the boy is shown as being singularly unimpressed by the Lutheran faith of his fathers, and he brands the solid Icelandic Lutheran readings from Helgi Thordersen's and Pétur Pétursson's homilies as the most boring things he knows. Further, he attributes to such literature a good deal of the blame for the dechristianising of Iceland. 'Afkrístnun' (HEF, 14) is a strong word and this is one of Laxness's earliest shots in his almost unrelieved criticism of the Lutheran Church in Iceland. He maintains: 'Þegar ég var tólf ára öðlaðist hjarta mitt þá sannfæringu að hin eina sanna lúterstrú væri þvættíngur' (HEF, 14).

He has already become sceptical towards 'true faiths' and with definite irony he tells of his own experience of being 'born again': 'Ég endurfæddist til hinnar einu sönnu frjálshyggju' (HEF, 14). This means fairly simply that he ceases to listen to religious readings, and goes to his room and reads literature and philosophy there in their stead. Having got this far the boy now stops reciting the prayers his mother taught him and when the time for his confirmation comes, he sees the ceremony as a meaningless formality and is more taken up with thinking about the girls. However, the rejection of Lutheranism is only a reaction against the Lutheran-impregnated background of his childhood. It cannot be seen as a rejection of God in any sense. He speaks of the one true religion of free-thinking and of the religion of reason, but they have no trace of agnosticism or atheism, and have no connection with the worship of reason. They merely represent a break with limited, prescribed religious thought and seem to stand for the liberation of constrained worship.

The year before his confirmation the boy is sent to Reykjavík and here he makes his first attempt at writing fiction. *Dagrenning* is the name he gives his book, it being, he says, a work full of optimism and the beauty of life, its characters being noble and idealistic, adhering to a religion of reason, going in God's ways and performing acts of charity. Here can be sensed the influence of Bjørnson and Selma Lagerlöf coming through the young Laxness. The narrative of the book is said to be packed with incident: accidents, murder and suicide. Because of the boy's new found

faith in living, this faith manifests itself in action. Ardent but not passive faith is greatly admired. The purpose of the book is to blow the trumpet for charity, for 'Guð er til' (HEF, 26). God loves all men, and forgives them all without quibbling, He sends no one to Hell and Christ's teaching is the finest moral teaching on earth. The first version of the manuscript reveals that all the bad characters in the young writer's novel were sectarians and sermon-loving people. <sup>9</sup> This feature is later removed from the published text, possibly appearing too naive and ill-considered. It was a healthy outburst, a boy getting his own back on boring dogmatism. The later version is well-tempered but less amusing.

One thing stands out as memorable in the account of *Dagrenning* and that is that for the boy-author, Christ is solely a teacher: 'Kristur er manneskja eins og við, en siðakenning hans bestur fróðleikur jarðneskur' (HEF, 26). The God that he believes in is Unitarian and not Trinitarian. He writes that whenever, in later years, he hears philosophers talking about Christianity, he recalls '*Einginn nema ég sjálfur getur verið meðalgangari milli Guðs og mín*' (HEF, 27). The words are in italics in the text, and seem to imply that they are a quotation remembered from *Dagrenning*. May it not be presumed then that Laxness, first as a young boy in his teens, then as a young man at the time of writing *Heiman eg fór* felt no need for a mediator, even in the person of Christ?

After liberation from the Lutheranism of his early childhood, during the period of his free-thinking, the narrator says that his idea of God remained very much a poetical idea for some time to

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come, and there seem to have been times when his 'eina sanna frjálshyggja' (HEF,30) was insufficient. One such time is when his soul is, as it were, totally unnerved by the feeling of uncertainty about Creation: 'Mér hraus hugur við því snögglega, að vita eigi vissu mína hvað hyldist að baki veröld þeirri sem ég var brotabrot af' (HEF,31). At the same time, however, he is given a momentary conviction of the existence of God: 'Stundarfæring um tilveru Guðs brá leiftri yfir sál mína og mér fanst í svip að hún hefði höndlað hið eina óbrigðula verðmæti' (HEF,31). There has been no actual disbelief in God's existence before, just varying degrees of vagueness, and the intensity of his new experience does not prevent him from probing into other uncertainties. He picks at the mystery of Creation and the possibility of there being no Creator at all. On reading Genesis one day he is struck with the horror of life should there, in fact, be no higher reality for the soul than this visible world, should there, in fact, be no God to live in and to die in. The language is elated: 'Hamingjan góða, ef ekkert er til merkilegra en þetta blessað sköpunarverk, einginn æðri raunveruleiki sem getur fullnægt sál manns, veruleiki sem hægt er að gefa sig með líkama og sál, eingin æðri verðmæti til að lifa og deya fyrir, einginn Guð til að lifa og deya í! - hvílíkur ófögnuður, já, hvílík ósköp eru það þá að hafa orðið til!' (HEF,33). This is not, then, a God that delights in sacrifice, rather one that is all consuming. If this is the way things are, then the response of the narrator must be total, and it is evident that it will be so. In a rush of emotion the boy runs out of the house crying 'Hvað er ég! Hvað á ég að



gera?' (HEF,34). There seems to be a longing for total dedication and self-abandonment to God.

The mood of exultation is maintained and even rises to a crescendo during the account of a night spent in the open a little before Midsummer Eve. The boy rejoices in Creation and is aware of a love towards all things. The summer night, his own soul, everything is described ecstatically as 'eingilfagurt ljóð' (HEF,36). His soul is a sea of happiness, a song of praise. He and nature are one. Eternity is like the playing of harps within his breast. He is God's angel. He begins to talk to God. Once again there is a direct and personal approach, and there is no mediator. The word he uses is 'tala' and not 'biðja'. In his talking there is the same lack of restraint that one understands was also in the text of *Dagrenning*. The boy resolves to perform unforgettable deeds for the glory of God, in thanks for the benefits that God has bestowed on him. In his resolutions he resembles Steinn Elliði. He is ready to serve God in any romantic and exaggerated fashion. As he presses himself to the ground, 'við brjóst móðurjarðarinnar' (HEF,38), he becomes one with the Earth. And God is in the heavens above him: 'Hve ljúft að minnast þessara náttur' (HEF,38). His desire to live in God, to abandon himself seems to be assuaged in his physical contact with the natural world.

This rather emotional phase of the boy's life is followed by a non-committal period in Reykjavík. He is now living in a wider world and one with more colourful influences than he had known before. Comparatively little is said about his spiritual growth,

but Laxness's serious views on life cannot ever, even at a much later date, be completely divorced from his religious ones, for, once the boy has come to the recognition of the certainty of the existence of a superior being, Laxness portrays him as seeing human life as being distorted, if it is lived unworthily. The boy's serious views begin to form in Reykjavík and he first gives them expression in a speech full of invective against reactionary Iceland: 'Hér er ellinnar land' (HEF,59). It is a speech shot through with religious terminology, though he is first and foremost singing the praises of youth. God and the service of God are not the subject matter. The boy is particularly sharp towards those of his elders who 'setja . . . svip sinn á þjóðlíf vort, smásálar og úrvætti, sem alla ævi hafa verið að bíta við að fórna sjálfum sér á altari sjálfs sín, manneskjur sem eiga ekki annan helgidóm en eignir, eignarétt og eiginhagsmuni' (HEF,59).

This is youthful social criticism of course, but it is unpolitical. It is a seed that will grow into social indignation and anger at a later date and that will call for action rather than contemplation. At the moment it is germinating. But the criticism is not plain social criticism; there seems to be spiritual criticism there as well, that is to say there is an attack on the spiritual poverty of those who, in their littleness of soul, have been offering themselves, not so much to the wrong god in error, as to no god at all other than themselves. It is an attack on those who hold nothing sacred other than property and its rights: 'Og einmitt það hégómlegasta og ómerkilegasta sem til er milli himins og jarðar, það eru eignir og réttindi' (HEF,60).

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Among those of his new circle who make a particularly strong impression on him is Steinn Elliði. Indeed the young man is fascinated by him and the fascination endures until the night when he discovers that Steinn is associating with prostitutes, and when he abuses Ásgrímur to his face. Behind the disillusionment lies a deep respect for chastity and for a high moral code, which need not, of course, go hand in hand with middle-class respectability, but which has a fundamental respect for the individual and which acknowledges an obligation towards the individual. This respect for chastity and for the individual is much the same as Snjólfur's feeling of duty towards the woman he has compromised, in *Undir Helgahnúk*, and also it foreshadows something of the vow of mutual chastity made by Diljá and Steinn, at the time of Steinn's reaction against the flesh in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*.

In meistari Ásgrímur the narrator meets the man who he claims has the greatest influence of all on him. Ásgrímur is a man who displays a remarkable detachment from the turmoil of life, yet who remains thoroughly within the world at the same time. At their first meeting he does not appear shocked at the young man's recent outburst against Old Iceland, neither does he deride it. He understands it simply as a necessary step on the path towards a truer self-knowledge: 'Þetta er leiðin okkar allra . . . segja skoðunum almennings og kenningum aldarinnar stríð á hendur, kalla alla logna hluti sanna og sanna hluti logna, og skygnast síðan út yfir veröldina frá hinu glæsta sjónarhorni ofurmenskunnar í nokkur ár . . . áður en við leggjumst í að kafa niður á hafsbotn eftir dýrstu perlunni' (HEF, 90). So the older man accepts the extreme

attitudes of youth as an inevitable stage of a journey towards wisdom. He also understands the value or the cheapness of different teachings. He continues: 'Öll kenning er brigðul nema sú heimska og lýgi sem vér höfum einu sinni barist gegn, - líkt og Páll postuli. Sú er best kenning sem keypt er dýrstu verði, ekki sú er vér sannfærumst um, heldur hin er vér neyðumst til að fórna sannfæringu vorri. Og þetta er sem sagt fyrsta sporið á leiðinni: að slíta sig lausan af öllu því sem kent er um sannleik eða sem sannleikur' (HEF, 91-2). If the narrator were feeling at all uneasy about abandoning the formal Christianity of his forbears, here at hand was a philosopher ready to urge him on to do so, ready to reassure him that only a doctrine that is first cast out and then readopted is of any worth. What matters is not what one still believes, but rather what one believes again. Doubt everything at least once - truths must be tested.

On the same evening that he meets Ásgrímur the young man also makes the acquaintance of frú Svala. It is she who first evokes in him a sensitive and emotional response to woman. Up until then his reactions towards girls have been only physical; but then, like meistari Ásgrímur, she is somewhat out of the ordinary. Like him she seems detached from life, but she is less committed within the world than he. She possesses that stillness which Laxness grew greatly to esteem: 'ró sú er yfirskygði svip hennar vottaði sál sem einga ósk sína hefur hlotið uppfylta af forlögnum og krefst nú einskis af þeim framar' (HEF, 93). Her religious experiences are indeed almost mystical. They are only witnessed by the young man himself. Late, after a day in the country, he is sent to look for

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her and he comes across her sitting almost entranced by the music of the waterfall. It has an extraordinary power over her: 'ég gat ekki slitið mig héðan burt . . . Fyrst er eins og hljómur af málmí, síðan kemur harpa . . . þá byrjar heilt orkestur . . . ég kannast við lögin, en ég hef kanski aldrei heyrt þau fyr . . . nú kemur það, það er ekki leingur hljóð, heldur hjartsláttur, sál . . . Það er alvaldið sjálft sem sýngur . . . sjálfur ódauðleikinn . . . Það er eilífðin' (HEF, 127-28).

At this point the young man feels that she is laughing at him, but frú Svala is in earnest. She is glad that he has come, 'einmitt þú'. She recognises in him someone capable of spiritual sympathy and she unburdens her heart to him. She says that she longs for perfection; her imperfection lies heavily upon her, but days and weeks pass so that she forgets the one thing that she longs for most. Her life seems worthless: 'Dauður hlutur meðal dauðra hluta . . . hégómi í hégómanum . . . túngan brennandi af þorsta . . . og mega ekki gefa sig eilífðinni á vald' (HEF, 129). This is a positive and not a negative longing, a longing for spiritual fulfilment rather than annihilation. There is something elemental in her wish to be taken up into eternity, but it is not a death wish. It is something akin to the feeling of the narrator on the night before Midsummer Eve, something akin to Jón Prímus's attitude to the glacier in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*; it is not a wish to end it all, rather to be absorbed in eternity. The reader sees these perceptive souls drawn towards God through the mysterious forces of nature. They are moved by the roar that lies on the other side of silence, the waterfall, the night, the

glacier rather than the pulpit or the written word.

Svala never directly makes a statement about her belief in God. When the young man asks her if she thinks that God exists, she does not affirm or deny, but only looks at him, 'og það var eingin vitund í svip hennar nema andi og sál . . . hún nefndi nafn mitt, álasandi . . . ' (HEF, 132-33). When she is able to pierce the depths of him with her look, she continues: 'þú getur ekki verið að spyrja í einlægni' (HEF, 133). This is the first time that she has used the informal pronoun, just when the conversation has touched 'því eina sem ég þrái' (HEF, 129) and it marks a new stage in their relationship .

Frú Svala and meistari Ásgrímur are two of the formative influences on the soul of the young writer in Reykjavík. He writes of the feeling of contentment of being 'meðal tveggja sálna sem skildu mig, og vissu miklu betur en sjálfur ég hver ég var og hvers ég þarfnæðist' (HEF, 94). Once more the emphasis is on the soul and on the association of different souls rather than persons. People grow as souls and move about the world as searching souls, having different needs for development, rather than as social beings moving in a world of material substance.

The third lasting influence upon the narrator is his grandmother. At first sight she does not seem to have had any part in her grandson's religious development, since he makes no mention of her in a specifically religious context. However, her detachment and unruffledness in the face of transitory fashions in life and literature, her scepticism towards innovations and modernisations, her stability and calm, her firmness in her roots

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cannot have failed to contribute towards the young man's sense of values. As he says: 'ég er hreykinn af að hafa setið við fótskór þeirrar konu sem fjærst var því að vera tísku háð eða aldarfari, allra kvenna, þeirra er ég hef þekt' (HEF, 23).

The influence of one person upon another cannot be measured solely by the way in which the one slavishly imitates the other, but often, at a much deeper and more permanent level, by the high regard in which the one holds and continues to hold the other and that for which he stands, long after contact between the two has ceased. The three people in *Heiman eg fór* most valued by the narrator, and who seem to have the blessing of the author himself, are shown as being uncorrupted by materialism. The grandmother is remote from and unimpressed by the modern world; frú Svala has seen through and even beyond it; meistari Ásgrímur is untouched by it. Steinn Elliði, on the other hand, is engrossed and already smutched by it. What clearly comes through is the picture of a boy in his formative years, fervent and impressionable, who, through his association with these three people, continues to have but small regard for material possessions, who comes to look down on worldliness and unchastity, and whose soul is, in the right circumstances, capable of, even desirous of total commitment to its Creator.

*Heiman eg fór* was written from the monastery where Laxness had become a Catholic the previous year, 1923, <sup>10</sup> and where at one time he had the intention of taking vows at a later date. It is not difficult to recognise the voice of a convinced believer at work in the novel, even though specifically Catholic or religious

subjects are not handled. In an interview for *Morgunblaðið*, 13 December 1924, he maintained that matters of faith were one thing for him, and art another. I think it is not an exaggeration to say that Laxness is here portraying a soul in preparation for vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The boy's low esteem for property has already been mentioned. Further, his repeated use of the word 'hégómi', vanity, seems to echo the first book of *The Imitation of Christ*: 'Vanity of vanities and all is vanity'. Laxness wrote in his correspondence with Einar Ól. Sveinsson of the enormous influence that Thomas à Kempis's work had had on him.<sup>11</sup> The boy's attraction for frú Svala need not be regarded as any kind of serious sexual distraction to him in this respect. Both she and Ásgrímur see him as a youth in need of protection and he recognises this with thankfulness. For him she is mother, maiden and angel all in one, not an object of sexual desire (HEI, 94).

*Heiman eg fór* is only a fragment of what was intended to be a much longer work<sup>12</sup> but the fragment is all that exists and by the time of its publication in 1952 the initial zeal of the Catholic convert had somewhat disappeared.

Laxness claimed in the preface that he had only removed a few sentences from the manuscript before publication, but the actual sentences that he has removed are significant, for, mostly, they occur in the manuscript at that place where the boy has an intense religious experience, amounting almost to ecstasy, which is described without any trace of irony. The words omitted reveal, to a high degree, the religious fervour of the author at the time of composition. The manuscript chapter is titled 'Um drottinn'. The



episode remains in the published version, still without irony, but considerably watered down, now being without its title. The published version, Chapter 9, gives the picture of a boy delighting in nature, brimming over with joy and vitality, wondering at his own physical strength, a boy full of love for life and humanity, set on achieving glorious goals for God. The emphasis is on physical strength, action and humanity. In the manuscript, on the other hand, the emphasis all lies on God. The first omission occurs when he describes the setting. The words 'Hvílíkt musteri!' are removed. A temple is very much the setting for the self-offering that takes place. The following lines are those that have been cut out; they express ecstatic wonder: 'Allir mættir sálar minnar eru þegnir af þjer! Drottinn minn, lof mjer að lifa þjer og deyja þjer! . . . Drottinn minn . . . hve sál mín er gagntekin af þjer, sem gafst mjer máttu! . . . Kærleiki þinn fyllir sál mína . . . Guð minn, guð minn, láttu mig aldrei vita neitt og aldrei læra neitt nema það, að þú ert völdugur og heilagur, lát þú öll öfl veru minnar hverfa inn í vilja þinn, inn í þína dýrð, almætti þitt! Alvaldi guð, þú skynjar hjartaslög mín . . . finnur hve barmur minn svellur . . . jeg þrái ekkert nema þig . . . þig'. God is at the centre of the boy's universe. He is the reason for his love of his fellow men. The noble deeds that he longs to perform are tempered by humility. He desires nothing but God.

A further point of interest in comparing the manuscript with the published text is found in the description of frú Svala's character. In the first version she is said to be one whose wishes

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have not been granted by fate and who no longer asks for anything from it, but who believes in God. This last statement is left out in the edited text.<sup>13</sup> In the early reading Svala appears as someone full of peaceful resignation, communicating her faith to the world. In the later reading she still has her resignation, but there is a silence about her faith, and it is left a mystery. It is only communicated to the narrator in privacy, at a later date and without the help of words. In omitting these words, Laxness has made a very subtle change in the nature of the faith that he is portraying. The first faith seems to be more of the kind that has all the answers, the second is too private, too holy perhaps, for expression. This manuscript alteration, making a move away from the expressed towards the unexpressed, is in line with Laxness's general development in the 1950s.

All in all the final version of *Heiman eg fóR*, revised by the writer in middle age, is a more controlled and less exuberant piece. It is more tolerant of others, more hesitant in matters of commitment, less given to mystic ecstasy. It is indeed the work of a man who has now grown up, and is a little embarrassed at what he may once have been.

1. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), p. 31. Letter to Father Jón Sveinsson, 4 February 1923.
2. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 24-25.
3. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 25.
4. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 20.

5. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 13.
6. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 14.
7. Hallberg, *Den store vævaren*, p. 160. Letter to Jón Helgason,  
5 November 1924.
8. *Den store vævaren*, p. 161.
9. *Den store vævaren*, p. 20. Unpublished manuscript studied by  
Hallberg.
10. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), pp. 32-34.
11. *Den store vævaren*, pp. 88-90.
12. *Den store vævaren*, p. 160.
13. *Den store vævaren*, p. 167.

Like *Heiman eg fór*, *Undir Helgahnúk* was also written during Laxness's stay at Clervaux between 1922 and 1923, and it too tells of the spiritual and intellectual progress of a young boy; it shows some of the same kind of fervent abandonment and a predilection for mystic experience, but it gives very little obvious sign of the writer's own religious persuasion at the time of composition. However, as a portrait of a young boy's frustrations, longings and loneliness it is sensitive and valuable. The book is only a fragment of what was intended to be a significantly longer work, which was never finished. ' Certain parts of it, in particular the ending, bear marks of it being written in a hurry. The psychology is thin and this is still clearly the work of a very young man, but great ground has been covered since *Barn náttúrunnar*. To begin with, the simplistic notion that God is reached solely through work and a good conscience has disappeared. The God of justice, to whom mercy is unknown, has also vanished. Now the characters, with the exception of Ísleifur Heljarmenni and for a while the boy Atli himself, are all adherents to the Christian faith, with varying degrees of conviction, and God is to be found not on one's own, not in isolation or in nature, but in and through Christ. This last feature I think is evidence of the influence of Catholicism on Laxness. This belief is common to all Christianity, but in *Heiman eg fór* it is told that the narrator felt no need for a mediator between himself and God, the Father (HEF, 27); now, as a young man, he makes the need for Christ the central message of his new work, even if it is clumsily expressed, and Laxness's acceptance of this

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need must be through the influence of his Catholic instruction. Now he also stresses that it is necessary to foster a strong hope in God, to trust in what is good, and to put away self-reliance. Added to this there is now an implicit condemnation of extremism and emotionalism in the matter of religion.

From the point of view of religious conviction there are two groups of believers in *Undir Helgahnúk* which can be set against each other. In the first group are Kjartan the priest and the boy's father, his wife Jóhanna, and their son Atli; in the second are Snjólfur, his daughter Áslaug, the housekeeper Þuríður, and Grímur með pokann.

The first group leaves a generally negative impression of religion, and to some extent of Lutheranism in particular. Kjartan, for example, has a definite disinclination for the priesthood and is better suited either to the life of a farmer or an artist, but he is pushed into the priesthood against his will. He is no conventional churchman:

Að vísu fundu allir að hann væri einginn skörúngur í embætti, hvorki saungmaður né ræðugarpur, en eingu að síður hafði hann þá kosti til að bera, sem menn yfirleitt kröfðu af presti sínum þar um slóðir. Menn sögðu um hann: Presturinn okkar er gestrisinn; hann er auðveldur í viðskiftum, lítillátur einsog barn. Hann má ekkert aamt sjá; hann kann ekki mun á háum og lágum en greiðir erindi allra. (UND, 46)

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He is of the same breed as Jón Primus in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*.

Wilhelm Friese points out that 'the very old and yet always new questions' are asked in *Undir Helgahnúk*; 'What is man? What is the meaning of life? . . . the attempt of an answer is laid in the mouth of a young and immature boy who is going to conquer the world'.<sup>2</sup>

I do not see that the questions posed in this early novel are more outstanding than in Laxness's other works. They are indeed initially asked and are more clear cut in *Barn náttúrunnar*, and they go on being asked throughout all those works that follow. In *Undir Helgahnúk* there are, rather, fumbings and experiments on the part of a boy, and the answers that the author gives to him correspond very much in spirit with those given forty years later by Jón Primus and Úa, on the understanding that the superstructure of Christianity is removed in the later work. There are many similarities between *Undir Helgahnúk* and other novels of Laxness, which I shall refer to later.

Séra Kjartan is rarely privileged among Laxness's priests in that he has been given a past, grounds which explain his present attitudes. For the most part Laxness's priests are representatives of opinions, or actions, so that the reader cannot sympathise in any depth with their behaviour. But this is not the case with Kjartan. He is a man who has been deeply hurt. Having explained him as an open-hearted, unclerical, simple man, Laxness subsequently allows him to appear in a different light. Suddenly after the episode in which Atli drinks the communion wine, Kjartan's character takes a turn and he strikes out vehemently

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against the boy. Neither the priest nor his wife make any attempt to understand their son. He is simply condemned outright: 'Við hérna tókum ekki á móti neinu af vondum dreingjum sem guð vill ekki sjá' (UND, 70). All explanation is useless; the boy must be punished. As if to emphasise the paradox between the man's office and his behaviour, Laxness repeats the word 'Presturinn'. Suppressed anger, hidden under an overcoat of warmth, bursts out. It is a stark instance of his want of understanding of spiritual things: 'Heldurðu kanski að þú fáir að vanhelga sakramentin í kirkjunni án þess að smakka á hvað það þýðir? Nei, þú skalt svei mér geta að því gert í næsta skifti!' (UND, 72). Man is now the judge, not God. Kjartan is of course urged on by Jóhanna, but he reveals himself as a man of deep passion. During the scene no concern whatever is shown for Atli's spiritual understanding. His parents make no attempt to bring him to a realisation of the sacred significance of communion in any other way than by psychological and physical violence. A great part of their outrage seems to be caused by the feeling, on the one hand, that their parental authority has been undermined, and on the other, that their respectability has been tarnished. A scandal has been caused. The whole affair is a horrific example of hypocrisy and a failure to apply the most basic Christian precepts. The writer comments: 'En með þessu kvöldi var óhamingju riðin í garð á Stað undir Helgahnúk' (UND, 75).

Hereafter Kjartan is shown as living in ever greater isolation from his family, and generally speaking, as a kindly, lonely, and a suffering man. For instance he opens his house to Sæmundur's

orphaned son, Mángi. There is however an inkling that Laxness considers this the least that he could do, since the man was drowned while ferrying the priest's newly acquired possessions over the water. The destitute family that Sæmundur leaves is forced to split up. Laxness points an accusing finger at those in positions of material privilege, though for the moment the irony is light. Later the comfort of Atli's home is contrasted with the squalor that Mángi's mother has to endure. Atli is distressed and disturbed by the inequality. Laxness had already begun his criticism of comfortable priests in the story 'Kálfkotúngaþáttur' in 1920. In this novel his unease in the face of an unjust world continues, but there is no direct attack on Kjartan himself.

Jóhanna is portrayed as an excessively emotional and hysterical woman. As might be expected she swings from one pole to the other. At her husband's ordination her feelings amount almost to ecstasy; 'Það var einsog sjálfar stjörnurnar á himinhvolfinu væru farnar að sýngja og hún skildi ekki þetta máttuga mál, heldur óttaðist það. Það var einsog einhver stóraþburður ætlaði að fara að gerast: fyrirburður eða opinberun, - einsog drottinn ætlaði sjálfur að fara að tala; þessvegna skalf hún' (UND, 41). Sobriety and balance are lacking here. However, Laxness shows her as being completely sincere in her faith, especially during the upbringing of her children, when she teaches them their prayers. These times are remembered by Atli as particularly precious. She uses the old Catholic custom, retained at the time in Iceland, of making the sign of the Cross over her children at night. However, her faith, somewhat like Randver's in *Barn náttúrunnar*, seems to be dependent



on good times, and because of circumstances, and after certain events, including the souring of the marriage-relationship, her faith and her personality crumble. Her former sense of unworthiness at being the wife of an ordained priest is forgotten and she develops into a peevish woman with habitual complaints of being misunderstood. In her conversation with the singer on the night of the fateful party, she reveals that she considers her position as wife and mother as pointless. Heaven has disappointed her. As a girl she asked for the gift of grace but life has sent her to the North to be a serving woman, and she questions the validity of any beliefs she has ever had: 'Ég veit meira að segja ekki hvort ég hef nokkurntíma trúað á guð' (UND, 108). It becomes clear now that what she has been believing has been founded only on a pleasant feeling and on emotion, having no solid understanding. At this stage Ljúfur has not yet been killed, so it is not the shock of incomprehensible suffering that is affecting her, as is partly the case with Atli's loss of faith, so that he can ask: 'Heldurðu kanski að nokkur guð hefði látið hann litla bróður minn merjast undir vagnhjólunum?' (UND, 230). It is just that, spiritually speaking, Jóhanna has been misguided; hysterical in her happiness, hysterical in her unhappiness, she has expected everything to be given to her. Her wish for Áslaug shows the poverty of her philosophy: 'Ég óska þess, góða mín . . . að þú látir heiminn aldrei taka frá þér það sem þú átt' (UND, 131). She has believed in receiving too much from life, she has been trading with God, not putting her trust in Him, as she says: 'Lífið dauðadæmir þá sál sem trúir á það' (UND, 162). Snjólfur firmly

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argues against her: 'Ef við látum sorgirnar yfirbuga okkur, frú Jóhanna, þá lítur út fyrir að við höfum trúað á okkur sjálf, en ekki á hann' (UND, 130).

It is uncertain whether or not Jóhanna regains any remnant of real faith before she commits suicide. She gives her crucifix to Áslaug saying, 'Það er holt að stara á hann fyrir þá sem biðja bænirnar sínar' (UND, 161), but mainly she seems to be experiencing religious nostalgia and dejection. This dejection seems to be caused by a sense of failure before Christ: 'Það er sagt að Jesús Kristur hafi verið góður og saklaus. En ég hafði ekki nóga olíu á lampanum mínum' (UND, 161). It is not so much that she no longer believes, as that she no longer looks upon herself as being among those striving for salvation. She is suffering from accidie, hence her self-destruction.

Such are the parents to whom Atli is born. Erik Sønderholm draws attention to his name: 'Hans navn er den islandske version av hunnerkongenavnet Attila, hvilket må tages som en tegn, dels på hans destruktive intelligens, dels på hans ønsker i overgangsalderen om at blive noget i retning af en erobrere'.<sup>3</sup> There are indeed destructive forces in the child's nature but they surface only after a number of happenings; firstly after he has suffered what seems to him a rejection, after the birth of his little brother, which is a normal reaction for a first-born child; secondly after the gross mishandling of him when he drinks the communion wine; and thirdly after Ljúfur's fatal accident. It is important to underline that Atli has an essentially religious soul. Laxness makes a point of stressing his unschooled

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understanding, in the same way that he does with Nonni in *Sjálfstætt fólk*. The boy feels a great reverence, where those who know more, and who should know better, feel none. Thus he is shocked by the behaviour of the communicants in his father's church: 'Þegar hann leit í kringum sig furðaði hann mest á því, að kirkjufólkið skyldi ekki vera hátíðlegra í bragði en raun var á. En það var einsog því stæði öllu á sama um þetta yfirnáttúrlega sem átti að fara að gerast . . . einginn mundi eftir guðs heilagleika né hinu yfirnáttúrlega sem ætlaði að fara að koma . . . þetta fann Atli var ljótt' (UND,62-3). Yet the boy with his instinctive awe of the supernatural is barred from communion, because, he is told, 'lítil börn . . . geta ekki skilið það sem er yfirnáttúrlegt' (UND,62).

Atli's taking of the bread and wine is not motivated by shallow curiosity, but by a deep longing to share in the wonder of the supernatural and the mysterious. When he nearly finishes the bottle of wine, this is explained not as greed but as quite the opposite: 'Hann ásetti sér að hætta ekki fyr en hann fyndi til hins yfirnáttúrlega' (UND,66). He is also fully convinced that God cannot be opposed to little boys participating in the supernatural any more than grown-ups: 'Hann þekti hve fullorðna fólkíð æfinlega var fult af bábiljum' (UND,64). Laxness seems to be wholeheartedly behind the boy, sharing his indignation at the presumption of the adult world. Who, he seems to ask, is to judge which person is mature enough to comprehend the incomprehensible? Certainly not the adults, for they cannot see into the heart. Those who exclude children from communion are men and not God, in

the same way that it is men, and not God, who administer punishment.

In an atmosphere in which the mother swings from one extreme of emotion to the other, and in which the father gives way to fierce anger and unethical condemnation, it is small wonder that Atli's religious awe dwindles. Sæmundur's death has a disturbing effect on him, but it is naturally Ljúfur's death which is at the centre of his unhappiness, and the principal reason for the reversal of his confidence in God: 'Hitt vissi dreingurinn vel, að himinninn sat ekki á fjöllum og var ekki úr gleri, heldur var hann óendanlega hár og ekkert að baki, hvorki paradís, guð né einglar, - ekkert nema óendanlegt tóm . . . einginn vissi hjarta hans nema steinarnir' (UND, 115-16). Yet he does find a certain comfort at his mother's bedside. There he remembers the prayers they used to say together, and the God they used to believe in.

Atli comes to live more and more in his imagination, and more and more apart from Mángi and Áslaug. This is a difficult time for Atli anyway, when his sexual fantasy and desire are first beginning to awaken. They both obsess and disturb him. Erik Sønderholm sees in the portrayal of Atli 'det religiøse og det erotiske, det himmelske og det jordiske . . . Det er interessant at konstatere, hvor klart forfatteren underlægger det erotiske det religiøse, sådan som han også gør det i "Den store Væver"'. <sup>4</sup> This is true; the force of Atli's erotic feelings is very strong, but the underlying problems that he has concern pain, and loneliness and purpose; they are in fact spiritual problems and they are harder for him to solve than the physical ones.

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At this time a compensatory craving for power begins to take shape within him. It is a desire for a power to assuage his loneliness and pain. In a dream, or a vision, he trades his human heart for a heart-shaped stone of power; power is all satisfying; he says to the fairy in his dream: 'Herra töframaður! . . . Hvern ætti ég svo sem að biðja um náð ef ég verð máttugur?' (UND, 146).

The immediate effect of surrendering his heart is an exhibition of callous cruelty, but there is no indication that this mood is lasting. On the contrary Atli is shown displaying a deep tenderness to his mentally sick mother, whom he uses as a confessor.

Atli's loss of faith is not a liberation. He is tormented by a sense of inferiority because of it. At his confirmation he considers Áslaug:

Þá fanst honum hann sjálfur mínka og mínka, ljókka og ljókka og verða verri og verri þangað til hann var orðinn fyrirlitlegastur og vesælastur af öllum fermíngarbörnum, og jafnvel fátækustu kotakrakkarnir voru fallegri, betri og hamingjusamari en hann. Því þau trúðu á guð og þau áttu mæður og systur og bræður og vini, en hann átti ekki neitt. Hann fyrirleit kirkjuna, þabba sinn og allt annað og þó sjálfan sig mest. (UND, 191)

Atli's rejection of God is not, I believe, a genuine rejection. It is a protest, a sign of resistance to the inexplicable pain he has been exposed to.

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As an adolescent, Atli is firm in his determination to oppose all theories about the existence of God and the creation of the world, but he has small support from his author who seems to write with his tongue in his cheek. The description of the boy's atheistic reading recalls the tone of defiance in the narrator in *Heiman eg fór*, during his student years in Reykjavík (HEF, 64-5). The boy's thoughts are revealed as echoes of big books, wanting in experience:

Hann hafði lesið Austurlönd og Vesturlönd og Nítjándu öldina og ótal fleiri bækur og vissi að jörðin varð ekki til á sex dögum einsog stóð í bifliunni . . . hann vissi að mennirnir voru ekki komnir út af Adam og Evu, heldur út af öpum, og að Jesús Kristur var einginn guð og hvorki gefið vald á himni né jörðu, heldur hafði hann aðeins verið gáfuður maður, svo fremi að hann hefði nokkurntíma verið til. (UND, 188)

In conversation with Áslaug a little later, he tries to impress her with his knowledge of Darwin: 'Aftur á móti er það tóm vitleysa að nokkur guð hafi skapað heiminn; það er hebresk þjóðsaga. Það stendur um það í bókunum eftir Darwin hvernig heiminum varð til' (UND, 229).

Atli also feels he has come to the truth about Luther: 'Hann vissi líka að Lúter hafði hvorki lagfært neinn gamlan sannleik né leitt neinn nýan í ljós og ekki forðað heiminum frá neinni villu. Því þessi Lúter var sjálfur ekki annað en fallinn múnkur, þýskt skamhýði, uppreistarseggur og fyllisvín sem loksins sálaðist í

ðlæði' (UND, 188). Laxness has not shown great admiration for Lutheranism on the whole, but these words of Atli do not seem to have any imprint from him; again they are felt to be only the precocious expressions of a confused and hurt boy. Religion is folk-tale as far as he is now concerned. It is all right for cottars and women, but it is certainly not for him.

Atli's return to faith is muddled. The name 'Jesús' is scratched on to his heart-shaped stone with Áslaug's crucifix. In trying to erase the name Atli cuts his hand, but he does not cut a vein. This may signify one of two things: that in excluding Jesus from his life he is heading for grief, or, in the very presence of Christ's name alone, Atli is prevented from coming to grief. However it may be, from his wonderings about the matter, Atli is led to a change of heart, and he slips very happily from the praise of Darwin into a folk-song about faith in Christ. It is all rather easy. But to give Laxness his due, the mini-miracle occurs only moments after Áslaug has been in deep contemplation of her crucifix. However, no connection between her contemplation and what Atli sees as a sign to him is stressed; she is not, for instance, said to be praying for him. But obviously the reader is meant to see Áslaug as bringing about his conversion. It is her innate goodness and her care and prayers for him in general which are supposed to save him. But it is all vague and tangled. The mini-miracle of the heart-shaped stone overshadows her part. The whole episode lacks conviction. It has a ring of plebeian superstition, and this is somewhat surprising, coming from the pen of a recent convert. I think the explanation must lie in the

essentially religious nature of the young boy. It has been shown that his atheism has given him no happiness, that he has felt an outsider because of it, and that his attitudes are primarily those of protest rather than true conviction; the whole thing has been a sad and terrible effort, but a necessary one. Now he can surrender himself to God and he does so willingly.

There is at times something of the mystic about Atli. This of course is why he can succumb to the real or imaginary powers of the other world, but it is also why he is aware of a presence behind the visible, even at those times when he professes to be an unbeliever. During his last summer at home he reflects on this: 'Þó þetta væri ekki nema hið daglegasta meðal hins daglega, þá var það þó eingu að síður einsog brotabrot úr einhverju máttugu og endalausum og óumræðilegu. Það var líkt og einhver hátíð hyldist að baki daganna' (UND, 214). He speaks in almost the same words when he and Áslaug sit together after he returns to his faith. His mystic tendency connects him with others of Laxness's mystical boys, the narrator in *Helman eg fór*, the lad in 'Steinninn minn helgi' (*Nokkrar sögur*), the boy in 'Pípuleikarinn' (*Sjö tölfrámennt*) and Ólafur Kárason. But the mystic element is not confined to the young, and something of it is found weaving its way through all Laxness's work. There is a holy presence behind the Icelandic countryside for those who will be still enough to perceive it.

The second group of characters who express religious values are those with a balanced and sober faith, namely Þuríður, Snjólfur, Áslaug and Grímur með pokann.



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Þuríður is one of the many older women, like Laxness's grandmother herself, whom the writer likes to portray, and whom he portrays as imperturbable and secure, invariable in their kindness and inner calm: 'Í brosi hennar lá hin sama hlýa, hin sama ró, einsog fyrir mörgum árum meðan Atli var enn lítill dreingur . . . kanski hafði hún einnig brosið á sama hátt daginn sem hann fæddist, kanski einnig laungu áður en hann fæddist' (UND,192) - the continuity of the great maternal smile. Þuríður has nothing spiritually revolutionary to say, no new dogmas to expound; she is a woman of great heart but few words; she is imbued with a peace and a goodness which say more.

From a literary viewpoint Áslaug is sweet but dull, except when she is in a temper. From a religious viewpoint she stands for the solid, simple kind of faith that Laxness is advocating. She is not a thinker; she is a feeler, and she accepts what she does not comprehend. Above all she accepts the limitations of her understanding, and so she asks Atli: 'Heldurðu að mennirnir sem vita svo lítið geti skilið hvað guð meinar?' (UND,230). In her final argument with Atli, when he reflects on the Genesis story, her attitude is that one does not *know* through reading. Her knowledge of God is not gathered from information, but from a sense of wonder at creation, at the stars and at her own smallness before it all. This is the kind of intuitive grasp that Jóhanna once had, so that she could say to Atli, 'Maður sér ekki guð, góði minn, maður finnur guð' (UND,49). Áslaug sees that God's ways are not the ways of men, and that we are unable to judge whether in fact it is more tragic for Ljúfur to have been crushed, than for

Atli to have been allowed to live.

Áslaug is described as Atli's guardian spirit. She constantly watches over him and longs for a change in his disposition. She is always saving him: she saves him from a beating after he has raided the duck's nest (though it is she who first reports on the incident); she saves him from petrification in his nightmare; and of course she saves him from the ~~sou~~<sup>soul</sup>-destroying power of the stone. There is a change in the roles now from *Barn náttúrunnar*, where for the most part the man appeared as the moral saviour.

Snjólfur combines the brain and the heart of the kind of Christianity that Laxness now seems to support. Were it not for Snjólfur's affirmation of the faith, it might still be looked on as something for 'kotakrakkarnir eða sauðsvartur almúginn' (UND, 188). His action in the book is comparatively limited, but his strength of character is weighty. He provides a contrast of moral determination and principle lacking in Kjartan. Snjólfur has also had grief in his life, and it is he, the layman, who has learned how to come to terms with pain. His vigour and willingness to face reality stand out against Jóhanna's retreat into morbid reflection. During their first meeting he is put in a position in which he must speak of things that are important to him. Appealing neither to philosophy nor theology, but speaking with simple directness he explains his faith: 'grafir koma mér yfirleit ekki við . . . ég trúi á eilíft líf' (UND, 129); God is in all things, 'við eigum að trúa á allt það góða og vona allt það besta . . . þetta hefur lífið kent mér og ég væri laungu kominn á hundana ef ég hefði ekki lært það. Maður gleypir ekki sólina í

þessum heimi' (UND,129); then we must be humble: 'við megum aldrei halda að við séum of stór til þess að trúa á hann' (UND,130); we must not rely on life or on ourselves: 'ef við látum sorgirnar yfirbuga okkur . . . þá lítur út fyrir að við höfum trúað á okkur sjálf, en ekki á hann' (UND,130).

The brief picture of the wandering Grímur með pokann should not be overlooked. As the whole book is a study of the powers of evil and the powers of good, so two visitors to the priest's house can be said to symbolise these powers. Ísleifur Heljarmenni is in some way associated with the powers of darkness, exercising a fascination on Atli. But as Atli is equally drawn to good, so he is drawn to Grímur:

Ef illa lá á dreingjunum gat hann á augabragði feingið þá til að gleyma öllum ama. Ef þeir voru reiðir blíðkaði hann þá. Ef þeir höfðu háreysti og læti hóf hann gömlu hnýttu höndina sína á loft. Hann þoldi eingan hávaða. Hann sagði:

Við eigum að vera stílt og góð börn, en ekki að hafa hátt um okkur, því annars verða einglarnir okkar hræddir og fara burt frá okkur . . .

Hefur þú séð "hann"? hvíslaði Ljúfur og horfði áfjábúr í sólskínsandlit förumannsins.

Vinurinn minn! sagði Grímur með pokann, og strauk dreingnum yfir ljósan vágann. Hann kemur til allra sem eru þreyttir og fátækir og til allra sem leggja eyrun við og hlusta og til þeirra sem líta í kríngum sig í auðmýkt og bera lotningu fyrir

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skörunarverkinu. Hann kemur og leggur höndina á þeim, vinur minn. (UND, 94-5)

*Undir Helgahnúk* shows a much deeper understanding of Christianity than *Barn náttúrunnar*. The Christian life is seen to be more than just receiving necessities of life, such as daily bread, and more than being forgiven our trespasses. Jóhanna is only a believer in receiving and in getting and holding, and she is seen to be completely defeated through her wrong ideas. The image of God has softened considerably since the earlier work, and correspondingly, the service of God is now definitely connected with the heart. When the name of Jesus is carved on to Atli's heart-shaped stone, then comes the idea that religion is not solely a matter of the head, but it is now also firmly bound to resolution rather than emotion and this involves facing and not evading suffering.

1. Hallberg, *Den store vävaren*, pp. 147-48.
2. Friese, 'The Quintessence of the Novels of Halldór Laxness', p. 83.
3. Sønderholm, p. 103.
4. Sønderholm, p. 107.

*Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* is Laxness's boldly Catholic work, but it shows that Laxness was not entirely happy with Catholicism; it seemed not to contain all the answers that he was looking for. The work is not so much a turning point, as the unravelling of a knot. It contains a mass of warring opinions and views. Laxness has said of it, 'Vefarinn mikli er skáldsaga, þar sem lýst er sem samviskusamlegast öllum þeim lífsskoðunum og kenningum, sem ríkja í heimi nútímans, án tillits til hvort þær eru "ljótar" eða "fallegar"'.<sup>1</sup> These views slowly resolve themselves, though not entirely satisfactorily, in the mind of the principal character, Steinn Elliði, who moves forward and back under the influence of his father-confessor and the woman he loves. At first sight these two influences seem to be diametrically opposed, but I do not in fact think that this is essentially the case. The problem with Steinn, as it was with Laxness himself, is his own exaggeration and one-sided understanding of much of Catholicism.

Steinn Elliði is in many respects a shadow of the young Laxness, and Peter Hallberg has suggested that Papini's words at the end of *Un uomo finito*: 'This is not my biography but the exact course of what has happened in my inner life',<sup>2</sup> might well have been written by Laxness in connection with this work. There are striking similarities between the two books. But it should also be remembered that Steinn is the continuation of the same character that appeared in *Heiman eg fór*, who both attracted and repelled the narrator, and then it was the narrator himself who was the supposed shadow of the author. In the same way as in the earlier work, Steinn in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* is again both

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commended and reproved, blessed and condemned by faðir Alban and Diljá, as he develops and as he causes pain. So if we are to look for Laxness's own position in the work, we must seek it not only in the opinions of the protagonist, or in his final decision, but also in the reactions of the other characters. Above all it should be remembered that it is Catholicism that the writer is exploring and praising; in a reply to Jónas Jónsson in *Vörður*, 7 May 1927, he wrote: 'Af öllum þeim aragrúa lífsskoðana, sem fram eru settar í bók minni, aðhyllist jeg persónulega að eins eina, nefnilega hina kaþólsku'.

This is a work about the duality of human nature and the war between man's animal appetites and his divine aspirations. In June 1923 Laxness was given a copy of Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple*<sup>3</sup> and was greatly impressed by it.<sup>4</sup> It too is a study of diametrically opposed forces present, in one man, and like *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* it ends with a capitulation before God and with Pascal's words 'Tu ne m'aurais pas cherché, si tu ne m'avais pas déjà trouvé'.<sup>5</sup> Peter Hallberg also cites Giovanni Papini in this context and draws attention to the fact that Laxness had read *Storia di Cristo* and translated one of its chapters, 'Antinatura', for *Morgunblaðið*, 31 October 1923: 'Det är knappast en tillfällighet, att han stannat för just det kapitel, rubricerat *Antinatura*, som mot varandra ställer djuret och ängeln i människans väsen, "natura bestiale" contra "l'angelica"'.<sup>6</sup> Yet there is actually little emphasis placed on the polarity of man's nature in this particular chapter. The theme is rather the revolutionary, subversive, the non-natural or higher-than-natural

nature of Christ's teaching. There stand the words 'Hatred of self and love of our enemies is the basis and the end of Christianity. It is the greatest victory over the old, fierce, blind and brutal Adam'.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore interesting to note that in his first conversation with faðir Alban, Steinn himself rejects the book as 'blómskrúðugur kjaftavaðall' (VEF, 94). On the other hand he seems to admire its forerunner, *Un uomo finito*.

The fallen nature of 'the old, fierce, blind and brutal Adam' and his yearnings towards God, are the recurrent theme of the Bible, the writings of the Desert Fathers and the medieval Western mystics, in all of which Laxness was well versed at the time of writing.<sup>8</sup> His character, Steinn, like Doctor Faustus, might cry out 'O, I'll leap up to my God! Who pulls me down?'.<sup>9</sup> The answer for Steinn would be 'the flesh', and this for him means 'woman'.

The attitude of the Church towards woman deserves some consideration. The idea of woman being God's rival and the cause of the downfall of man on his road to God stems from Genesis 3, where Eve is seduced by the serpent and where she in turn leads Adam astray. The attitude of St Paul is often misinterpreted as it seems ambiguous, but it seems fair to say that he does manifest a certain misogyny. The Desert Fathers can also appear to have an antipathy towards women. A little later St Jerome continues the opposition, and the influence is still felt in the Middle Ages. Lucy de Bruyn in her book *Woman and the Devil in Sixteenth-Century Literature*, writes: 'It was a legacy bestowed by the Middle Ages to give all praise to God when things went right. But if anything went wrong, the Devil was blamed. Consequently, if woman fell

short of man's high expectations, the Devil must be with her'.<sup>10</sup> The tendency to regard woman at least as inferior to the male, especially in monastic establishments, still has the support of some Christian thought, even in the twentieth century: 'Woman has been called the vessel of infirmity. This 'infirmity' consists especially in her enslavement to the natural, elementary forces within and without herself'.<sup>11</sup> These opinions are in opposition to the revolutionary example of Christ, and there is no suggestion that man is equally, though differently, frail and corruptible. A weak woman is viewed by one section of the Church as being, of her very essence, more sinful than a weak man and in any case she is a temptress. It seems to claim that it is woman that is wrong and not the attitude of man regarding her.

Laxness's own misogyny comes from his reading of Strindberg, Otto Weininger and some parts of Tolstoy, in particular *The Kreutzer Sonata*. I think it also stems from a one-sided study of the Desert Fathers. There is no trace of such misogyny in his home environment. It is transitory.

It is important to look at Steinn in more detail and to see how much of the Church's outlook in these matters he has absorbed, and how many of his views are in fact the result of passing infatuations and impressions.

First of all, as has been said, Steinn has learned from his own observation that there are two natures within himself. Before he leaves Iceland he explains to Diljá: 'Ef helmíngur ævi minnar er synd þá er hinn helmíngur ljóð, og kanski meira . . . Maðurinn hefur tvær náttúrur . . . Önnur stefnir uppí himininn . . . alla



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leið til guðs. Hin leitar niðrávið ósköpin þar sem helvíti brennur og frýs. Maðurinn hefur sál, og maðurinn hefur líkama, og það sem sálin heimtar ríður í þverbága við hitt sem líkaminn girnist, og líkaminn girnist þá hluti sem drepa sálina' (VEF,32-33). So much he can perceive in himself, but his use of Latin phrases, 'cupiditas carnis' (VEF,30), 'spiritus adversus carnem' (VEF,32), and his reference to 'guðs móðir sem stendur á tunglinu' (VEF,32), added to an evidently new inclination for a chaste way of life, all point to a strong Catholic influence already working on him. He seems to see celibacy, both before leaving Iceland and throughout the book, as the only way out of the dilemma posed by conflicting forces in his soul. Celibacy is the powerful weapon of Catholicism, and it makes its appeal to this potential disciple.

Steinn has already outsinned himself at home in Iceland, and he would have Diljá believe that woman has no more attraction for him. He has so great a disrespect for woman, that Diljá is led to ask whether he considers that woman even possesses a soul. He sees marriage as an imperfect state and it seems to be the influence of St Paul, I, Corinthians 7, that leads him to say: 'Það er ófullkomið að kvænast skapabri skepnu . . . Fullkominn maður giftist ekki öðru en hugsjón sinni' (VEF,29). His views in his conversation on the train in 1921 seem to be largely those of the old, impersonal Catholic Church, before the relaxing of attitudes after Ecumenical Council II:

Konan er nefnilega hvorki meira né minna en hættulegasti meðbiðill guðs og keppinautur þar sem sál mannsins er í tafli.

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Það eru tvö reginöfl innan vorrar jarðnesku tilveru sem heya reipdrátt um sál mannsins. Annarsveggar er guð, sem kallaður er, takmark hinnar andlegu þrjár mannsins; hinsveggar hold konunnar. Bæði elska manninn hvort á sína vísu; hvorugt vill vera varaskeifa; bæði krefjast þess að eiga hann allan, eiga hann til líkama og sálar, eða réttara sagt: maðurinn á ekki nema um tvent að velja . . . guð eða konuna . . .

Gerir hann konuna veruleik sinn verður guð honum misjafnlega veruleg skáldsýn, í hæsta lagi biflía í hákarlsskráp, skrautgripur sem hann flytur um leið og stundaklukkuna inní musteri það sem hann reisir konu sinni og nefnir heimili sitt. Kjósi hann guð verður konan honum ímynd hins fallvalta heims; hann sér í henni fulltrúa hégómans, persónugervíng blekkíngarinnar. (VEF, 118-19)

I use the word 'impersonal' in relation to these views, since they are clearly not the expression of individuals but of a detached establishment. Faðir Alban, for example, gives Steinn's arguments scant support, and his teaching on marriage later in the book gives a totally different picture from the one that Steinn held but a short time before. And Laxness in his article 'Misogynie Vefarans', published in 1963, writes: 'Því hefur verið haldið fram að áhrif múnka muni hafa ráðið mysogynie í Vefaranum. En það var sannarlega ekki af mysogynie í Saint Maurice, heldur leikaraskap, að líta ekki á stúlkur ef þær voru nær'.<sup>12</sup> Steinn's views are not the mature author's, nor his father-confessor's. They are those of a confused young man, possibly the younger

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Laxness at an earlier stage, who has taken something from the Church, and also something from the ideas prevalent in the world he moves in, for there is a more modern misogyny in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* as well.

The opinions expressed by Steinn come straight from Otto Weininger and Strindberg and have been thoroughly researched by Peter Hallberg. Hallberg concludes that they consider man and woman to be irreconcilable enemies, and that Weininger calls for 'total avhállsamhet för båda könen'.<sup>13</sup> The same is demanded in *The Kreutzer Sonata* by Tolstoy, whom Laxness had read with interest.<sup>14</sup> Steinn is proud of his misogyny, but it is stuck on to, rather than absorbed by him; Laxness's irony in *Heiman eg fór* may be remembered here: 'Mér þykir líklegt að ég hafi það úr einhverjum bókum að konan væri óæðri vera um andlegan þroska en maðurinn: þær eru ekki skapaðar til að hugsa' (HEF, 29); the writer is not taking too serious an approach to such a juvenile pose. However, the tension between the sexes, the idea of woman as a distraction to man, as temptation and consequently as sin, endures in Steinn's mind throughout the book.

It would be unjust to give the impression that woman is solely regarded unfavourably within the tradition of the Catholic Church and, for our purposes, in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. This is not so. While in Genesis 3, Eve succumbs to the temptation of the serpent, a promise is also given of the Virgin who will crush the serpent's head. Belief in the Virgin gave rise to 'an unconditional faith that she would continue to do so until the end of time'.<sup>15</sup> So there are two figures of womanhood, the temptress

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and the Madonna, the curse and the blessing. Woman can aspire to 'das Ewig Weibliche in the noblest sense or degrade herself to merely die Antlitzlose Maske des Weiblichen'.<sup>16</sup>

Steinn recognises the two images of woman and, for all his antipathy towards one of her aspects, he acknowledges a certain wonder surrounding the life-giving figure of motherhood and reflects: 'Konan er ekki aðeins móðir mannanna, heldur dýrlínganna, jafnvel Jesú Krists sjálfs. Ave Maria, gratia plena, dominus tecum' (VEF, 264). Finally the Virgin becomes his refuge and while he is resolutely resisting any distraction occasioned by Diljá in Rome, a picture of the Virgin stands by his bed. In a prayer lying beside it, she is invoked as 'athvarf syndaranna . . . móðir miskunnseminnar' and the prayer ends with the words 'Móðir guðs, vertu móðir mín!' (VEF, 321).

In Diljá Steinn sees both the Madonna and the temptress. She is gentle and impressionable. Laxness portrays her with definite sympathy. As a girl she is described with these words: 'Hun var hafin yfir alla synd og fyrirgaf alt. Hún var of hrein til að skilja að nokkuð væri ljótt í syndinni. Hún elskaði þá sem áttu bágt, það var alt og sumt' (VEF, 38). Steinn, on the other hand, is shown as dishonest and disrespectful in his dealings with her; disrespectful, in that he misuses his influence over her in extracting her vow of chastity, showing a basic disregard for her freedom; dishonest, in that behind the vow there is, on his part, an undeniable suppressed passion. Furthermore Steinn is unjust in ignoring Diljá's letters, bound together as the two of them are by a mutual self-denying bond, so that, in view of Steinn's

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silence, she really has no practical alternative than to break her vow and marry. Again the sympathy of the writer towards her is felt. Laxness does not present Diljá as a temptress, nor give the impression that Steinn is tormented by his longing for women when he is in the monastery. On the other hand there is plenty of evidence in Laxness's own diaries that he himself underwent considerable temptation during his own stay at Clervaux, so the entry for Whitsunday, 20 May 1923 runs: 'Hef ekki notið heilagleiks hátíðarinnar nema að litlu leyti sakir kvenna', and that for the next day: 'Konur trufla mig mjög í kirkjunni. Ætla bráðum að láta snoðklippa mig af þessum ástæðum'.<sup>17</sup> This again points to the fact that the character Steinn only partially represents the author.

When Steinn returns to Iceland, Diljá no longer appears solely as a gentle Madonna figure, but neither is she the undisputed wicked temptress. She has suffered and her suffering has in some measure been occasioned by Steinn. Now she claims what is her own, and she knows that he is not unwilling. To some extent she appears as God's rival for the love of her man, saying: 'Guð elskar þig ekki eins mikið og ég' (VEF, 313). Her love becomes primitive and pagan, so she says to Steinn of herself: 'Það er einginn glæpur svo óheyrilegur að hún mundi ekki drýgja hann ef þú vildir' (VEF, 314). The Church and the monks are her enemies, and later she travels to Rome 'til þess að heimta elskhuga sinn úr tröllahöndum' (VEF, 315). The idea of woman competing against God for the soul of man seems to bear an echo of *Fjalla-Eyvindur*, the play by Jóhann Sigurjónsson (1911), which Steinn refers to as 'hinu djúpsæsta

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leikriti á norræna túngu' (VEF, 120). Here Halla, the outlaw's wife, says to her man, 'Þú kaust heldur að bíða dauðans en syndga gegn guði þínum. Þú metur sáluhjálp þína meira en lífið. Jeg ásaka þig fyrir það. En jeg á engan guð og jeg hef aldrei getað greint sundur sál mína og ást'.<sup>10</sup> There is of course a difference in the outlaw's and in Steinn's behaviour, and I feel that it is Steinn's behaviour in Iceland that explains much of Diljá's apparently primitive reactions and the new rawness in her love. In Iceland he is no ambassador for Catholicism or for Christianity in general. He is arrogant and hostile and shows many signs of being unbalanced. The God that he purports to love has had a detrimental effect on him; conversion has made him a worse and not a better man. It is understandable therefore that Diljá should be opposed to the God who is responsible for such a change. She rebels against Steinn's harshness and hypocrisy. This is why I do not see her as a temptress, nor as being diametrically opposed to faðir Alban, for she wishes to draw Steinn away from what is false and hurtful in him. And it is in fact Diljá who enables him to throw off the burden of falsehood, for his love of God is very clearly a strain and an affectation during the time he is at home. After the night spent with Diljá he temporarily becomes a new man, for he has had the courage 'að yfirgefa sjálf sitt og tala hina sönnustu lygi mannglegrar ófullkonnunar' (VEF, 292). For a while the delusion that he lives under, namely that he solely loves God, falls away, and for a while he can see his religious sacrifices as being the outcome of his old pride. Diljá has not made him fall; she has returned him to his unaffected state. Sønderholm considers

that it would have been appropriate for the work to have ended here; not only because it would avoid forcing the main character into a straight ideology, somewhat unnaturally, but also because, at this point, Steinn rediscovers in himself a sense of true identity, as an Icelander, and with it a need and a vocation to be of service to his fellow men; <sup>19</sup> if this had been the design of the novel the genuinely social would triumph over the artificially religious. Steinn however returns to his religious way of life, and it is during their final meeting in Rome that Diljá can actually see that some real change, a change for the good, is possible within him, even within this religious life that is so alien to her. She sees his face transformed by prayer, 'svo hún hafði aldrei séð neitt fegra á ævi sinni' (VEF, 323), and so in the end the God of love wins. The God of harshness she was able to resist and fight, because He ruined the man she loved, but, even for a brief time, this God of love has a transfiguring effect, so she does not and cannot resist any more. She is left bewildered, without illusion or comfort, crushed in the face of the tremendous weight of the Catholic world, attempting to screen herself, like the figure in *Skriket* by Munk, against 'hinna eilífi skelfingu sem hlær að baki deginum' (VEF, 324).

One of Steinn's chief problems is to come to terms with his own sexuality. It is his inability to cope with this that leads him to his dishonesty and his unwillingness to regard Diljá as a full person, worthy of respect and compassion. At their final meeting, when he is transformed by prayer, he is able, for the first time, to see her in this light, no longer as a stumbling block; she

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becomes instead 'veslings barn' (VEF, 323). The transformation in him is genuine and, this being so, it makes its impression. Steinn himself appears to be at peace. But it is not woman that he has overcome; he has overcome himself.

In his essay 'Trú' (1928-29) in *Alþýðubókin*, Laxness writes, 'Lausn "Vefarans" gefur einga von'.<sup>20</sup> However, he definitely does not present Steinn as being without hope at the end. If this is a tragedy, it is one which the principal character elects with equanimity and apparent, if hard-won, peace of mind. His mood is far from sombre resignation. It is interesting, therefore, that Laxness would like Steinn's fate to be understood as tragic, when he has allowed him to undergo an unexpected spiritual renewal, one which seems out of character, and which could easily have been avoided, if the writer had wished to heighten a sense of gloom. The ending of the novel may dismay the reader and to a certain extent, I think, may have dismayed the author himself. By the time of finishing the book there was undoubtedly ambiguity in Laxness's attitude to the Roman Catholic Church, despite whatever he may have written in personal letters. The feeling that he had lost his conviction in the Church is shared by critics. Stefán Einarsson, for example, writes that in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, Laxness 'reduced the ideal of the Church, as he understood it, *ad absurdum*',<sup>21</sup> and Erik Sønderholm notes that by the end of the book 'forfatterens katolske ræs havde mistet sin kraft'.<sup>22</sup> This is all true, but I do not think that the interesting transformation in Steinn should be overlooked or downgraded. It makes the separation between the lovers more acceptable, and



whether Laxness wishes it or not, it is a sign of hope for Steinn's future. It also reveals that although Laxness and the Church might formally have had to part company, he still held a belief in the possibility of the holy.

I have said that at the end of the work, Steinn has eventually overcome himself. The first positive, external step towards this is taken after three dreams which follow his attempted suicide. The first two dreams show sexual desire coupled with guilt, and depravity mingled with a need to observe religious rites. In the last dream the whores of mankind scream around the crucified Christ, who is dressed as a dandy, and Steinn becomes aware that he too is defiled and is on the point of asking Christ for clean garments, that is for spiritual regeneration. It is after the dreams that Steinn seeks out the monastery in the hope of finding help for his soul. Günter Kötz understands that there is a rapport between the holy man and the dandy, that it is possible for the man who feels himself in some way raised above the mob to identify with the One on the Cross: 'Was dem homo vulgaris schlechthin das Lebenswerk bedeutet, kennt weder der Heilige noch der Dandy. Beide erblicken im Erfolg der "gemeinen" Menschen nichts als Misserfolg. So kommt es, dass Heiliger und Dandy über den Alltag erhaben sind . . . Heiliger und Dandy sind daher die höchsten nicht prostituierten Wesen'.<sup>23</sup> The interpretation of fictional dreams is more hazardous than of actual ones. Steinn, although an aesthete, does not identify with the dandy on the Cross. He cannot, though he may aspire to what he represents in worldly terms. He is surrounded by whores and he recognises that he

himself is one of them. The dandy represents for him both worldly exclusiveness and superiority, which he can readily understand, but the state of crucifixion brings in the spiritual dimension which he realises more and more is that which he longs for. The realisation that 'hann var sjálfur skækja alveg einsog hinir' (VEF,190) means that the dream is decisive for him and after it his life takes a definite turn, and he seeks out faðir Alban in his monastery.

In the monastery, under the guidance of faðir Alban, Steinn submits to God, admitting that he has suppressed his belief within himself. He now becomes a Catholic. It is necessary to look back at the previous chaos in Steinn's mind and at the choices that were possible for him, in order to see why he makes this decision.

Laxness calls his novel *Vefarinn mikli*, as he explained in a letter to Peter Hallberg, because he had in mind 'den gamla sagan om "Den store vævaren med tolv kungars visdom"'.<sup>24</sup> Steinn is the weaver and as he says 'sál mín er einsog Kasmír, dalur rósanna' (VEF,102); 'hann var fæddur í Kasmír, dal rósanna, með hörpu í höndum einsog goðin' (VEF,183); but as he progresses he meets humiliation and intellectual disappointment: 'Einn dag vaknaði han frá hörpuslætti sínum og sá sjálfan sig; rósirnar höfðu fölnað og dáið undan iljum hans' (VEF,183). The image of the humiliated weaver appears again when Steinn arrives bleeding and torn at the monastery door, and when he finally capitulates and kneels before his friend and confessor in the Carthusian monastery. His mind is always full of intellectual debate and philosophical questions, but underlying this it is clear that he is strongly drawn to the

religious. Before he leaves Iceland for the first time this is evident. He feels born again; he longs for perfection; but his longing for God bears his own stamp. Humility is unknown to him and therefore all his religious yearning and striving is comically marked with overbearing arrogance: 'Ég hef gert samning við drottin um að verða fullkornasti maðurinn á jörðu' (VEF, 28). Erik Sønderholm has made an extremely lucid study of Steinn's position. He understands that the book treats the conflict between soul and body, and enlarges on this to show that this also means conflict between the religious and the political. Consequently Steinn 'søger at finde en patentløsning på alle problemer'.<sup>25</sup> As Steinn says: 'Vitríngurinn á um þrent að velja. Hann getur valið um hvort hann vill lifa sjálfum sér, guði eða mönnum. Um þessa þrjá kosti brýt ég heilan' (VEF, 109); Sønderholm points out that these are Kierkegaard's categories of the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious.<sup>26</sup> Steinn's life as a poet proves unsatisfactory, so he is left with the choice between the ethical and the religious. At first he believes that Communism is the social answer to the future, but all that he can ever achieve himself is a kind of pseudosocialism, because as Sønderholm says, 'han systematisk stiller sig over og ikke blandt medmenneskene'.<sup>27</sup> He is influenced by Nietzsche, although he ostensibly refutes his philosophy: 'Ofurmennið stendur jafnfjarri hinum eilífa óháða anda einsog maðurinn. Því dýpra sem ég sökkvi mér niður í Nietzsche því ómurlegri hillíng verður mér ofurmennið' (VEF, 109); and in Bambara Salvatore he meets, in another person, that which he himself is likely to grow into, namely the amoral intellectual, the cynic,

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the non-believer who yet collects religious artefacts, and coldly admires the Catholic Church. He is the epitome of the meaningless. Faced with this meaninglessness, Steinn makes an abortive suicide attempt and then seeks religious refuge. In his religious mind 'han kombinerer overmennesketeorien med askesen . . . askesen, som han siden sit åndelige gennembrud har forbundet med åndelig fuldkommenhed, skal således garantere, at overmennesket forbliver uselvisk'. <sup>28</sup> Asceticism and chastity are the values that he admires throughout his development, and it is his over-emphasis on them, to the detriment of other Christian virtues, that seems to be the principal reason why he is unable to make head-way in his spiritual life, and why his relationships fail miserably in the outside world. It should be noted that chastity is not stressed but rather taken for granted by faðir Alban. Steinn's attitude is already a misinterpretation on his part, before he makes the acquaintance of the monks. Before coming to the monastery, he writes

Menn einsog ég fremja dauðasynd gangvart mannkyninu ef þeir blandast óskírara málmí en þeir sjálfir. Þeir eru fæddir til að vera hreinir og einir.

Af allri þjálfun er skírlífið hollvættur persónuleikans . . . Ekkert eflir fremur anda mannsins né eykur á sálrænan mikilleik hans, ekkert herðir hann betur gegn mýktinni né mýkir hann fremur gegn hörkunni, ekkert gerir hann vígreifarí né sljórrí fyrir áverkum, ekkert veitir honum jafnskilyrðislausu ósérhlífni til áhættuverka né óbilugra þol til lángríða, og

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ekkert hatrammari grímd til þess að ganga milli bols og höfuðs á drekum. Skírlífið er trygging þess að tilgangur mikilmennis sé hreinn. (VEF, 115)

For Steinn chastity is a means of setting the chosen apart from the rabble, even if it is also a means of acquiring enviable qualities, and serving mankind. Peter Hallberg is right in saying: 'It is not, perhaps, with Christian humility that one first associates such an ideal. There is an obvious element of the dream of the superman here'.<sup>29</sup> At the beginning of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* Steinn even believes that his own chastity is part of a bargain with God: 'Guð hefur sjálfur sagt mér að ef ég sé nogu hreinn, geti ég ort nytt tímabil yfir heimsbókmentirnar einsog Dante Alighieri' (VEF, 39). If there is to be self-denial on his part, Steinn obviously hopes for ample rewards.

It seems fair to say that Steinn's insistence on chastity and sexual abstinence stem from his fear of his own sexual nature, which, as has been mentioned, also leads him into misogyny. We are told that he has indulged in sexual orgies in his parents' absence, and this has led to feelings of disgust, not only for the opposite sex, but for himself. Since he cannot trust himself, he must chain himself. He cannot understand the idea of training himself. He is always led to extremes and understands no middle way, therefore when Christianity opens before him as a real possibility, it necessarily means the way of austerity for him, celibacy, the monk's life. It is obvious from his behaviour on his return to Iceland that Christianity has, in his mind, no bearing

on ordinary, everyday life. In his extremism Christianity means, for him, the monastic life or nothing.

Steinn chooses Catholicism because he comes to believe in the truth of the words of Robert Hugh Benson, words which he had formerly doubted: 'sé guð til, þá er líka kenningakerfi kaþolsku kirkjunnar ein rökrétt sannindaheild altniðrað vígsluvatnsfontinum við kirkudyr' (VEF,220). He seeks for authority from the Church, a voice of certainty which will bring order to the chaos of his ideas. Later he admits in a letter to faðir Alban: 'Kirkjan hefur aðeins veitt mér tryggingu: hún er lífakkeri mitt' (VEF,301). The other Christian denominations make no appeal to him. It is surety, universality that he wants from the church:

Honum kom ekki til hugar að ímynda sér að kirkja Lúters, Kalvíns, meþódista, baptista, né aðrar meðal sex hundruð kristindómsupppfinninga síðari tíma, væri kirkja Krists . . . Kirkju sinni hafði Jesús Kristur heitið fylgi alla daga til enda veraldar, fimtán hundruð árum áðuren kirkjur Lúters og Kalvíns urðu til. Og Steinn var fullljóst að hefði Jesús Kristur sjálfur stofnað kirkju til að leiða mannkynið í sannleika var það hneyskli og babilja að gera ráð fyrir að sú kirkja gæti kent lygi . . . Annaðhvort voru allar hugmyndir manna um kristlega kirkju þvaður og rugl eða kirkja Krists er óskeikull boðberi sannleikans, - ancilla veritatis. Aðrir kirkjur eru rótlausir kvistir . . . Kirkja sem á það á hættu að kenna eitt í dag og annað á morgun getur ekki verið kirkja Krists, því guð er óbreytilegur og sannleikur hans eilífur.

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Guðdómur Jesú Krists og óskeikulleiki kirkjunnar stendur og fellur hvort með öðru. (VEF, 220-21)

The Catholic Church also makes an appeal to Steinn's aesthetic sense, and, further, in a passage that foreshadows Arnas Arnæus's impressions in Rome (ÍSL, 244), there is a feeling of excitement at the vastness and the oneness of a church incorporating all ranks of people from all the nations of the world (VEF, 221-22). But it is primarily as a refuge from chaos, a sure guide, that Steinn envisages Catholicism.

Steinn shows great devotion to his father confessor and drinks in his teaching, even if, when first put to the test, it does not seem to have made a deep impression. The monk's fundamental teaching is that nothing can separate us from the love of God made visible in Christ; that we are to come to Him as little children, forsaking intellectual opinions and ideals (VEF, 198); that we are not to rely on ourselves but on Him alone (VEF, 233); that reality lies not in the external but in the inner life; and that God is not served by our works, He asks for ourselves (VEF, 103). It is this last notion that Steinn finds particularly incomprehensible, for, to some extent, aesthetics and the image of God are often confused in his mind. He is first and foremost an intellectual, and then an artist, and it is difficult for him to recognise that what he himself prizes most highly may be of small account before his Maker. It is the actual example rather than the words of faðir Alban, himself a former intellectual and artist, that leads him forward. He only learns to follow in his footsteps at the end.

Before that, he has to tackle the question of humility, which is an unknown quantity to him. Steinn has considerable problems with this since he has promised God that he will become 'fullkornasti maðurinn á jörðu' (VEF,28). But as faðir Alban explains, it is not magnificence but the purity of intention that matters ultimately, and Steinn's early convert's zeal is often tinged with a characteristic longing for self-glory.

Steinn's version of Christianity is basically a misunderstanding, and as such, it is fruitless. Therefore, in the long run, he finds it hard to yield to the God that he builds for himself, 'þennan almáttuga harðstjóra tilverunnar' (VEF,311). The person of Christ and his image of God are seen only in terms of sacrifice and asceticism, and although these are the things that are the backbone of his religious life, there is obviously resentment in him as well; he has not come to terms with what he himself has given up, namely his love for Dilljá, nor with his new loss, namely that of faðir Alban to a closed monastery. At the wayside cross, on his way to the Carthusian monastery to find faðir Alban, he addresses the following embittered words to Christ: 'Kristur, Kristur, ef þú gættist gæti grunað alt sem þú hefur á samviskunni' (VEF,306). In his mind Christ bears an immeasurable guilt, for imposing on His chosen men terms that are totally unrealistic and unacceptable. One might expect a voice to come to him from the thunder crash, a rejoinder: 'Han er deus caritatis'.<sup>30</sup> His view of God as the great punisher seems to be a remnant of his Protestant upbringing, but at the same time it is unfortunately true of much Catholic thinking, prior to Ecumenical



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Council II. His harsh vision of God fits in with his devotion to the Virgin in a manner that is explained by Robert Llewelyn in his book on the gentleness of God:

It is partly because God (and Jesus too) has been so often seen as a stern and forbidding judge that the Church has turned in large measure to the virgin mother, seeing in her qualities which in truth belong to God . . . Yet supposing it were true [that Catholics worshipped the virgin Mary] and that some uninstructed Catholic, in worshipping the virgin Mary, carried over into his worship a character picture of God as he truly is (though the worshipper gave him another name and that name was Mary) then such a man would have been nearer to eternal truth and goodness than his orthodox Catholic brother who worshipped a being whom he *called* God, taking over into his worship a conception of the Deity which was seriously warped. <sup>21</sup>

However, at his last meeting with faðir Alban, Steinn does eventually submit himself to his severe God in a new and a humbler way. He bares his soul and appears to come to a self-knowledge hitherto unknown. He alters his attitude to his Creator, abandoning his will, his pride and his artistic dreams. He gives up all hope of effecting his own salvation and hands himself over to God: 'Ef hann átti ekki að glatast varð guð að taka hann með valdi og endurnýja sál hans frá grunni, hugsa fyrir hann, vilja fyrir hann' (VEF, 311).

The next and final task is for Steinn to alter his attitude to humanity.

The religious life is composed of a spiritual and a practical side and the two should be complementary. To ignore the second side is looking for an easy way out. As T.S. Eliot says: 'When the Christian faith is not only felt, but thought, it has practical results which may be inconvenient'.<sup>32</sup> This is an inconvenience which Steinn is not prepared to shoulder. Although at times he professes to love his fellow men, this is only emotion and it is only skin deep.

Steinn's love of humanity is an idealised, poeticised love. It is a romantic dream with no practical results. So before he leaves home he exclaims: 'Ég gæti dáið fyrir heiminn ef nokkrum væri þægð í því, látið krossfesta mig fyrir allt sem er í heiminum. Ég elska mennina, elska þá alla' (VEF,39). This juvenile ideal develops into Communism once he is exposed to Europe between the wars. A new era will dawn when Communism comes, and then, he says, using biblical imagery: 'Óvinum mannkynsins verður kastað úti ystu myrkur' (VEF,211). But these beliefs about brotherhood are easily dispelled; they come and go according to the warmth of his belief in God. It seems that mankind is not intrinsically lovable in his eyes. As has been said, his socialism is always mingled with disdain. The only reason for loving men is that to do so is to obey the commandment of God. When he is in London in 1925, claiming to believe no more, it follows that he no longer considers humanity to be any concern of his. His disdain for the

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men he claims he loves is at its zenith when he returns home, and he tells Diljá, 'Mennirnir eru því hlægilegri í augum mér sem þeim líður ver' (VEF, 275), though he admits that this view is Buddhist and not Catholic. If poetry and religious fervour are removed from him, little remains of his philanthropy.

In actual fact Steinn is only too happy to cut himself off from his fellow men. His lack of solidarity is noticeable mainly through what he neglects to do. Thus he prays: 'Lof mér að elska þig og gleyma öllu öðru' (VEF, 205); 'Kendu mér að elska þig . . . þannig að ekkert sé mér neins vert innan endimarka tilverunnar nema þú einn' (VEF, 281). If Steinn has a spiritual life, then it consists in God and himself. He wishes nothing else to exist outside it. In his letter from Sussex, 1924, he quotes Goethe: '"Greif hinein ins volle menschenleben!'" (VEF, 111), and argues that the perfect man struggles on behalf of mankind, implying that the ascetic lacks the necessary courage for real life. This proves to be the case with him in later years. His spiritual life excludes the world and its responsibilities. Religious texts support his stance — all is vanity, 'Vanitas vanitatum' (VEF, 245). He makes the choice between the Creator and the creature. The idea that the world is illusion nourishes his detachment and disdain. Finally, not in disdain, but with some conviction, he can tell Diljá: 'Maðurinn er blekking. Farðu og leitaðu guðs skapara þíns því allt er blekking nema hann' (VEF, 323).

Much of this way of thinking may have come from *The Imitation of Christ*.<sup>33</sup> There, at some unprecise stage in Book III the

demands of God begin to be put forward in so uncompromising a way that saintliness or despondency ensue. Take for example the following two extracts: 'Rapt in spirit, a man must rise above all created things, and perfectly forsaking himself, see clearly that nothing in creation can compare with the Creator. But unless a man is freed from dependence on creatures, he cannot turn freely to the things of God'; <sup>34</sup> 'Your love for a friend must rest in Me, and those who are dear to you in this life must be loved only for My sake. No good and lasting friendship can exist without Me, and unless I bless and unite all love it cannot be pure and true. You should be so mortified in your affection towards loved ones that, for your part, you would forego all human companionship'. <sup>35</sup> Compare Steinn's reflection: 'Og þó er synd að elska mannveruna annars vegna en hinnar eilífu fyrirhugunar' (VEF, 262). Added to this admonition to sever human affections is the idea that the body, 'the prison-house of the soul', <sup>36</sup> is bad and a hindrance in all ways. To submit oneself to the spirit of certain parts of Book III could seem to amount to a rejection of life, and it is precisely this Book that Steinn himself turns to when he is faced with any difficulties (VEF, 263-64).

In no part of the religious philosophy that Steinn takes to himself is there any echo of the Sermon on the Mount. The voice that formerly spoke of commitment to men is silenced now. In view of the great impression that Giovanni Papini's *Storia di Cristo* made on Laxness, <sup>37</sup> it is at first surprising that there is no note of it here. Papini lays great emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount, and in particular on the socially revolutionary aspect of

Christ's teaching. In Chapter 20 he writes of the compulsion to service experienced by believers in the face of the apparent tragedy of the condition of mankind:

Others there are who experience the same horror of man as he was and is, but who before succumbing to the despair of nullity, stop to consider what man may become; these believe in the possibility of spiritual improvement and find their happiness in the divine but terrible task of preparing the happiness of their fellow men . . . For men who are true men there is no other way. For them there can be but the anguish of despair or the strongest faith. Either they must perish or they must save others. 38

Steinn's silence about the practical virtues of Christianity is yet another indication that he is an invented character, only loosely touching on the author's experience, since Laxness himself was interested in social questions.

Laxness's solution for Steinn, in allowing him some measure of transfiguration at the end, must, I think, be taken as a sign of loyalty and respect for much that the writer himself felt deeply for in Catholicism. For Steinn to have walked away from the Church entirely after his sudden acknowledgment of his love for Diljá, and after his sudden reawakening to his role as an Icelander, would have been logical for him, but it would have left fæðir Alban as an eccentric, and as a lone voice that could win not one follower. And for all the disparate feelings that Laxness seems to

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have had about the Church, that seems to be an idea that he was not prepared to promote. The portrait of faðir Alban bears every mark of the writer's regard, and speaks favourably for the religious way of life; thus Steinn reflects: 'Það er sök sér að lifa, hafi maður borið gæfu til að kynnst helgum mönnum. Hafi maður ekki kynst helgum mönnum þá er ekkert varið í að lifa og jafngott að hafa aldrei orðið til' (VEF, 303). The religious - that is, of course, exclusively the monastic - way of life is portrayed with dignity and reverence, but it is also shown as a way that uncompromisingly rejects the world, society. The outside world is esteemed as nothing. The highly regarded monk teaches for instance: 'Eitt faðirvor, beðið á næturlæpi þegar allir sofa, það er meiri atburður en byltingin í Rússlandi þó ekki fréttist af því fyren á dómsdegi' (VEF, 103); but this is not really something that Laxness himself can accept. Although his character follows in the footsteps of the incontestably holy man, the religious way is shown as diametrically opposed to life. Throughout the book there is tension between body and soul, the social and the religious, and the question of whether the world is real and therefore worthy of attention, or illusory and therefore a vain distraction, is frequently posed. And it is a question of prime importance for Laxness too. Laxness seems drawn to the religious life, but concedes that he finds it life-denying. In 1929 he writes 'Frumhugsan kristindómsins er með öllu ósamrýmleg frumhugsan jarðnesks lífs, - það er upphaf og endir "Vefarins". Sé guð alt og maðurinn blekking ein og hégómi, þá liggur í augum uppi að

manninum er best að halla sér útaf og deya, svo að guð geti verið alt í friði'. 39

The question of what the Church considers evil in human life causes definite problems for Laxness. Robert Llewelyn writing of the same problems has the following to say:

It is undoubtedly true that the Church, if not through its official teaching, yet through some of its spokesmen, among them some whom it has honoured, and sometimes through its mental and spiritual climate, has often produced . . . [the] impression: that commonplace things like food and sex and sleep are almost necessary evils, instead of being a part of the means God uses to effect his work of sanctification . . . We cannot do without these things if we and the human race are to survive - people with a Manichaeian turn of mind seem to say - but surely God with his vast resources and skills, could he not have thought out a rather better way? Such thinking undermines the Christian faith at its roots. 'Regard the flesh, the body, matter as evil or even inferior, and one has already begun the deviation from the Christian truth'. 40

Laxness does seem to have been effected by this kind of deviating teaching. He could not write in the tone he uses in *Alþýðubókin* if it were otherwise.

Shortly after the publication of his Catholic novel, Laxness left Iceland for America in 1927. By this time he had shown a sharp swing from the contemplative and ascetic standpoint to one

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that favoured action alone. In a series of newspaper articles in 1927, he had revealed himself as a socialist, writing: 'Kristur vill að mönnum líði vel . . . Hann vill, að þeir búi í rúmgóðum og þokkalegum húsakynnum . . . Hann vill, að þeir búi við góð lífskjör og hafi efni á að því að eignast menningu'. <sup>41</sup> True Christianity, as he saw it now, consisted in making the underprivileged dissatisfied with their burden. He was trying to make his new views fit into a scheme of Christian teaching. Two and a half years later, when he returned, his position had altered. He had been brought harshly face to face with the misery of the modern world, and his social conscience, already awakened, was now alive and indignant. He now places Man on the altar instead of God. In 'Trú' (1929), he writes: 'Einhverveginn er svo komið að ég ann mannum og stríði mannsins meira en guðinum og himni hans'. <sup>42</sup>

The reasons for Laxness's disenchantment with Catholicism have been discussed particularly by Gunnar Kristjánsson and Sven Stolpe. According to Gunnar Kristjánsson the reasons for his later apparent enmity towards the Church must be sought in its indifference towards social problems. He adds 'Es ist Laxness also nicht gelungen, sein Interesse an einer christlichen Lebensauffassung und seine politisch radikalen Meinungen über den Menschen und die Gesellschaft zu synthetisieren'. <sup>43</sup> This seems to be so. There is no middle way. Laxness does not lapse gently, out of indifference; he suffers a violent reaction against the Church, signs of which appear in the novels following *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. It is the reaction of fervent and disappointed youth.



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According to Sven Stolpe, Laxness chose the world rather than the cloister, because he had only come under reactionary influences in his experience of Catholicism. He was therefore unacquainted with realistic, contemporary Catholic thought, unacquainted with writers like Bloy, Claudel, Mauriac and Maritain. Stolpe suggests that Laxness's development might have been different had he known them. He continues: 'Den unge Laxness såg i katolicismen uteslutande världsförnekelsen, askesen, mystiken. Kyrkan som institution i tiden, kyrkans sociala program, kyrkan som gestaltare av samhällslivet, katolicism som livsbefrämjande faktor - allt detta undgick honom väsentligen. Resultatet kunde inte bli annat än en kris'.<sup>44</sup> I am sure that Stolpe is correct and that the rigid teachings of the spiritual works that Laxness subjected himself to at an impressionable age were responsible for his subsequent change of heart.

Bearing in mind Laxness's evident bent for independent thought in *Heiman eg fórn*, where he declares that he felt no need for a mediator between himself and God (HEF,27), it is hardly surprising that he should, at some date, distance himself from a strict church and doctrine. I think his obvious feeling for Icelandic nature as a temple of God also plays a part. So Steinn says: 'Í þessari kirkju vildi ég deyja' (VEF,32); 'hér er kirkjan mín' (VEF,134); and when he is in the monastery and thinks of home: 'Guð á himnum er einhvernvegin all öðruvísi þar en hér: guð vors lands' (VEF,234). *Undir Helgahnúk* shows the same mystic awareness and it seems to be Laxness's own. There is at times an impression that Laxness perceives a spirit running through all

material things . It would be hard to contain such a reverence before the created world in what seemed a life-denying institution. Although Catholic worship went a long way in satisfying the needs of the young Laxness for worship, it was clearly not enough. There was too much form - ritual, discipline, beauty, all of which were loved by him and which were necessary - but he needed freedom too. And it is eventually in this required freedom that he finds his own religious expression. But before that time, there had to be a time of reaction, social commitment and a rest from ecclesiasticism.

1. Letter to Jónas Jónsson, *Vörður*, 7 May 1927.
2. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), p. 48.
3. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 95.
4. Hallberg, *Den store vävaren*, p. 211.
5. Bourget, *Le Disciple*, last words.
6. *Den store vävaren*, p. 210.
7. Papini, *The Story of Christ*, p. 105.
8. *Den store vävaren*, pp. 17-18 and p. 228.
9. Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, p. 100.
10. de Bruyn, *Woman and the Devil in Sixteenth Century Literature*, p. 79.
11. *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, edited by G. P. Fedotov, p. 430.
12. 'Misogynie Vefarans', in *Skáldatími*, p. 32.
13. *Den store vävaren*, pp. 219-22.

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14. *Den store vävaren*, p. 228.
15. *Woman and the Devil*, p. 13.
16. *Woman and the Devil*, p. 19.
17. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, pp. 144-45.
18. Jóhann Sigurjónsson, *Fjalla Eyvindur*, Act IV.
19. Sønderholm, p. 124.
20. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p. 203.
21. Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, p. 317.
22. Sønderholm, p. 27.
23. Kötz, 'Der Dandy am Kreuz', p. 70.
24. *Den store vävaren*, p. 183.
25. Sønderholm, p. 112.
26. Sønderholm, p. 118.
27. Sønderholm, p. 119.
28. Sønderholm, pp. 118-19.
29. Hallberg. *Halldór Laxness* (New York), p. 43.
30. Ibsen, *Brand*, Act V.
31. Llewelyn, *Love Bade Me Enter*, pp. 20-21.
32. Eliot, 'The Idea of a Christian Society' (1939), in *Selected Prose*, p. 219.
33. *Den store vävaren*, pp. 88-89.
34. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book III, Chapter 31, p. 135.
35. Thomas à Kempis, Book III, Chapter 42, p. 148.
36. Thomas à Kempis, Book III, Chapter 49, p. 159.
37. Hallberg, *Vefarinn mikli*, Volume II. p. 111.
38. Papini, p. 87.

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39. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p.203.
40. Llewelyn, *With Pity not with Blame*, p.46. The quotation cited is from Paul Verghese, *The Freedom of Man*, quoted from Kenneth Leech, *The Social God* (Sheldon Press, 1981).
41. 'Raflýsing sveitanna', *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 March 1927.
42. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p.203.
43. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten und christliche Motive im Romanwerk "Heimsljós" von Halldór Laxness', p.29.
44. Stolpe, 'Laxness och katolicismen', *Credo*, p.74.

Laxness left the monastery in Luxembourg for good in April 1926 and returned to Iceland where he still held firmly to his Christian thinking, attempting to fit it into his view of socialism. This view became more real as a result of his travels around Iceland when he was able to see for himself a high degree of destitution among the country people. In June 1927 he travelled to the United States where his opinions were reinforced when he witnessed the depression with its resultant unemployment and misery. Laxness stayed in the States until 1929, becoming a confirmed socialist, and enjoying the friendship of the socialist writer Upton Sinclair. <sup>1</sup>

Up until *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* nearly all Laxness's work had focused on the inner man, and on subjects with religious overtones. Now, man as a social being becomes his main concern. Something of a new attitude to the luxury of spiritual self-indulgence amidst a world of suffering is shown in the conclusion to his essay 'Spámenn og meistarar í Kaliforníu' (1928). In the essay he refers to a book entitled *An Outline of Masonic Hermetic Qabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolic Philosophy Being an Interpretation of the Secret Teachings Rituals Allegories and Mysteries!* Laxness tells of his visit to a reception to view the book and finishes with these words: 'Loks kvaddi ég frúslur mínar, óskaði þeim til lukku með 75000 dollara bókina þeirra og hélt út í sólhvítt strætið þar sem húngraðir atvinnuleysingjar slángra á meðal kúluvembdra miljónúnga um þetta leyti dags'. <sup>2</sup> Here he is drawing attention to three classes of people, firstly to those who close their eyes to reality, immersing themselves in, here,

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pseudo-spirituality; secondly to the starving and the unemployed on the door-steps of the first group; thirdly to the overfed and overwealthy who pass the second group by. This essay was written in 1928, but already in 1926 his feeling for the wretched conditions of the working classes was finding literary expression. Between *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (1927) and his next novel *Salka Valka* (1931-32) he wrote four short stories. These, together with three others, written after *Salka Valka*, were published as a collection, *Fótatak manna*, in 1933. It is worthwhile concentrating on the chronological, rather than the published order of the works, as this helps to show the development of the author's mind and sensitivity.

'Saga úr síldinni' is the earliest of the stories, written in 1926, the year in which Laxness made his trip around Iceland and came to realise the utter dependence of the people on the land, the sea and the weather. Herring he saw as the god of the coastal settlements, not so much because it was worshipped, though in a way this was so, but because the life and death of the community were controlled by it, and, as he understood the matter, as long as such a state continued there would be no energy or spirit left in the local people for religious or cultural affairs. He published a series of articles, 'Raflýsing sveitanna', in *Alþýðublaðið* in March 1927, commenting on what he had seen. What he accentuates is the hypocrisy, the immorality and the futility of preaching Christianity when the preachers themselves ignore its precepts and fail to practise Christ's doctrines of mercy among the poor. The doctrine of mercy meant, as far as he could see, a

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radical programme of social change: 'Fyrst, þegar fólki hafa veizt skilyrði til að lifa skár en urðarkettir, álit ég tímann til kominn að predika því hina einu sönnu trú . . . Jesús Kristur predikaði ekki fyrir þeim, sem bágt áttu; hann bætti mein þeirra'.<sup>3</sup> Later he continues more forcefully: 'Ég hatast við þennan kaldhæðna kristindómsáhuga, sem leitast við að sætta veslinginn við eyndina með því að lofa honum skorpusteik á himnum. Slíkt er þrælmenska og ekki kristindómur . . . primum vivere deinde philosophare'.<sup>4</sup> These opinions are very much in the same vein as Steinn's during his first meeting with faðir Alban (VEF, 100). In the short story there is social criticism as well as criticism of the Church, but perhaps its chief value is the fund of compassion that the author once again brings to his treatment of the unfortunate. Since *Nokkrar sögur* Laxness seems to have been too preoccupied with theoretical and philosophical matters to have had much time to spare in his writing for the poor and the underprivileged, but the problems had clearly not left his mind. So in a letter to Jón Sveinsson in September 1926, a flood of brotherly love comes to the surface, and it is a love which is inspired by Christ's love for man: 'Ífirleit held ég að ekki sé hægt að ala í brjósti öllu göfugri tilfinningu en elskuna til mananna, enda elskaði Kristur mennina meira en nokkur annar og hneikslaðist aldrei á þeim. Þegar ég hugsa mig um finst mér sem ég hafi aldrei á æfi minni hitt fyrir mér vandan mann, og ég held að það sé ekki annað en ljót villukenning að til séu vondir menn'.<sup>5</sup> The last comment has caused Peter Hallberg to write: 'Í þeirri skoðun sem fram kemur í þessur bréf virðist Laxness vera

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kominn út í villutrú. Að því er bezt verður séð, felur hún meðal annars í sér afneitun hinnar kristnu syndavitundar'. <sup>6</sup> This is a debatable point. I believe that what Laxness intends to say is not that man is perfect and therefore in no need of repentance, but that no man is entirely given over to evil. This interpretation would support rather than weaken the Church's teaching that man is made in the image of God and that there is therefore a spark of God in every man. However that may be, the words in the letter clearly illustrate Laxness's confident trust in and solidarity with man, and with all men. There is another interesting point in the same letter; a comparison is drawn between life in the monastery and life in Iceland: 'Og hvílíkur feiknamunur á þessu íslenska sveituumhverfi eða Clervaux - munur bæði á landi og fólki. Og þó er erfitt að gera upp á milli mannanna'. <sup>7</sup> It is as if Laxness himself, for all the richness of the experience, were admitting regretfully that something had been lacking in his European years. In Europe was debate, philosophy, theory. Here in Iceland was real life. Here he could express his love for his fellow men.

In 'Saga úr síldinni' this new surge of compassion is turned towards a ninety-year-old working woman, Kata, in a small fishing village from which the herring have been absent for seventeen years. Consequently there is hardship and demoralisation in the community. When the herring return, a renewed and feverish energy is released among the people and Kata, in spite of her years, is affected by it too. Her former life of almost relentless work has conditioned her to react automatically to a herring-landing in



this way. Laxness describes Kata's life as one of uniform greyness, without hope or joy, and with so little event in it that it was even without sorrow. There has just been constant bickering and work. In the last few lines of the story, when she returns home at night with her son, leaving her work against her will, Laxness manages to communicate all that is pathetic in her life. She is not pathetic because she is old, but because life has offered her nothing worthy and she is wounded by the indignity of an unworthy life. It is strange that the editor of *Íðunn* condemned Laxness for mocking her: 'Mannhelvítið hæðist að kerlingarbjálfanum'. The text would seem to contradict this: 'Og það fólst heil veraldsaga í æðisgeingu kveininu er steig frá brjósti þessa níræða þreiga. En sonurinn ansaði þessu eingu, og gamal konan trítlaði áfram móti vilja sínum gegnum bæinn í lágnættisregninu og hélt áfram að gráta og grét hástöfum, - því gamalt fólk grætur hástöfum, og með sárum ekka einsog lítil börn' (FÓT, 199). This is not mockery. The vulnerability of the aged is emphasised by the simile 'einsog lítil börn' and the image of children brings with it something of innocence as well.

This is not of course the first time that Laxness had written about the condition of the people. He had begun to do so in *Nokkrar sögur* dating from 1919-20. There is a point of difference now, though. There the criticism had been directed at individual characters. Now in 'Saga úr síldinni' the social criticism is more general; it highlights the fundamental mis-understanding and culpable blindness of the privileged classes as a whole. The passage that best demonstrates this runs as follows:

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Og þegar menningarfrömuðirnir að sunnan gista þorpið og auglýsa ókeypis fyrirlestur um andatrú, heilsufræði eða pólitík, þá stórfurðar þá á því að sjá ekki aðra á áheyrendabekkjunum en prestinn, sýslumanninn og lækninn. Þeir skilja ekki að þurrabúðarmaðurinn sem barist hefur öll þessi mörgu ár við fiskileysið, skuldirnar og húngrið, hefur öðrum guðum að gegna en mentagyðjunni og horfist í augu við alvarlegri rök en svo, að hann hafi geð til að sitja undir hrókaræðum um skrautið sem veggina prýðir í hásal lífsins. Trúmálahreyingarnar liggja honum í léttu rúmi úr því síldin hefur ekki látið sjá sig síðan sumarið sem hann Jónsi litli fæddist. (FÓT, 190)

In an article entitled 'Ferðasaga að austan' (9 September 1926) Laxness again crystallised the idea of the unavoidable and lamentable enslavement of men by their dependence on their work, when he wrote: 'Síldin er einsog menn vita, ímynd guðs almáttugs hér á þessa landi og ræður öllum manna'. 'That which governs the life of these fishing people is not therefore some vision or ideal, not any kind of beauty in itself; it is, of necessity, herring. So there comes the news that, 'eftir seytján ára fjárvistir er drottinn aftur í bænum' (FÓT, 191), and of Kata it is said: 'Árum saman hafði hún þreyð síldina einsog heilög kona sem bíður eftir sínum lausnara' (FÓT, 194).

There are two things to observe in connection with Laxness's religious development in this story; the first is that his indignation is not directed at vague individuals in the Lutheran Church, but more generally at the educated, privileged classes and

at the Church as a whole; and secondly that there is a resurgence of compassion, in some measure a reaction against the isolation from the real world experienced in the monastery. But this is not humanism. It is a compassion motivated by Christianity.

There is nothing of particular interest in 'Tvær stulkur' or 'Nýa Ísland' as far as this study is concerned, but a confirmation of certain attitudes, and a new approach to others can be discerned in 'Og lótusblómið ángar . . .', written eighteen months after these when Laxness had been in America nearly a year, in Spring 1928. The story concerns a ten-year-old boy, Bim Bim in California, who keeps himself and his mother by selling waste paper and cigarette ends. It has two scenes. The first is set in a world of harsh contrasts, where there is degradation and glamour, poverty and immense wealth, anonymity and sometimes warmth. The second scene takes place in his ramshackle home.

Once again a deep compassion is evident. Bim Bim puts his paper sack down to help an old woman over the road. She is a woman of complete insignificance: 'Auðvitað var það ekki meira tíðindi þótt hún yrði undir vagni en sorphæna' (FÓT, 161). Laxness understands not only her social insignificance but also her own feeling of unimportance and her lack of confidence: 'En í rauninni á hún óttalega bágt. Henni hafur stöðugt verið að mistakast eitthvað í áttíu ár. Jafnvel á hverjum degi í áttíu ár hefur henni mistekist að hisa upp sokkana. Og í raun og sannleika hafa þessi mistök feingið ósköp á hana' (FÓT, 162). He describes the passers-by who are oblivious of her anxiety about crossing the road. It is left to the little boy to spot her, for, as Laxness says, 'húngraðir

götustrákar koma manna fyrst auga á þá sem eru strand' (FÓT, 162). The old woman is speechless; this is the first time in her life that an event has taken place; she is filled with gladness and wants to tell him her whole life story with all its triviality and nothingness, but in her confusion she forgets even to express her thanks. Laxness underlines the immeasurable tragedy of a life that has known no personal attention or personal respect: 'það er harmleikur að lifa í áttíu ár og deya án þess að manni sé hjálpið yfir götu. En það er tilvinnandi að lifa í áttíu ár ófyrirsynju, ef manni er hjálpað yfir götu aðeins einusinni áðuren maður deyr' (FÓT, 162-63). The old woman has much in common with Kata. The two of them are so vulnerable in their littleness. They do not ask for much. Laxness seems to stand in reverence before these victims of the cruelty and the indifference of life.

This intense respect comes over also when he writes of Bim Bim. First he describes him in words that express protective friendship, then in those that tell of paternal and fraternal sentiments, and finally his solidarity is such that he is led to identify with the boy himself: 'Og þarna baksar litli maðurinn minn . . . þetta litli sonur minn . . . hann litli bróðir minn - ég' (FÓT, 160).

A few months later Laxness wrote of the necessity of feeling this solidarity in his article 'Trú' (1928):

Maðurinn er fagnaðarboðskapur hinnar nýu menningar . . . hinn eini sanni maður, - þú. Þessvegna skaltu ekki leggja trúnað á það sem sagt er í kristilegum bókum, að þegar lítur magninn er

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fótum troðinn þá sé verið að beita bræður þína ránglæti; nei, það er alvarlegra en svo: það ert þú. Þar sem börn öreigans eru mergsogin til ágóða fyrir varga auðvaldsins, - þar er verið að traðka sjálfan þig niður í sorpið, hinn eina mann, hina æbstu opinberun lífsins, þig. 10

As always, Laxness is more successful in expressing himself in imaginative prose than in the declamation contained in his essays. In the short story the self-identification is perfect. There is both tenderness and commitment, but no false sentimentality. In the essay there is political vehemence and there is a more than a shadow of a feeling that Laxness is demeaning selfless commitment by tingeing it with self-interest; that one's own rights ought somehow to be more important than other people's.

This political seriousness begins to appear in 'Og lótusblómið ángar . . . '. It is personal animosity and it is new in Laxness. There is now a feeling that his love for his fellow men is intense but not unconditional; It seems doubtful, if at this stage of his experience in America, he would have been so warm in his expression of universal love for mankind, as he was in his letter to Jón Sveinsson in 1926, quoted above. For instance, he allows the reader no benefit of the doubt about the motives of the woman in the expensive car. The sympathy and tolerance extended to the old woman are not permitted here. In his socialist enthusiasm he has begun to divide his fellow men into classes, in which the poor are pure, and the rich are the representatives of all that is bad and mean. At this point Laxness is not interested in looking into

the psychology of the capitalists, he had to wait until *Atómstöðin* to do that. Since his sympathy is restricted, he reveals the hidden secrets and tragedies of the poor, old woman but of the rich woman he has no definite knowledge and makes rash guesses as to her purposes, and the very vagueness speaks of contempt and superior disinterest: 'En það hefur sennilega verið efnakona á góðgerðahríngferð í bænum til að friða samvisku sína útaf því að hafa espað mann sinn til að láta berja og skjóta nokkur hundruð fátæka verkamenn, sem gert höfðu verkfall vegna kaupkúgunar í verksmiðjum hans í Carolina' (FÓT, 166). For once Laxness conveys only sourness here; there is no sense of righteous indignation.

Another new approach can be seen in Laxness's cynical and imaginary picture of Sunday Schools. They are presented as selling simplistic optimism under a religious veil. When Bim Bim discovers that his sack, full of his day's work, has been stolen, Laxness launches into a satirical Sunday School story in which Bim Bim is the central figure. He remembers God amidst his tears, and God sends him a benefactor in the form of a beautiful, rich girl in a Rolls Royce. She gives him a whole dollar and they all live happily ever after: 'þannig hjálpar guð vinum sínum, börnin góð' (FÓT, 165).

This is the first time that Laxness has used sharp satire against a branch of organised Christianity. He draws attention to what he understands as the manipulating and suffocating of young minds, in order to maintain a society free from opposition. There is something here that he sees as basically dishonest. The children in the parable are to remain blind and grateful

throughout life. This imaginary Sunday School is the very ground where he might wish to put into practice the kind of Christianity that he wrote of in 'Raflýsing sveitanna': 'Fegursti kristindómur vorra tímar er sá að gera þrælinn óánægðan með hlutskifti sitt, kenna honum að krefjast, gera byltingar og verða að manni'. ''

In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* Steinn points to the absurdity of the Church expecting any religious response from a people bowed with hunger. The same idea is brought out again in this story: 'Fátækir dreingir biðja ekki til guðs. Þetta er ákaflega sorglegt þó það sé satt. Fátækir dreingir berjast meðan kraftarnir endist og þegar búið er að taka frá þeim síðustu vonina, þá öskra þeir. Síðan deya þeir úr húngri' (FÓT, 166). But Laxness is more than just restating what he has said before. He is now trying to expose, not only the remoteness of the Church, but also a perhaps conscious design, on the part of certain sectors, to suppress any justified feeling of indignation, and to maintain a silent stuntedness among the masses. It is fair to say here that Laxness is not attacking the Catholic Church, since Sunday Schools have never played a prominent part in Catholic education. For Laxness Catholicism was never an 'opium for the people'.

The second scene takes place in the room in which Bim Bim and his sick mother live. The ailing woman is visited by Entoskin, a Russian Marxist. He is a man of great practical kindness. He urges her to take nourishment, he has wanted to buy her flowers, he sits with her for company. There is no theory here, only practical brotherhood. It is highly significant that the role of the Samaritan is given to a Marxist, just as later it is given to

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Salka Valka, and not to a Christian. However, Entoskin is also shown to be a fanatic, 'með glóð óftrúarmannsins í augum' (FÓT, 167). To a certain extent he is stupid too, for to preach about the prime importance of facts, at a sick-bed, is as useless as preaching brotherly love to the hungry and dying. In the name of Fact he tries to take away frú Berta's faith, but in the name of Fact it is too late. To live in faith, in a dream, under an illusion may be very demeaning in an atheist's eyes, but if one is soon to die in faith, then reason has already come too late, and the hope of a sick woman is, in any case, a harmless thing. Yet even here, while Entoskin is seen to be a man of little common sense, and in many ways ridiculous, Laxness also appears to have sympathy with his conviction and his sincerity. He understands this big, ugly, warm-hearted man with his thick-headedness and his passionate beliefs. The following passage manages to convey this blend of tenderness and intensity in one man: 'Og hann tók visna hönd hennar í bláar krumlurnar, þessi stóri, ljóti, beinaberi maður með funa í augum og skældar rosabullur á fótum, hann kreisti þennan vesalíng af öllum kröftum uns skinnið hvítnaði á hnúum hans: það var einsog hann héldi að hann gæti miðlað þessum dauðvona beinum einhverju af þeirri ruddalegu hreysti sem fólst í innviðum hans sjálfs' (FÓT, 169-70).

What Entoskin lacks is just what faðir Jóhannes Skírari has: experience, wisdom and, possibly above all, humour. He is a man from a different world. He is kindly, humble, and paternal, rather than patronising. He is portrayed with respect and without irony. Like Entoskin, he is a good and a sincere man. Yet what he stands



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for and admires and advocates above all as being the most desirable of Christian virtues is, one feels, precisely what Laxness rejects most vehemently: 'Þolinmæði umfram allt' (FÓT, 171), and the heavenly reward that the priest believes in as a result of earthly suffering is what Laxness begins to look upon as moral blackmail. But Laxness does not depict him as personally responsible; the priest acts in good faith, but as a representative of something holy yet remote, and completely out of touch. His words are confident and quiet, but at the same time rusty, and it seems almost with sadness that Laxness speaks of the basis of the priest's faith as stemming from a holy unreality: 'Orð guðmannsins voru einsog gamalt járn, rýðguð en örugg, högvær en lángsótt, einsog kvöldstjarna sem kemur uppyfir kirkjugarðshorni þegar náttar, - og óhrekjanleg vegna þess að grundvöllur þeirra fólst í helgustu og hjálparlausustu draumum aldanna, sem þjást og deya í Kristi sínum' (FÓT, 176). But the dream has so permeated the priest's being that he is imbued with dignity, humility and concern, and with a total trust in God's mercy towards all men of good intent.

To some extent neither of the men speak for a system that offers a satisfactory way of life. Faðir Jóhannes is full of gentleness and a thorough courtesy towards mankind. He knows no enemy. He lives in accordance with his own inner convictions. But his is a solely spiritual and not a material concern, and Entoskin shows up his remoteness in an attack on the irrelevance of his vocabulary: 'Þér tókuð til að halda fram, yfir veikri konunni, alskonar fullyrðingum um guð, fórnir, þjáníngar, anda trúarinnar,

friðkaup, rentur, höfuðstól, kross, kirkju og náðargjafir. Hver hefur löggilt orðabókina yðar, ef þér viljið svo vel?' (FÓT, 173). He is making a valid point, but Entoskin's own system too has its drawbacks, and in his way he is often more ridiculous than the priest. He is ridiculous when he insists on having facts, proofs and sources of reference, when he himself cannot produce the same to defend his own arguments. He is ridiculous in his allusion to the Inquisition and the persecution of the Huguenots and in insinuating that the priest bears some guilt for the atrocities, and he is ridiculous in the limits he imposes on his own good will. Faced with the benevolence of the priest, Entoskin appears surly, and in a mean and shady light. Essentially he can only regard faðir Jóhannes Skírari as his enemy, 'fjandmaður sinn í guði' (FÓT, 177). There is clearly something of an ideological dilemma in Laxness's mind when writing the story in 1928. The positions held by these two characters reflect this. Neither of their philosophies has his unwavering support, and each has something against it. Christianity offers a dream and consolation, but little relief; socialism offers relief, but it seems to be spattered with spite.

Laxness offers a third alternative, in the form of art. Bim Bim, the child genius, silences both the priest and the rationalist, as he plays a violin concerto by Mozart and the possibility of a higher existence for man is revealed. The soul of man soars upwards. Socialism may offer relief and reality; Christianity may promise paradise as a reward for virtue and patience on earth, but art, through the miracles of the creative

soul of man, opens up a new refuge and a new, great hope. Laxness wonders at the spiritual and artistic heights that man can attain, and he presents these achievements as something tangible, an immediate solace and delight. He does not show them as something factual and sometimes harsh, like Entoskin's socialism, nor as something unknown, unseen, to be experienced only after death, but he shows them to be something admirable, which can be appreciated even here in a poor woman's bedroom. And now having raised man up and honoured his creativity, the writer goes one step further: with the words, 'þannig skapaði maðurinn guð í sinni mynd' (FÓT, 177), he makes God, Beauty into the creation of man. He is toying with the idea that God is only a necessary figment of man's imagination, and now that the roles are reversed, now that the creator is man, man takes on the suffering of God, Christ, and the wonder-child Bim Bim is watched as he creates a new gospel: 'Gamli maðurinn . . . starði einsog nýfætt barn á meistarann í tötrunum, - á hið marghrjáða píslarvættisandlit mannkynsins og hinar heilögu hendur þess, orpnar óprifnaði, sem ollu þessum guðspjöllum' (FÓT, 177). Though Laxness partially rejects socialism here, in choosing art as his solution, he does so in a thoroughly socialist way; for if the answer for the Christian is God, the answer for the socialist is man, and now Laxness places man, the artist, the new creator on the altar, well above any other god.

'Og lótusblómið ángar . . . ' can, I think, be marked as something of a turning point in Laxness's writing. Here are the first signs of a socialist class-bitterness and the first signs of the practical example of a non-Christian outshining that of the

Christian. Christianity is clearly losing some of its appeal to him. I have given special attention to the widening and the narrowing of the channels of Laxness's sympathies here because, now that he appears to move away from formal religion, somewhat disenchanted, it is his attitude to the creature, rather than to the Creator that must be observed.

'Vinur minn' (1932) is a poignant reminiscence of a deceased young friend, by a young man. It encapsulates the dream of youth, with all its philanthropic social and political vision. There is the same mood of resistance here that is apparent in the other stories in the collection. Once again man is enlarged and ennobled, as in the previous story; no longer the creature, the object, but now the creator, the subject: 'Það vorum við, sem sköpuðum heiminn' (FÓT, 178). And it is these young men who have compassion on the people and who perform the miracles that Christ worked: 'Við breiddum út faðmunn við öllum sem áttu bág, og sjá: blindir feingu sýn, haltir geingu. Og drotni alsherjar sögdum við: Syndir þínar eru þér fyrirgefnar' (FÓT, 178). God is forgiven, but sickness and death are irresistible; the friend dies, but defiantly, and the flower seller turns into an old woman.

'Úngfrúin góða og húsið' (1933) is a long story that tells of the double values and hypocrisy of the prosperous and respectable class. Against them are set the qualities of sincerity and propriety. Séra Jón, his wife and his elder daughter Þuríður are 'fínt fólk, það var fínasta fólk í landsfjórðungnum' (FÓT, 144). But marring their veneer of respectability is the younger daughter Rannveig. Her lapse from virginity puts her beyond the pale, as

she jeopardises 'heiður Hússins' (FÓT, 114). Yet she is the one that is genuinely good. Þuríður also has moral lapses, but these are judged in a different light, since she has a husband to protect her position. The moral sister cuts herself off completely from Rannveig after a second embarrassment; a literal barrier between their properties is erected at Þuríður's instruction. Rannveig finds it to be 'ógerningur að lifa í ósátt við nokkurn mann, heldur þurfti hún að breiða kærleik sinn yfir allt' (FÓT, 132-33), but Þuríður is determined to remind her sister constantly of her shame. It is only when Rannveig's children are 'out of the saga' that she suddenly becomes acceptable again. Rannveig is shown in two lights, firstly as someone capable of great joy and happiness, and secondly as a person of great suffering. In both her capacity for joy and for pain, she exceeds her family. Beneath everything is her weeping, and it is not her pregnancies that give her sorrow; it is the attitude of the so-called virtuous people. It is the hardness of men's hearts and not their moral weakness that Laxness judges here, as he is to do in *Salka Valka* and *Sjálfstætt fólk*, in similar circumstances.

'Lilja' (1933), the last story in the collection, tells of the separation of two simple people who have never really lived because of being apart. Nebúkadnesar Nebúkadnesarsson is so insignificant in his life and in his death that even his dead body is rifled. Again Laxness deals with his character with tenderness.

Erik Sønderholm sees that Laxness uses tears as a sign of his sympathy, which indeed is detected in all of these stories. Sønderholm writes: 'I ingen af de 6 fortællinger . . . kan man

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spore anden form for socialisme end denne medlidenhed med menneskene, der har det ondt i livet. Der er ingen antydning af teoretisk socialisme. Der er ingen klassekampssynspunkter i fortællingerne, selv om man kan finde klasse modsætninger i den'. <sup>2</sup> Only in the case of 'Og Lótusblómið ángar . . .' would I disagree.

*Fótatak manna* is remarkable for Laxness's depth of feeling for the small and the suffering and for his solidarity with people who are generally despised by the world.

1. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), pp. 54ff.
2. 'Spámenn og meistarar í Kaliforníu', in *Alþýðubókin*, pp. 187-88.
3. 'Raflýsing sveitanna', *Alþýðublaðið*, 10 March 1927.
4. 'Raflýsing sveitanna', *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 March 1927.
5. Letter to Jón Sveinsson, 1 September 1926, quoted by Hallberg in *Vefarinn mikli*, II, p. 219.
6. *Vefarinn mikli*, II, p. 219.
7. Letter to Jón Sveinsson, 1 September 1926, quoted by Hallberg in *Vefarinn mikli*, II, p. 219.
8. Personal letter from the editor of *Iðunn*, Árni Hallgrímsson, to Hallberg, 12 February 1956, quoted by Hallberg in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I, p. 21. See also p. 279.
9. 'Ferðasaga að austan', dated 9 September 1926, *Vörður*, 16 October 1926.
10. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p. 206.

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11. 'Raflýsing sveitanna', *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 March 1927.
12. Sønnerholm, p. 191.

Laxness returned to Iceland at the end of 1929 still an ardent socialist. His next novel, *Salka Valka*, was published in two parts, the first, *Þú vínviður hreini*, in 1931, the second, *Fuglinn í fjörunni*, in 1932. The two volumes were combined under the one title in 1951. It is the first of Laxness's social novels. He himself prefers to rank it together with *Undir Helgahnúk* and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*, as belonging to the period of his youth: 'Hún er síðast þeirra bóka er ég samdi innan þrítugs og bindur endahnútinn á æskuverk mitt', ' but from the point of view of his religious development the novel, without doubt, belongs to a different, later period. The link between the two stages can be observed in the early stories of *Fótatak manna*. When considering Laxness's new religious standpoint, Kristinn E. Andrésson's comment on Laxness's retreat from Catholicism is worth quoting:

Halldór hvarf vonsvikinn frá kaþólskunni. Trúin veitti honum ekki svar, ekki við sannleikanum, réttlætinu, frelsinu. Hvers virði var hin persónlega sælutilfinning trúarinnar, hvað djúp gat hún verið, meðan lygi, misrétti og kúgan hefti hvert spor meðbræðra minna í áttina til eilífrar fullkonnunar? Var trúin annað en afvegaleidd þrá manns til að eignast þessa fullkonnun hér á jörðinni? Var ekki jörðin sjálf, þegar allt kom til alls, lífgjafi okkar, nútíð og framtíð? Að minsta kosti hlaut það að vera fyrsta verkefnið fyrir mennina að skapa sér hamingju, réttlæti og frelsi í sambúðinni á jörðinni. Halldór hvarf úr hinnum kaþólskunnar til nýrrar fótfestu á jörðinni. 2



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Indeed Laxness now steps very firmly into reality. The setting, like that of 'Síldin', is a small Icelandic fishing village and the action takes place first between 1910-14, and then about ten to twelve years later. Laxness now favours no retreat from life. There is no escape into the cloister from the real battle outside. There is no sanctioned refuge in art. If there are refuges and illusions, they are not those that the author smiles kindly on. The book tells the story of a mother and her daughter and their struggle against the injustices of life. Sigurlína, the mother, is completely overcome by it, but the daughter, Salka Valka, acquires a self-sufficiency and toughness that enable her to survive.

What is striking in *Salka Valka* is not only Laxness's sincere commitment to society after what he calls 'the religious orgies of my early twenties',<sup>3</sup> but also a marked change in his portrayal of God. In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír faðir* Alban presents an image of a God of love. This God of love has now gone. There is also Steinn's picture of a tyrant God, both magnetic and compelling as He attracts and overtaxes His most willing servants. This God has also gone. What emerges instead is a pitiless, repelling God, incomprehensible in His tyranny, who metes out suffering and natural calamity 'mankinde for to anoye'.<sup>4</sup> He is a God made in man's image and likeness, a little larger than man to be sure, a powerful overlord, in some part responsible for social conditions, the bringer of storms and all bad weather. The image that Laxness is at pains to present and which he allows his characters to visualise seems now, to a great extent, to be his own. Underlying

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it there seems to be a feeling of personal outrage and indignation. However hard he tries, Laxness cannot yet be detached. His former love of God now manifests itself as aversion. He makes God the cause of misery and ascribes to Him the blame. It is primitive, hurt reasoning but it has an effectiveness which matches the primitive atmosphere of the town.

So the Creator is unscrupulous and unconscionable: 'Í þessu plássi virtist aldrei koma gott veður, því skaparinn var altaf að gera tilraunir með himin sinn . . . Svona gat hann haldið áfram sleitulaust, - að honum skyldi geta þótt gaman að þessu!' (SAL, 61-62). He has no thought for the wretched effect that His diversions have on the people below: 'Þetta var svo þýðingarlítill kaupstaður að guði þótti víst ekki taka því að draga frá sólinni fyrir þá á daginn eða fægja fyrir þá stjörnurnar á nóttinni' (SAL, 181). This is not like Lagerkvist's God of *Det eviga leendet*, who is only preoccupied and bewildered by the reproach of the dead souls who demand an explanation for the obscenity of life. The God of *Salka Valka* is the very instigator of the obscenity and of much of the trouble that is endured, and He is unconcerned. He is far removed from faðir Alban's God who never allows His creatures to wander a moment from His sight (VEF, 212); the new image of God almost despises the work of His hands: 'Manneskjurnar eru nokkurskonar tilbrigði sem drottinn gerir úr soðningu og kanski svolitlu af slæmum kartöflum og haframélsglyrnu' (SAL, 111). As Laxness reflects on the prevailing social misery in relation to God, man, whom he describes as 'hin fullkomnasta líffræðileg tegund' in *Alþýðubókin*,<sup>5</sup> now appears bereft of dignity, just an

unpleasant accident of an unloving, governing power.

It is specifically the individual that seems most despised by God, rather than mankind as a whole, that stands defenceless, pitted against the combined, inimical forces of God, Nature and Society, and it is the individual who, in his isolation, bears great burdens imposed on him by God. The weak and the innocent are the most vulnerable here, and often they suffer inexplicably, not for their own but for others' sins. The clearest example of this is Sigurlinni, Salka Valka's little brother. He cries out for his rights in this pitiful world, 'þar sem guð leggur svo mikið á einstaklinginn' (SAL,122), and he looks out to the sun with eyes 'sem voru gædd þjáningu heimsins' (SAL,144). The child is innocent and the inexplicable mystery of its suffering is laid before the reader.

As the mother understands it, the child suffers for the sins of others: 'Það er mikið hvað guð getur látið sakleysingjana líða fyrir annarra syndir, því ekki getur hann verið að líða fyrir sínar syndir, sem aungvar eru til' (SAL,144). While she is perplexed to see the innocent in pain, she believes that suffering is sent by God and believes that this is good, for without the conviction that suffering is a trial sent by Him, a person would be led to despair. This belief makes it bearable and allows it to have some meaning.

Once again it is the inexplicable nature and the injustice of the suffering that occupies Laxness in his presentation of Sveinbjörg. She is a mother watching her children grow up in hunger and squalor. She is not old and she is near to death. She

poses the justifiable question to everything in her life: 'Hverskonar guð er það sem stjórnar þessu annars? . . . Stendur það nokkursstaðar í biflifunni að guð sé góður . . . Er það ekki bara einsog hver önnur kerlingabók sem mennirnir hafa fundið upp?' (SAL, 234). She does not share Sigurlína's malleable qualities and will not accept pain as being a punishment for sin, or a test sent by God. She refuses to be drugged into acceptance by pious words and will not concede to the priest that God has always been good to her. She has a free, rebellious spirit. She contrasts her own sufferings with Christ's crucifixion and she judges her own to be the greater, since her death and passion are meaningless, whereas Christ had the consolation of dying for a noble cause — even the redemption of mankind — and He, moreover, went straight to the highest seat in heaven, while she expects no heaven for herself. When her own suffering is ended, other suffering will continue in the miserable lives of her children.

In the first part of *Salka Valka*, *Þú vínviður hreini*, the cause of suffering is to a great extent God. But God is not exclusively to blame. Much blame can be ascribed to intrinsic weakness in the characters themselves. So although Sigurlína's child dies in undeserved pain, in want of the sun and its warmth that God withholds, Sigurlína brings much of her own misfortune on herself. It is her own irresponsibility that gives her her children out of wedlock; it is her own sexuality and greed that alienate her daughter. However, one may understandably ask: What has she done to earn Steinþór's derision and desertion? What has she done that Salka Valka should be preferred to her? She is stupid and sensual

and weak, but the explanation of inherent character-weakness is unsatisfactory for Laxness in the end. When her body is found in the water, ironically on Easter Day, one eye fixed on the heavens, its questioning frozen as if eternally, then Laxness, too, seems to demand from the same quarter: Who is responsible? Life treats the weak so cruelly. Why?

In the second part of the novel, *Fuglinn í fjörunni*, no part of the characters' exceptional suffering is traced back to personality. As far as Sveinbjörg is concerned she believes it is God alone who is to blame. But here, in relation to Sveinbjörg's plight, it is Laxness's criticism of the Church that can be detected, lurking behind his portrayal of certain so-called Christian attitudes that have been passed down. They are found among the simple people. For instance, they feel that it is commendable to have as many children as possible, and they believe that subordinates should be submissive to their superiors: 'En það stendur skýrum stöfum í kristindóminum að yfirmenn og undirgefnir eigi að vera í hverju landi og undirmennirnir eigi að vera trúir yfirmönnum' (SAL, 225). It is implied that fostering these 'Christian' attitudes serves to maintain and contribute to the material ill-being of the working poor. Mostly, at this stage, the cause of material destitution is put down to the deplorable living conditions. The attention given to material distress recalls Laxness's articles, 'Raflýsing sveitanna' (1927), and the words: '*primum vivere deinde philosophare*'.<sup>6</sup>

In *Þú vinnviður hreini* there are harsh conditions but they are to some extent overshadowed by the action and the characters themselves. God is principally to blame, though Eyjólfur always speaks out against the exploiters of the poor; these are the rich, the masters, and thus Eyjólfur recognises that blame can lie elsewhere. In *Fuglinn í fjörunni* there is a renewed emphasis on bad social conditions, and there is a perceptible bend in Laxness's reasoning. God is not now solely to blame for He has a helpmate in His tyranny, namely man, as the author himself comments at Guja's distress: 'Það var . . . eingin takmörk fyrir þeirri grimd sem heimurinn og skapari hans höfðu ásett sér að beita þetta unga fátæka hjarta' (SAL,421). Salka Valka has similar reflections: 'Oft hugsaði Salka Valka um það, hversvegna guð og menn skuli vera svona mikið á mótí einstaklíngnum' (SAL,306). But there are no more references to God's pernicious control of the weather; there are even sunny spells, and though there is still an underlying feeling of despondency at God's incalculable treatment of His creatures, yet there is, too, a strong feeling that there are other powers that be, other exploiters in the living world, and that there is corruption in high places.

In connection with his complete swing away from the spiritual, over to the material, it is interesting to observe Laxness's new attitude to the Crucifixion, to which, significantly, he refers a number of times (SAL,235,310,360). Suddenly it is the purely

physical suffering of Christ that draws his attention. The Passion no longer has a spiritual meaning. Christ's suffering is minimised in comparison with Sveinbjörg's, since Laxness is reluctant to acknowledge, in Christ's suffering, anything other than bodily pain. His interest in material well-being or ill-being has completely displaced his interest in spiritual values. Indeed the redemptive death of Christ is seen by Salka Valka to be like the death of her mother, a thing pointless in itself (SAL, 360). This reference to the futility of Christ's death of atonement, 'friðþægíngardauður' (SAL, 360), and another to the abstract nature of His work of redemption: 'reikningurinn hjá Jóhanni Bogesen var í eðli sínu eins óhlutkend og trúin á opinberun guðs eða endurlausnarverk Jesú Krists' (SAL, 62), when put together with the image of Sigurlína's dead body with its upturned, questioning eye, 'svefnlaust, friðþægíngarlaust . . . aðeins opið' (SAL, 209), seem to imply that Laxness has now rejected any belief in the doctrine of redemption through the death of Christ. There is the impression that he views the death of Christ as a sacrifice to illusion, in which connection Laxness's words about Christ's suffering and death in 'Og Lótusblómið ángar . . .' can be remembered: 'helgustu og hjálplausustu draumar aldanna' (FÓT, 176); there is also a feeling that Laxness looks upon death itself in general as helpless and hopeless, a stony emptiness in which there is no salvation - as one onlooker at the discovery of Sigurlína's body observes: 'ekki tekur betra við hinumegin' (SAL, 209).

Erik Sønderholm suggests that the novel is a Passion story in which man in the form of Sigurlína, not God, is the sufferer. <sup>7</sup> He

describes Sigurlína's arrival in Óseyri as 'denne korsgang'. Sigurlína is indeed despised and rejected by the local community; she is already acquainted with grief, but she is by no means a spotless victim, bearing a cross for others' sins. The word 'korsgang' seems inappropriate here. Sønderholm does not in fact refer to Sigurlína as a Christ figure, but in his choice of words he would seem to imply that she is such a one. This I feel is not Laxness's meaning. He has only partial sympathy with Sigurlína's weaknesses. To see his greater sympathy towards sexual weakness we could compare 'Úngfrúin góða og húsið' (1933). Here Rannveig's indiscretions are portrayed with understanding and a certain humour, and the reason must be that Rannveig's character typifies that which is gentle and patient and totally generous. Sigurlína's does not. In this respect then, Rannveig's suffering is Christlike, but not Sigurlína's. Laxness portrays Sigurlína as a pathetic, helpless being, a victim of her own sensibility. He underlines her lack of reason, her need for consolation, her confusion, but that he does not see her as an entirely innocent victim is shown by the emphasis he lays on her coarseness, her sensuality rather than her capacity to love, and on her often outrageous treatment of Salka Valka. He does not go out of his way to justify her behaviour in order to enlist the reader's sympathy. She suffers, but she is not a living well of kindness. She is just one out of millions, supremely insignificant and not very good. This is the whole point.

There are copious biblical allusions in *Salka Valka* and they are indicative of the deep impression made on Laxness by



religious literature, and of his deep involvement in religious matters, even if at this stage he was no longer a practising Christian. But to see the first chapters of the book as 'en slags gammeltestamentlig forudsigelse af den kommende passionshistorie',<sup>28</sup> or to liken the kick that Angantýr gives Sigurlína's dead body to the piercing of Christ's side, as Sønderholm does,<sup>29</sup> is not necessarily helpful. The kicking cannot be compared with the piercing, for it is solely an insult, whereas the piercing was to ensure or to verify death. Nevertheless one cannot pass over the fact that Sigurlína's body is found on Easter Day. Yet even here I fear that there is a danger of reading more into the text than is there. Had Laxness wanted to produce a full and weighty allegory of suffering man, then he might well have given Sigurlína's death a harsher irony and bitterness by allowing her to sacrifice herself one day earlier, on Good Friday, then to be found on the Third Day, unrisen, untriumphant, untransformed. But she disappears on Easter Saturday, the day of her wedding. She cannot then have the distinction of standing as a symbol for the suffering of man, when, with a day permeated with symbol, so near at hand, she nevertheless dies simply, insignificantly on the day which follows. Sigurlína cannot be judged as a Christ figure in a Passion story. She is not an innocent lamb, nor is her death of heroic nobility. If she is a symbol in her pain, then she symbolises the manifestly inconsequential and insignificant in man. This is surely enough in itself.

It appears that at this stage Laxness has rejected the doctrine of Redemption and abandoned a belief in a God of love. This helps

to explain the dark tone of helplessness in the novel. Laxness has no more Christian optimism. He feels that man is on his own and that God is essentially against him. As the book proceeds it is this essential loneliness of the human being which is underlined. Spiritual consolation of course is offered here and there but it proves to be illusory, skin-deep and above all transitory, a fashion, a phase. The Salvation Army comes, the Salvation Army goes, and the small man is on his own again.

While Laxness on the one hand gives attention to the suffering that has to be endured, often inexplicably, in this world, on the other hand he shows that most of his characters are unable to endure this reality without the consolation and the security of a dream or an illusion. This hope and refuge is offered to the simple people in Óseyri through the Salvation Army in *Þú vinnviður hreini*, while in *Fuglinn í fjörunni* it takes the form of a dream of political reform.

Laxness's approach to the Salvation Army is fittingly sober. He is not impressed by the undiluted emotionalism of 'hinir frelsuðu' (SAL, 191). He views the unintellectual, irrational abandonment of the witnesses with scepticism, and seems to detect a certain sensuous pleasure in their confessions and the accounts of their sin-ridden pasts. The whole attitude of the Salvationists to religion lacks sobriety. As much as they would wish their former, unenlightened lives to appear to have been sunk in debauchery and wickedness, so, after their reform, they become, to the same extent, intoxicated by the new life in Jesus, and like all intoxication, theirs too is a flight from reality. Faced with a

problem or some unforeseen distress, their only recourse is to immerse themselves in waves of emotional and irrelevant hymns. The unrelatedness of this religious fervour to the reality of life is most cruelly demonstrated in the scenes in which the Salvationists try to console Sigurlína after Steinþór's second desertion. Verses from a Salvation Army hymn are interspersed throughout the description of her reaction to the news, telling of God's never-failing love which streams down on man. The love streams down relentlessly and the rain outside, likewise, streams down relentlessly, seeping through the roofs, soaking the children in their beds. The line 'Hún streymir fram, hún streymir fram' (SAL, 205) punctuates the prose. Laxness comments: 'Það er svo einkennilegt hvað guð getur verið ólíkur í sálmunum og veðurlaginu; stundum virðist blátt áfram eingin brú þar á milli' (SAL, 205). Peter Hallberg aptly remarks: 'Lesandinn skilur, að söngurinn um sístreymandi kærleik guðs er hið beiskasta háð'. 'God is still cruel; life is still cruel, but the Salvationists are only kind and blind. Ultimately God's love towards Sigurlína does not exist and the Salvationists' trust in it is not enough to sustain life, only illusion.

Though Laxness evidently has little time for the Salvation Army, he nevertheless feels a certain pity for Sigurlína with regard to her religious faith. This sympathy is not present all the time of course, for he allows her to indulge in dishonesty and self-delusion when she makes her public confession, but it is a sympathy and an understanding for her fundamental weakness, for the very human fusion in her of weakness and wilfulness and the

wish to be otherwise and to be good. For this reason I would even regard his likening her to a wise virgin waiting for the bridegroom as a mark of sympathy rather than contempt (SAL, 107). Peter Hallberg comments: 'Þessi biblíusamlíking verkar sem naprasta háð - ekki eingöngu vegna þess að Steinþór er eins ólíkur Kristi og verða má, heldur einnig vegna þess að Sigurlína er sízt af öllu nein forsjál mér'. 'This is true, but, as I understand Laxness's tone, he is not condemning Sigurlína here, but rather expressing a gentleness, admittedly not without humour, towards one who, at times and in her heart of hearts, would dearly love to be other than she is. But the straight and narrow path of virtue is not for her: 'Syndirnar eru svo margar. Og heilög ritning gerir svo háar kröfur' (SAL, 41).

Sigurlína recognises the war of wills in her breast: 'Það er svo erfitt að vera manneskja' (SAL, 57), she says. Laxness is constantly adding to his picture of her as someone aware of her own inferiority. She is above all self-accusing. She blames herself for the sins of the past; she feels that she should be filled with nothing but gratitude when the slightest good fortune comes her way, but she admits that, instead, she feels a growing greed. Finally she blames herself for the death of her child and she sees this as a fitting punishment for rejecting the will of God and for resisting the clause in the Lord's Prayer: 'verði þinn vilji' (SAL, 153). This self-abasement balances Sigurlína's sensuality and irresponsibility. Sigurlína is a strange mixture of weaknesses, for while she acknowledges failings humbly on the one hand, calling forth the author's understanding, on the other hand

she happily takes advantage of the very same faults and then there is no more room for any self-blame, and this Laxness does not condone.

Laxness creates in Sigurlína the portrait of a woman who is morally and emotionally weak, essentially a dependant and a worshipper. She desires not so much to serve, which requires action, but to subject herself, which requires only servility and passivity. For this reason there is confusion in her mind between Jesus and Steinþór. There is no question of doubting the genuineness of her love for Christ or her religious feelings on the whole, but Christ and Steinþór seem to be answering the same need in her, namely her need to be loved and her need to prostrate herself before a master.

The first sign of this confusion between the two masters is when Sigurlína associates Steinþór's eyes with a remembered childhood image of Christ's suffering. This occurs on the night when Steinþór first appears in her life and when Christ reappears in it, and it betrays the unconscious train of her thought. But the tendency to turn to one or the other master for the same need is exemplified by her behaviour generally. She relates, for instance, that when she was a child she turned to Jesus in trouble, but that when the trouble was over then Jesus was forgotten. In other words Jesus filled the gap. Much the same thing happens in her adult life when Steinþór returns home. When he enters her life again her need for a master is satisfied once more, and as a result, though she does not understand it as such, she becomes estranged from her Saviour: 'Þú . . . fællir frá mér

allar kristilegar hugsanir og hrekur frá mér sjálfan varðeingil guðs, svo ég get ekki einusinni komist í það rétta samband við Jesú minn frelsara síðan þú komst' (SAL, 178-79). The final tragic sign of the merging of the two images in her mind is her suicide on Easter Saturday, the day which should have been her wedding day, when she might be seen as going to her heavenly bridegroom instead.

Sigurlína's tragedy is not only that her child dies and that her man lets her down, but more fundamentally it is that her God and her Christ are silent towards her in the end. Her faith is thus almost shown to have been faith in hollowness and void. It has not been able to arm her with the necessary weapons to defend herself from life. For all that Laxness has a pitying regard for Sigurlína's believing, hers is the very kind of faith which he most tends to despise, the kind that accepts every degradation with gratitude, looking only for reward in the world to come. At this stage Laxness himself does not seem at all convinced that any reward will come at all.

The Salvation Army is not the only religious influence in Óseyri. The Lutheran Church is there also, though it is hardly effective. The two priests in *Salka Valka*, though very different from each other, bear testimony to Laxness's want of admiration for the established Lutheran Church. In *Þú vínviður hreini* the archdeacon appears in an unfavourable light straight away. When Sigurlína seeks his help, on her arrival in Óseyri, his tone towards her is one of respectable suspicion. He can offer her nothing except coffee. It is only fair to say that later on he

turns out to be a kindly and dutiful man, and one senses that his life serving the widely separated parts of his parish has not been without hardship. However, he comes over, as the mouthpiece of a narrow minded establishment. The narrowness of his attitude is mostly seen in his hostility towards the Salvation Army, 'þessi skrípaflokkur' (SAL,38). Its presence is naturally an embarrassment to him, for it has enticed many away from his services. He condemns the Army also because he sees that it is responsible for much that he considers to be contradictory to the true and unspoiled gospel. He thinks that it is foolishness and a sin to listen to its preaching, or to attend its meetings: 'guði er ekki þóknanlegur soleiðis fyrirgáangur' (SAL,213). The Army's hymns are 'guðlast og hégómahjal' (SAL,213). He is too schooled by the restricted outlook of the established church to regard the Salvation Army's activities with any more generosity, and therefore, when it comes to preparing a funeral oration for Sigurlína, her connection with the movement is best passed over in silence. On one occasion, though, he speaks on the subject of Sigurlína's attendance at the meetings and is more tolerant: 'Guð lítur ekki svo mjög á samkomurnar sem játnínguna' (SAL,188). This wider understanding is not manifested in the lives of the believers of the opposing churches in general in Óseyri. Laxness reveals a smugness and self-satisfaction on both sides. Each faith seems to vie with the other, trusting that, on the day of judgement, God will do the other side in. Sigurlína looks forward to that day when she and Angantýr's mother will stand before the Lord, when He will pronounce judgement on the richer woman who has

disregarded her (SAL, 36). In the same way the Lutheran Herborg interprets Sigurlína's misfortunes as a just and fitting punishment from God for her wanton behaviour: 'Guð lætur ekki að sér hæða' (SAL, 129). Laxness has a particular point to make in drawing attention to the rivalry between the different religious groups. In the patterns of their differing Christian lives, each leaves much to be desired, for their rivalry betrays the spirit of the gospel and Christ's prayer 'That they all may be one',<sup>12</sup> and their self-righteousness is of the spirit of the Pharisee who gave thanks that he was not as other men.<sup>13</sup> The irony of the lack of unity and of the spirit of criticism in the Christian churches is taken up by Laxness here and reappears in *Paradísarheimt*. Ruthlessly he begins to expose the contradictions and contentions of the various religious movements.

On the whole the God of the established church, such as He appears in *Þú vinviður hreini*, is a God of regulations and justice. A sense of responsibility before God and man is regarded as the essence of Christian morality: 'Hver heiðarlegur maður hlýtur að ábyrgjast sínar gerðir fyrir guði og mönnum . . . það er upphaf og endir á kristilegri síðfræði og mannlegum lögum' (SAL, 186). The necessity to repent one's sins is emphasised to the priest's congregation, which consists entirely of old women. There is small awareness of a God of love in his teaching. There is little consolation there and little recommendation for or example of Christian charity, but there is sternness and an unyieldingness that is uninviting. In the Salvation Army great emphasis is also laid on the necessity to repent, but here by contrast there is a



trust in the God of love and a belief that Christ will wash away all sin. Indeed the Salvationists' confidence and reliance on God is so great, that by some twist of reasoning, the believers are hardly held responsible for their actions. Their excess of consolation leads to irresponsibility. All things are sent by God, so they merely bend to His will.

A new young Lutheran priest is presented in *Fuglinn í fjörunni*. Laxness describes him with a certain cynicism. He tells how as a young man he had devoted himself to Christianity as a bride to her groom, how he had felt the call of the Holy Spirit to become a missionary in the East and how he had married a girl from the coasts and settled for domesticity in Óseyri instead. Later his ideals are weakened still further, to the extent that at the funeral of Beinteinn í Króknum he is shown almost fawning to Jóhann Bogesen, the deceased man's supposed benefactor, a worthless man but the most prosperous in the place.

Notwithstanding the priest's compromises, Laxness still allows him to be a man of sympathy and benign concern. Few can thus resist his 'andlega þroska og þá manngöfgi sem ljómaði af brosi þessa unga manns' (SAL, 238). However, it is not Laxness's wish simply to create a kindly priest. He must show that good nature on its own is not enough, that the young man's concern is insubstantial and bears no fruit, that even in the spiritual field his vision is limited, so that his care for the sick is out of touch as well. The priest is concerned only with the spiritual, and this has no link or connection with matters in this world. When Sveinbjörg's starving children quarrel over a fish head and

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interrupt his discourse, he is relieved to escape from this reminder of squalor, and to return to 'hinu eina nauðsynlega' (SAL, 239), the edifying task of reading to the sick. Once more Laxness takes the opportunity of allowing the clergy to make a virtue of patience and long-suffering and this is just what the content of his reading is about. With séra Sófónías's almost comically inappropriate parables, Laxness highlights the blindness and want of responsibility that stem from the pious attitudes commended by the archdeacon. The remoteness of the young priest's instruction is more striking than the older man's, since it is shown against a background of unconcealed social misery, of political unrest and a movement which fights against resignation. The priests in *Salka Valka* do not inspire.

The religious views that develop in the novel are expressed by Salka Valka, both in her words and in her bearing. Her approach is balanced. She is not a spiritual person and has difficulty in finding interest in spiritual things: 'hún var svo föst við sitt pláss' (SAL, 240). As Arnaldur says to her: 'Þú ert' (SAL, 313). She symbolises reality. This realistic approach means that she can see beyond the effusiveness of the Salvation Army, and her own bitter experience teaches her that life is not what it purports to be in their religious hymns. When she cries with outrage on realising that her mother has spent her earnings, she is baffled by the difference between the kindly Jesus of the Bible and the cruelty of the lessons and the deprivations that she has to endure: 'Hvernig stóð á því að guð gat haft ánægju af að hafa <sup>hana</sup> ~~vi~~ þessum

lörfum, eða Jesús Kristur, hann sem alltaf var svo vel til fara í bifflumyndunum?' (SAL, 84).

By the time Salka Valka has gone through the experience of her mother's death and witnessed the swollen body, disfigured both by water and despair, she comes to the opinion that Sigurlína's favourite hymn, 'Þú vínviður hreini', is really rather ridiculous and completely out of tune with the harsh life in Óseyri. The disparity of things as they really are and things as seen from a religious view point is shown repeatedly, and with special irony at this point, the end of the first part of the novel, where the little girl's thoughts are, as it were, summed up in the closing compound word 'páskaveður' (SAL, 215). Sigurlína's face has just been described as 'páskaandlit' (SAL, 209), and the joy of Easter is thus doubly mocked by the image of the distorted, inflated face and that of the wintry, coastal fog.

Salka Valka's feelings towards her mother are very mixed. Along with outrage, indignation and disgust, she also has feelings of pity and protectiveness. Even as a child she is the more mature. She cannot share her mother's easy believing and is an outsider to her faith. Thus she never considers that the Bible's teachings have anything to do with her. The Bible stories do not in any way correspond to the facts of life, of conception and death. She is also unable to regard them as spiritual allegories, as unable as Laxness himself pretends to be in this respect. She feels that if God helped Adam and Abraham, He did so a long time ago, whereas it is an entirely different matter with people now.

In her childhood God's apparent lack of interest and her own sense of outrage, impotence and disillusionment in the face of the injustices of men nourish in her a fierce determination never to give up: 'Kanski væri þó réttast að hún kastaði grjóti í allar rúðurnar í kirkjunni, til þess að sýna guði að hún skyldi aldrei, aldrei gefast upp' (SAL,84).

Her eventual feeling of abandonment by God grows out of her early sense of disillusionment and isolation: 'Innan fermíngar hafði hún sannfærst um að hvorki guð né menn hjálpa einstaklíngnum þegar hann á bágt; hann verður að hjálpa sér sjálfur' (SAL,242). Moreover, what is very significant is that, as a child, she also feels on occasions that charity, the mainspring of Christian teaching, is a fabrication: 'Þegar öllu er á botninn hvolft, þá er einsog hver manneskja hafi sitt sérstaka takmark fyrir sig og allur kærleikur sé uppspuni' (SAL,204). Laxness uses the word 'kærleikur' as in the New Testament, and there is again a feeling of the author's own personal disillusionment with the mostly negative results of practical Christianity. Perhaps this disillusionment is the reason why the role of the one who cares and serves for the hungry, the sick and the orphans is assigned, once again, not to a practising Christian, but to a character who has no real religious belief.

The voices in *Salka Valka* which seem to echo the conviction of the author, and which seem to speak with earnestness, are not now the church-going Christians or ecclesiastics, like some of those in *Undir Helgahnúk* or *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. They are the

voices--of--Steinunn--gamla and Eyjólfur. Steinunn--gamla--is--one--of Laxness's older women who speak with the voice of ages: 'Það var ein af þessum lífsreyndu hrukkóttu og tannlausu konum sem eru ekkert annað en blíðan og manngæðin, skilja alt, fyrirgefa alt, trúá öllum, vona alt' (SAL, 51). Thus she can say with large-heartedness: 'Vinið gerir öllum ilt en mannshjartað er gott' (SAL, 168). This is the tone of brotherly love that Laxness regards so highly. In *Salka Valka* it is found not in religious movements but behind the scenes, nearer to the sink.

Eyjólfur speaks mostly on behalf of the exploited individual worker, the underdog of the world. However, he is no modern agitator, but one of the old school. Like Salka Valka he knows the essential loneliness of the individual among his fellow men: 'Það getur einginn huggað mann nema maður sjálfur' (SAL, 206). What is to be noted about him, however, is the value he puts on responsibility. This responsibility plays an ever more important part in Laxness's novels and it is closely tied to reality. His views are expressed in the following words addressed to Steinþór: 'Það kemst aldrei skikk á þennan kaupstað fyren þú og þínar líkar eru orðnir að manneskjum með ábyrgðartilfinningu gagnvart sér og sínu félagi' (SAL, 180).

To a certain extent Salka Valka comes under the influence of Eyjólfur. Her own experience and developing attitudes are given his solid support and sympathy. Her growing awareness of reality and responsibility have been silently schooled by him.

Although Laxness appears to regard the old priest's understanding of responsibility as being mostly words, I think it

is only fair to say that the priest teaches that it is the core of Christian morality and seems to regard it as being an earnest regard for one's neighbour and one's way of living. Now, as Laxness retreats from the Church and from theology, responsibility, action, and reality become of dominant importance to him.

In *Salka Valka* those who do not have this sense of responsibility and reality make use of escape in three ways. Sigurlína escapes from life in the Salvation Army; Steinþór escapes in drink; Arnaldur escapes in a political and unrealisable dream of a Brave New World.

In *Fuglinn í fjörunni* the voice of conviction comes from Salka Valka herself, as she wends her way through life, learning, and sometimes necessarily changing her course. For her, escape and fantasy go hand in hand, as do reality and truth. Her impatience with fantasy is akin to her insistence on truth, so it comes as no surprise when she insists that Arnaldur tell her no lie: ' - ekkert, ekkert nema sannleikann. Ég er hrædd við alt nema sannleikann' (SAL, 446). This seems to be Laxness's own cry at this time, his own cry against delusions, against religions, against words and theories with no substance to bear them out.

It is worthwhile paying attention to Laxness's religious terminology and imagery in *Salka Valka*. It has already been pointed out that the fabric of the book is interwoven with religious quotations and references, which seem to be the result of the deep impression made on the writer by his intense religious study. It is interesting to note that Salka Valka and sometimes Arnaldur too express themselves in religious terms, in much the

same way, though neither of them conforms to a religious school of thought. Laxness expresses himself in biblical language in his prose because he has not freed himself from the hold of religion and because, whether he likes it or not, he cannot get away from it; Salka Valka uses biblical phrases as a result of her environment, not because she is a believer. However, such language as she uses has a particular significance and serves to lend gravity to the point she wishes to make. Thus she lifts from the gospel a quotation that expresses the honour due to Christ and the unworthiness felt towards Him, and she uses it with reference to Arnaldur, when she wishes to indicate the immeasurable gulf between him and Steinþór: 'Þú ert ekki verður þess að leysa skópveingi hans' (SAL, 412). <sup>14</sup> Laxness allows Arnaldur to use language in this way too: 'Ég trúí; hjálpa þú trúleysi mínu' (SAL, 386). <sup>15</sup> Arnaldur is not referring to a lack of faith in the power of God, but in the weakness of his own ideological convictions. In this way he imbues them with a religious significance. Similarly the words from Luke's gospel concerning the Son of Man are used firstly by Laxness concerning Arnaldur: 'sem hvergi átti höfðu sínu að að halla' (SAL, 355), and later by Arnaldur about himself: 'ég á í rauninni hvergi höfði að að halla' (SAL, 447). <sup>16</sup> Thus he is given and thus he borrows a certain sensitivity and vulnerableness.

Laxness appears to turn to religious terminology and vocabulary to express precisely those emotions and ideas that are poorly served by everyday speech. Thus Arnaldur awakens 'sálina' (SAL, 359) in Salka Valka; Steinþór is not a monster or a brute but

'djöfullinn' (SAL,360); and Salka Valka herself is 'píslarvottur' (SAL,360). She does not believe in Christ's redemption of man, but she uses the imagery connected with it when she speaks of the futility of her mother's death. Laxness uses religious language because it is to some extent the language of the people, but he also uses it as an artistic support.

On one occasion Laxness seems to intrude, with his own personal thoughts, into the speech of his character, so that Arnaldur speaks in a way that is out of keeping. Moreover, the thought expressed is not further developed, but it is as if the writer cannot resist pushing it in. When Arnaldur is describing the incomprehensible situation in which man finds himself, both overcoming and awaiting defeat, he continues suddenly: 'Það er ekki nema ein saga ennþá ótrúlegri, sú nefnilega að Jesús Kristur hafi borið heimsins synd, sigrað einn - fyrir alla' (SAL,345). This seems to be Laxness's own lack of comprehension, not Arnaldur's.

Much the same personal intrusion is felt at other moments, when there are unnecessary allusions to, for example, God's revelation, or the gift of grace: 'Reikningurinn hjá Jóhanni Bogesen var í eðli sínu eins óhlutkend og trúin á opinberun guðs eða endurlausnarverk Jesú Krists, en aunguadsíður voru verkanir hennar hlutkendar og ápreifanlegar á sinn hátt einsog til dæmis sakramentin og náðarmeðulin' (SAL,62). The chief purpose of such allusion must be to draw attention to the writer's own cynicism. He shows the same cynicism towards miracles. The people of Óseyri are incredulous when they hear that political power will come to



them but: 'sú var bót í máli, að ýmislegt hafði þá heyrst ótrúlegt áður hér í plássinu, einsog til dæmis þegar Jesús, bláfátækur maður, mettaði fimm þúsundir manna af litlu brauði, ennþá minni fiski og als aungum kartöflum' (SAL, 291). This example seems to be dragged into the narrative solely to give Laxness the opportunity to express and arouse sceptical laughter. From the time of writing *Salka Valka* he is always particularly obtuse where biblical allegories or miracles are concerned, and seems reluctant to recognise any underlying meaning or spiritual truth. With this religious derision he gives vent to an indignation that he evidently felt first round about that time. He has come a long way from the mini-miracle of the heart-shaped stone in *Undir Helgahnúk*. Perhaps he was also suffering from a certain embarrassment, having previously declared himself a fervent upholder of the faith, and now felt that a defensive and defiant attitude was called for. All in all Laxness's frequent use of biblical language betrays a lasting and complex preoccupation with religious matters, even if God and the churches are held in low esteem.

At the end of a survey of Laxness's religious development in *Salka Valka*, it can be said that Laxness shows a continuing interest in religion, but now particularly in its unpleasant sides. Most striking is a sense of his mistrust towards God, a sense of being let down, an indignation on behalf of oppressed people. In his lack of comprehension in the face of blatant social misery, he now takes up the cause of suffering humanity and mostly points the accusing finger at the Creator. He represents

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the churches either as emotional escape-routes or uninspired institutions for the maintenance of the status quo. Both these options he rejects and the individual is portrayed as comfortless and alone, let down by man and God. The values that he upholds in *Salka Valka* are not religious or political fervour, not theoretical charity, but homely and solid ones - doggedness, practical readiness to act, moderation, kindly commonsense. Salka Valka herself stands out as a figure of hope and determination, a figure of toughness and tenderness in a world that is otherwise short of hope. It is a work that testifies to the writer's own reaction against religious faith, even his own loss of faith at the time.

1. Postscript to second edition of *Salka Valka*, quoted by Hallberg in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p.182.
2. Kristinn Andrússon, *Um íslenskar bókmenntir*, Volume I, p.146.
3. Letter to Upton Sinclair, quoted in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I, p.71.
4. *Noah's Flood*, in *English Miracle Plays*, 1.140.
5. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p.206.
6. 'Raflýsing sveitanna', *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 March 1927.
7. Sønderholm, p.141.
8. Sønderholm, p.143.
9. Sønderholm, p.142.
10. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I, p.161.
11. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I, p.162.

12. John 17. 21.

13. Luke 18. 10-14.

14. John 1. 27.

15. Mark 9. 24.

16. Matthew 8. 20.

In the autumn of 1932 Laxness visited the Soviet Union for the first time. His interest here was mainly agricultural. He had already begun his next novel which was concerned with the agricultural conditions in Iceland, and in the Soviet Union he was greatly impressed by collectivisation and the methods of classifying farmers according to their wealth and purpose. This is indeed reflected in *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934-35), but it is actually the author's humanity and compassion, and the force of his characters, rather than any agricultural theory, that are impressive.

As far as religion is concerned, what Laxness seems to lay bare for scrutiny in *Sjálfstætt fólk* is not any specific Christian way, unsatisfactory or unsatisfying in its application, but rather a rampant confusion and ignorance about all religious affairs. A number of types and opinions are brought forward, but all, except Bjartur's, are fragmentary and indecisive. The picture that they build up is tattered and torn. Laxness does not condemn this confusion but he shows that it is there. His tone towards the confused, motley views of the Icelandic community is kindly and tinged both with humour and pity, while at the same time he is still keen-eyed and quick to expose hypocrisy and materialistic misunderstandings; but there is no trace of indignation as in *Salka Valka*, nor of any passionate conviction or antipathy from his side. Nor of course does he propose any religious renewal or reform, or even any consolidated attempt to work for a religious understanding. His time as a religious protagonist is over and, in the writing of his first social novel, he seems to have burnt out

his anger and disappointment at what he saw as the failure of practical Christianity. What Laxness now turns to as a prescription for the way of life, even more warmly than he had done before, is not a religious school of thought, not the understanding of the head, but simply the way of compassion, the way of the fellow-feeling of the heart. He now extracts one of the very essences of Christianity and divorces it from the whole, and this essence, this love he applies exclusively to man.

It is useful to look closely at the variety of beliefs and half-beliefs, the great body of contradictions and uncertainties that Laxness is at pains to present.

First of all there are the ghosts. The Icelanders, like other isolated peoples, have always had a deep-seated belief in spirits from the other world. This is reflected in the sagas and in folk-tale. The inclusion of a ghost folk-tale here is not in itself surprising. What is of interest is the use that Laxness makes of it and the shades he lends it. At quite a deep level, he gives Kólumkilli and his follower Gunnvör a symbolic role as the oppressors and the antagonists of those who dare to strive to break out from the humiliation that accompanies dependence under the old economic, agricultural system. At a more obvious level, he uses the ghosts to portray the superstitions, fears and the credulity of the people, and to demonstrate their conflicting beliefs, springing from a society which draws both upon Christianity and paganism, and in which paganism is often the dominant force. The irony that is absent in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and which begins to show itself in *Salka Valka* is now

positive. In *Heíman eg fór* Laxness touches cynically on the idea of truth being the possession of one group alone, and of being contained uniquely in one system of thought (HEF, 14). Now, in the retelling of the *Kólumkilli* legend, he humorously tosses forward the idea of belief in the Nordic gods as being the true faith, but this faith, he says, was abandoned in favour of sorcery, that is to say Christianity: 'Laungu síðar snerust norrænir menn á Íslandi frá réttum sið og hneigðust að töfrum óskyldra þjóðflokka' (SJÁ, 7). Apart from being able to voice his own scepticism about wild claims to truth, Laxness, at this point, is also underlining the degree to which the people as a whole can give credence to and feel allegiance for the old pagan Nordic religion. This allegiance is seen again later and more specifically in *Atómstöðin*.

There is another irony; Laxness will have known from his Catholic reading, and from his own country's history, that it is doubtful if *Kólumkilli*, or Columba as he is usually known, ever set foot on Iceland. There is no tradition to support the notion. Celtic monks did indeed set out across the ocean in search for desert places in which to lead solitary lives, but the evidence of monks in Iceland is from a period considerably later than *Kólumkilli*. ' But Laxness disregards history and *Kólumkilli*'s European reputation for sanctity and describes him as 'særíngamaður mikill' (SJÁ, 7). It seems that in demoting the Celtic saint to a shady sorcerer, and, moreover, in allowing his follower Gunnvör to demand sacrifice and blood, Laxness wishes them, to some extent, to stand for any repressive aspect of Christianity. However, his treatment of the ghosts should really

be interpreted with much humour. Peter Hallberg and Erik Sønderholm <sup>2</sup> have both pointed out that the ghosts are symbols of oppressors from the economic and the natural worlds.

Next there are the fairies. Once again there is a portrayal of a belief that appeals to an unsophisticated mentality. But where a belief in ghosts appeals to the darker side of the imagination, calling forth the nightmare, a belief in fairies awakens the lighter side and brings out the dream. Finna, Bjartur's second wife, is one such dreamer. Whereas those who believe in the ghosts of Kólumkilli and Gunnvör subconsciously express the fear that evil is the implacable overlord, Finna subconsciously expresses the conviction that good will overcome. Her belief is also an escape from a reality that is too bitter to bear. It is a vision of a world that is filled with peace and goodness. The fairies in her tales are not malicious, undependable creatures but are free from the failings of the human race: 'Huldufólkið hefur aungvar áhyggjur en það leitar hins góða og finnur það . . . svona er að lifa í friði og saung' (SJÁ, 213-14). They guide those that go astray, they console the weary and the oppressed, they befriend the lonely and the deprived and to the same extent that these ordinary fairies excel ordinary mortals in dignity and love, so too the fairy priest differs from the priests on earth: 'Það er einsog góð hönd væri lögð á hjarta hans' (SJÁ, 214). Those who hear the haunting sermon in her tale believe that it concerns the ultimate triumph of good.

Finna has built herself a dream world to set against the material and emotional deprivations of her life with Bjartur. The

priests of the Church have failed to give her what should be their vision and their hope, so she has recourse to fantasy, but she picks out and prizes only those elements of fairy-tale that are compatible with love, so that Laxness comments: 'Þessi kona þekkti guð á sinn hátt' (SJÁ, 200). Thus, unwittingly, she sees and knows God in the cow, in all animals and in nature, but never in that which is incompatible with her vision of love. And it is for this reason that she is even unable to contemplate any other escape from the harshness of her life in pursuit of visionary good, for to do so would only be the cause of further hardship and pain: 'Hver á þá að hugsa um hana ömmu?' (SJÁ, 215). Dreams may console but they are always and only dreams. There is responsibility in life.

Finna puts her concern for the welfare of others before an unpractical search for happiness. Bjartur, unlike his wife, allows dreams to bring destruction. It is, in fact, always the women in his novels who have this sense of responsibility. *Barn náttúrunnar* is the only exception.

It is interesting to notice that when Finna finds peace and harmony in fairy dreams, finding God in nature with her son, the writing takes on an almost mystical tone: 'Það voru góðir dagar. Þeir voru alveg yfir-lætislausir, og það er aðall hinna bestu daga, þeir lifu aldrei úr endurminningu dreingsins. Það gerist ekki neitt, maður bara lifir og óskar einskis framar, og ekkert framar.' (SJÁ, 211). The mother and son have the stillness of contemplatives. Bjartur has no inner peace. He must perpetually be



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occupied with something. Outer stillness or restlessness is made to reflect the inner life.

Further, spirituality and serenity emanate from Finna's face, and the mark made by her presence, by her very being on the boy is indelible. He likens the experience of the stillness of her presence to that of the holiness of contemplation: 'Og þegar hann hugsaði síðar til þessara daga og andlitsins sem ríkti yfir þeim, þá fanst honum að einnig hann hefði lífað helgi upplitningarinnar einsog bláu fjölli. Vera hans hafði hvílt full lotningar gagnvart þeirri snild sem sameinar allar fjarlægðir í fegurð og sorg, svo maður þráir ekki framur neitt' (SJÁ, 215). There is no derision in Laxness's treatment of Finna's visions or her peace. She does not have opinions. She is never ridiculous. She is completely simple. She is at one. Like her fairy folk, she seeks for the good and finds it. His description of her holy simplicity is not untouched by awe, from which it can be seen that he still stands in reverence before unaffected religious calm, before a sense of worship which is inborn.

Ásta Sóllilja and her mother, Rósa, are also of the dreamer type, but Rósa believes in Kólumkilli and the darker forces as well. Helgi, on the other hand, gives up any faith in fairies after the death of his mother, for they have failed her and him, but he does not turn to a state of total non-belief like Bjartur or Gvendur, rather he swings exclusively to Kólumkilli's side. These two types, the dreaming optimist and the macabre pessimist are described by Laxness as 'Tvær samstæðar andstæður, hinar eilífu andstæður í mannsmynd' (SJÁ, 299). The dark and the light in

human nature, examined already in Steinn Elliði and in Sigurlína, continue to hold the writer's attention.

The mixed characters in *Sjálfstætt fólk*, with their semi-pagan half-beliefs, their deep-seated hopes and fears, move in a society where there is little certainty or guidance in matters of faith at all. For instance, many people seem not quite sure as to who Jesus is; Fríða, the hired farm-hand, seems to believe in a blend of Jesus and Peter in one; and Bjartur tells Nonni that no Jesuses exist, as if Jesuses were a collective band. There is also a simple ignorance about Catholicism, or Popery as it is called. That it is out-and-out bad is clear to the people's minds. Bjartur regards the superstitions about Kólumkilli as a popish heresy and when Rósa is alone in the croft, tormented by uncanny cries, she fears that they come from the ghosts of tortured souls which include among their number Papists 'sem hatist við guð og Jesús og þráir það eitt að draga með sér alt lifandi niðri tortímingu sína' (SJÁ, 82). These are not only personal expressions, but the expression of a traditional prejudice, inherited from and preserved by the community which has reared them. Another example of a statement of this prejudice is to be found in the legend of Kólumkilli where Laxness reports that the spirit of Kólumkilli speaks: "klækilegum látínúvísu og ótilheyrilegum sámyrðum" (SJÁ, 8). The Latin, the former, archaic language of Catholicism, and the idea of obscenities are coupled together in one idea, in one apparent quotation from the presumed text of a traditional folk-tale. Yet at the same time that the people fight shy of any hint of Catholicism, there are relics of the old faith in their

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practices. Thus Bjartur, without reflection, without understanding the significance, merely from old habit, makes the sign of the Cross facing East, before starting work each day. And old Bera mingles Latin phrases in her hymns.

Day-to-day life is mixed with old superstitions and muddled customs. The year is punctuated with religious festivals that are minimally understood; the course of life is marked by services for confirmation, marriage and burial, but there is no feeling of the influence of the Church on the normal lives of the people. This does not mean that many do not have their own brand of faith, but there is no uniformity here. Many of the old farming community have a simple, non-intellectual faith. Rósa's father, Þórður í Níðurkotinu, knows the *Passíusálmur* by heart and prays his own version of the Lord's Prayer, poignantly telling of the abject state of those who pray:

Faðir vor, þú sem ert á himnum, já, svo óendanlega langt burtu að einginn veit hvar þú ert, næstum hvergi, gefðu okkur í dag eitthvað ósköp lítið að borða þér til dýrðar, og fyrirgefðu okkur ef við getum ekki staðið í skilum við kaupmann og lánardrottna, en láttu okkur um fram alt ekki freistast til að eiga góða daga, því að þitt er ríkið. (SJÁ, 148)

There is also Einar í Undirhlið with his elegies for the dead, his interest in the soul, and his hope for consolation in the world to come rather than for comfort on earth, but it is so long

since any of these men have been to church that they have forgotten all their hymn tunes.

In line with the general interest in ghosts in the area is the curiosity in the return of the souls from the dead. This reflects the growth of spiritualism in Reykjavík in the early part of the century, which is discussed in Chapter X. There is a good deal of vague talk about immortality and the soul, but the attitude is impersonal. It seems to be only idle curiosity and speculation. The farmers' discussion about the soul is as disconnected and as full of Laxness's humour as those of the other 'chorus' scenes. Laxness uses the discussion not to pursue any serious arguments but to demonstrate the ease with which the farmers are swayed, and to show the shallowness of the grounds for their belief and thought.

Apart from the uncomplicated faith, half-forgotten customs, and idle spiritual curiosity of these uneducated people, one finds at the other extreme the bailiff's wife's approach to religion, which is unrealistic and lyrical. She praises God as the great creator of this world, and sees it as men's duty to assist Him in all His work. She is purposefully blind to the hardship endured by other people. Her religion is only an extension of her love of national romanticism. It is neither simple nor sincere, and Laxness portrays her as a hypocrite.

The attitudes of the bailiff's wife are not condoned by the pastor, séra Guðmundur, who considers them downright paganism. Séra Guðmundur's opinions may be regarded as typical of the rural Icelandic priest. His religion is down-to-earth and free from

affectation. He is dogmatic, unyielding, 'moral'. His abruptness and impatience in carrying out his duties are hardly endearing. They seem to be born out of the harshness of the contemporary Icelandic society, even the very landscape in which he works. He is without sentimentality and at first sight without compassion. He is completely clear-sighted. When it is a question of failed responsibility, there is no doubt about his view. This is made evident both during Bjartur's visit to him and during his funeral speech for Rósa, in which he implies that Bjartur has the wrong priorities: 'Menn hlaupa eftir sauðkindina alla sína ævi og finna hana aldrei. Það er af því að sauðkindin er það mýraljós sem ekki er neitt ljós. Það er ekki til nema ein sauðkind sem er sú eina sanna sauðkind: guðs lamb. Slíkur er lærdómurinn sem vér getum dregið útaf viðskilnaði sem yfirbugar okkur í dag' (SJÁ, 150). Laxness presents séra Guðmundur as 'islenskur prestur samkvæmt þjóðsögum í þúsund ár, náðvist hans ein var þess holl tryggðing að allt var með kyrrum kjörum' (SJÁ, 150). There is a want of warmth and generosity in his dealings with his people. He is a security, no threat, but little use as a spiritual guide.

Séra Téodor represents a more liberal school of thought. He has little of the positiveness of his predecessor and his opinions are more flexible. Above all he wants to please. But the chorus of the farmers does not give him the respect that it accorded séra Guðmundur. In this area a priest is primarily esteemed not for his theology or his pastoral care, but for his knowledge of husbandry and sheep.

The grandmother alone stands as one who is sustained through life by religion and who seeks and finds a refuge in it. She has a firm faith in a merciful God, in the forbearing Father and in the powers of darkness. She ascribes everything that happens to her to the will of God. However, her religion, her God, her prayers and hymns are all a private affair. She does not communicate or explain. She does not pass on her faith to her grandchildren, but when Nonni is preparing to leave for America she gives him two pieces of advice, or rather makes two requests: the first is never to be insolent to those who are in an inferior position, and the second is never to hurt an animal. The requests contain the most precious precepts of her life, but they are not specifically Christian, they express a pan-religious courtesy of the soul. Once again, as with Finna's stillness, it is apparent that what Laxness respects is not dogma but evidence of a quality of soul.

Finally of all the believers in the district, there is the bailiff. His attitude is important in that it differs basically from the others'. He sees a material and social advantage in Christianity, because it implants a respect for the law: 'Ég heimta að aðrir hafi líka þann kristindóm sem til þarf að hægt sé að koma lögum yfir fólk' (SJÁ, 325). Christianity and the Russian Czar represent law and firm rule in his mind, and there is a feeling that in Laxness's mind the two represent a system of repression.

The fabric of Christianity is shoddy and dull in *Sjálfstætt fólk*. It cannot be an inspiration or call forth respect. There is no concern with worship or prayer, no idea of a personal

relationship with God. God does indeed seem all too distant; He is indeed almost nowhere at all. But Laxness shows that sincerity and goodness are irrepressible, they are still there, not as a result of the teaching of the Church, nor through the example of its followers, but perhaps because some people, as Helgi says of his mother, are just not bad enough (SJÁ, 297). If people are not sufficiently bad, then innate goodness cannot help but break through. Without anger, Laxness portrays a society to which Christianity contributes almost nothing of positive value, but in which man, even in his want of comfort, even in his despair, is often shown to be full of compassion and care.

Opposing all Christianity is Bjartur, who, even with his inherited bundle of Christian habits, is a man with a pagan soul. On the one hand he has no time for ghosts, superstitions and other 'páfavillu' (SJÁ, 33). On the other hand he has no time for the grandmother's faith and especially not for that Christianity urged by priests. His inspiration comes not from figures from Christian history, but from the ballads of Icelandic culture and the sagas. He is spiritually at home on the heath: 'Hún var hin andlega móðir hans, hans kirkja, hans betri heimur' (SJÁ, 98). Ideals in general, but particularly Christian ideals of forgiveness, brotherly love, and mutual co-operation are unknown to him: 'Hugsjón? spurði Bjartur og skildi ekki orðið' (SJÁ, 414). He glories in the pagan concepts of independence, honour and pride, and he brings up his children as heathens too. They, however, want to learn about Christianity, they want answers to life. What answers can they

possibly find in the confusions and the contradictions that they see?

The teacher that is sent to them offers no philosophy for life in this world and no hope for life in the next. He answers their questions with scepticism and a bitter disillusionment. His life of Christ is a tragedy, a murder story that ends with death on the Cross. He makes no mention of Resurrection or Ascension. Embittered, he ceased to pray when his prayer of petition was ignored. But he treasures sin: 'Það er sú dýrmætasta guðs gjöf' (SJÁ, 360). After his violation of Ásta Sóllilja, when he comes to realise that sin is perhaps other than this, then, in a crisis of misery and self-reproach he can still pray to God with a cry for forgiveness, which is at the same time a cry of despair: 'Guð minn góður, ég er glataður . . . ef þú ætlar að troða á mér, drottinn minn, troddu mig þá alveg í sundur strax' (SJÁ, 372). The dominant feeling, then, is not one of confidence or trust, but one of hopelessness, utter despair.

It is from such a believer that Ásta Sóllilja and her brothers have their first introduction to the Bible and they soon find they must work out all the answers for themselves. At this stage in Ásta Sóllilja's life, before the bitterness of her rejection and her pain, she cannot see that God is anything but good. Nothing can exist, she argues, if God did not exist in the first place, and since God is good, then He is necessarily unhappy, a suffering God as well, for the good cannot but be affected by others' pain. The God she envisages is unlike the God of retribution that lurks in the back of the teacher's mind. Since she knows no evil, she



cannot conceive of such an idea. Even so, soon after her discovery of God, she can say to the teacher: 'Guð er ekki nærri eins vondur og þú heldur' (SJÁ, 378). Her belief, her guilelessness, her unconsidered love are reflected in her face. These qualities are shown to be redemptive in themselves: 'Hann hélt áfram að horfa háfluktum augum á hið frelsandi andlit hennar; smámsaman varð honum rórra' (SJÁ, 378). So, in times of desperation, it is not justice or retribution that are required by men, but simplicity, compassion and mercy which can come from our fellowmen and which can heal and save.

At this time Ásta Sóllilja has a feeling of a suffering God of compassion, and being possessed of this compassion herself, she is able to give it back to the man who has violated her. But now she herself also stands in need of understanding and love, on two counts. Firstly, the teacher's love, with all that it entails, throws her into a new emotional and hitherto unexperienced, sexual confusion; secondly, according to the strict, Christian moral code, Ásta Sóllilja has sinned. As a result of Bjartur's inheriting exclusively the *moral* prejudices of this code, her social position suffers a change. But the understanding and the compassion that she and her situation now call for lie outside the scope of the imagination of the local community. It would be well at this point to consider Laxness's attitude, at this time, to what is called 'sin' and to what is called 'morality'.

The teacher's desire for sin and his appraisal of it, while it is still beyond his grasp, has already been noted; it is the dearest gift of God. Laxness shows that the act of this sin is, in

reality, the feelingless, sexual violation of an innocent, ignorant young girl, still little more than a child. It is loveless, it is selfish, and it is without responsibility. This seems to be unequivocally Laxness's idea of sin. It brings its own reward: anguish of soul, a darkness, a withdrawal, remorse, a kind of death.

Ásta Sóllilja's response to this first love is viewed in a different light. It is not portrayed as sin. True, she technically commits fornication, but what takes place is shown to be involuntary, largely passive, entered into for the joy of the other. She is selfless, she does nothing, she allows. In effect she does not sin. Yet at the same time she is aware of ambiguous feelings, aware that she ought to have tried to get away. It is not her fault that a shock, 'straumur', passes through her; 'Hversvegna fer um mann straumur? Lífið sjálft, maður getur ekki að því gert, maður lifir. Má maður það þá ekki? Já, en hversvegna er maður þá fæddur?' (SJÁ, 374). None of this is her fault. She may only be living, yet she feels that an affirmation of life is wrong. Laxness presents sexual relations here as being sinful as far as the teacher is concerned, but even when one person is filled with love and consideration, as is the case with Ásta Sóllilja, he shows that a sense of wrong enters into the union for her, for the union is based on dishonour on the man's side.

Some part of Ásta's guilt comes from her feeling that she has transgressed the inherited moral code, that she has done what is considered wrong from the Christian point of view. Laxness here returns to one of the pre-occupations of *Vefarinn miklí frá Kasmír*

and writes of 'hið fjandsamlega ofursjálfr sem dæmir mannlega náttúru á kristlegum grundvelli' (SJÁ, 375), and in his sympathy and understanding of human nature, he continues: 'það eru þó einhver takmörk fyrir því sem mannleg náttúra getur afborið af kristlegri siðfræði' (SJÁ, 375-76). In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* one sees in Steinn Elliði the duality of human nature, the divine aspiration in battle with the demands of the flesh, but there Laxness, under the shadow of Catholicism, condemns the flesh on all counts, and advocates austerity. The body is the degrader, the tempter, it drags man down. The great opposing forces fighting for dominion are referred to in *Sjálfstætt fólk* also. Laxness writes: 'Kanski er eitt óumflýanlegast af öllu: þau tvö sjónarmið sem brjótast með mannssálinni uns yfir lýkur' (SJÁ, 361). A little later he describes the grandmother's eyes as symbolising the reality of good and evil: 'tinandi augun . . . tákna þann veruleika með guði og djöfli sem hefst í lok þeirrar natur sem kemur með draumi og skógum' (SJÁ, 373). The writer's mind is clearly still taken up with this insoluble problem. However, his views have made progress since *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. The body is now no longer portrayed as bad; it is only pre-eminently weak; it is not necessarily guilty. Why does Christian morality have so little sympathy with the frail? Why does it judge the natural and condemn? It is that outgrowth of Christianity, sexual morality, that has assumed vast proportions, that is under attack here. It is not God or the person of Christ, and though Laxness does not carefully make a distinction at this point, it is necessary to observe one.

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Gunnar Kristjánsson has written of the similarity between Laxness's and Kazantzakis's criticism of the Church and of their attempt to free Christ from the institutionalised church. <sup>3</sup> There is a further similarity in their reaction to the Church's attitude towards human weakness. There is a passage from Kazantzakis's spiritual, autobiographical novel *Report to Greco* which expresses the desire for a church which, with a full compassion and understanding, will accept the wholeness of the human being, thus putting an end to such dilemmas and divisions in the soul that both writers undergo and portray in their characters:

. . . and then the religion of Christ will take another step forward on earth. It will embrace the whole man, all of him, not just half as it does now in embracing only the soul. Christ's mercy will broaden. It will embrace and sanctify the body as well as the soul; it will see - and preach - that they are not enemies, but fellow workers. Whereas now, what happens? If we sell ourselves to the devil, he urges us to deny the soul; if we sell ourselves to God, he urges us to deny the body. When will Christ's heart grow sufficiently broad to commiserate not only with the soul but also with the body and to reconcile these two savage beasts? <sup>4</sup>

In his frustration at the coldness and the stark limitations of Christian morality, Laxness looks to find an answer to the problem of human frailty, and the solution that he finds now is no longer in austerity, but has the same quality that is dreamed of in

Kazantzakis's work. It, too, is a solution that offers an embrace to the body and the soul, to the entirety of man. Morality and rules are no substitute for sympathy and love.

The punishment that the community metes out to Ásta Sóllilja comes in the form of total rejection by Bjartur, ironically on the morning of Pentecost. From the rest of the community she suffers complete indifference. Laxness does not stress the fact that Ásta Sóllilja's plight is unrelieved by practical help but his silences speak for themselves. Her plight is ignored by everybody except her brothers; not even the grand-mother offers her any emotional or material aid; the offer made by her natural father cannot be considered as an offer made in good faith, for it is made with the purpose of avoiding scandal, and comes in any case many years too late.

Nonni's relationship with his sister is on another plane, and his feelings crystallise Laxness's now apparently confirmed belief in compassion as the Way. The little boy is intellectually unable to understand his sister's suffering after her violation, but that, says the writer, is of small importance:

Það var í fyrsta sinn sem hann sá inni vöfundarhúsi mannsálarinnar. Því fór fjarri að hann skildi það. En það sem meiri var: hann leið með henni. Laungu laungu seinni endurlífði hann þessa minningu í saung; bæði í sínum fegursta saung, og í fegursta saung heimsins. Því skilningurinn á unkomuleysi sálarinnar, á baráttunni milli tveggja skauta, það er ekki uppspretta hins æðsta saungs. Samlíðunin er uppspretta hins

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æðsta saungs. Samlíðunin með Ásta Sóllilju á jörðinni.

(SJÁ, 389)

Laxness offers his solidarity to all the humble and the needy throughout the novel. He shows his understanding for the hardships and emotional poverty of family life, the material and economic life, and the frailty of human happiness as well. Finally he expresses his sympathy for all dumb creatures through Finna's feelings for the cow, and Bjartur's for his dog and above all his sheep. It is in the description of Bjartur's care for the new-born lambs that sympathy is seen to break down the barriers between animal and man: 'Þetta var kanski ekki neitt merkileg heiði og ekki neitt sérstaklega merkilegur bær í heiði, en samt gerðust þó stundum ótrúlegir hlutir í heiðinni: maðurinn og skepnan skildu hvort annað' (SJÁ, 409). And immediately before these lines are the words that are stamped with the very essence of Laxness's faith and hope: 'Samúðin á sér kanski ekki letur, en það er vonandi að einn dag verði hún sigursæl í öllum heiminum' (SJÁ, 409).

The whole of *Sjálfstætt fólk* is a plea for sympathy, and this is indeed necessary in such an economic climate, where all sense of fraternity is lacking, and in such a domestic environment where, for want of love, relationships either wither or completely die.

The want of sympathy and fraternity are not hard to see in the agricultural society that is depicted. The political and economic solutions that Laxness puts forward in something of a rush at the end of the novel only partially concern this study - that part of

them that can be considered as having spiritual value or expressing some quality of heart. Once again the essence of Laxness's solution lies in fellow-feeling, conscientious compassion and mutual help. He foresees no improvement in the workers' material situation while selfishness and exploitation on the one hand, and an overestimation of independence on the other strive to hinder it. Men must alter their fundamental attitudes of isolation: 'Einyrkinn kemst ekki úr kreppunni um allar aldir, hann heldur áfram að vera til í hörmúng, eins leingi og maðurinn er ekki mannsins skjól, heldur versti óvinur mannsins' (SJÁ, 524). Co-operation and consideration are the only way out.

In considering Laxness's religious development, it should be noted that, as he had begun to do at the end of *Salka Valka*, Laxness now continues to blame God, together with man, for the misery, the hardship and the oppression that are found in life. As in *Fuglinn í fjörunni*, God is no longer solely to blame. Earlier Laxness wrote like one personally aggrieved, irrationally. This irrational grievance against God is gone now, and it is in his political interests to apportion blame increasingly on man. In one instance, he writes of paid agitators who incite workers, 'og setja þá uppá móti guði og mönnum í senn, einsog guð og menn væru ekki nógu hatramlega andsnúnir þessum aðiljum í forveginn' (SJÁ, 457-58). Their responsibility is shared. In another instance Laxness uses a plural for the concept of God: 'Leingra gátu guðir og menn ekki komist í að féfletta þennan sjálfstæða einstakling' (SJÁ, 379). 'Guðir' is less personal than 'guð', it is almost Fate.

But this slackening in one direction must mean an intensifying of antagonism towards those in temporal power.

The want of sympathy and love in the domestic environment requires closer examination. The great embodiment of the deficiency is Bjartur. But it must be said that, however gross Bjartur's deficiency in human understanding and warmth, he is not totally devoid of feeling. It is generally the helplessness of other creatures that brings out a compassionate response in him. His love for animals has already been noted. He is moved, too, by the weakness of woman, but his pity is made null and void by his subsequent scandalous treatment of his wives and his disrespect for the role of the wife generally. What he experiences is emotion, sentiment, and when put to the test the sentiment is found to be false. However this is not always the case. He is moved by the vulnerableness of the new-born child and he accepts total responsibility for Ásta Sóllilja, knowing full well that she is not his child. His love for her is genuine, even if it is perniciously expressed at times.

However, Bjartur is first and foremost the personification of independence. In his character the spiritual evils of independence and isolation are underlined. This very spirit of independence, with its focus on the self, and its ruthlessness, is shown to be radically opposed to the spirit of co-operation and sympathetic fellow-suffering which Laxness recommends. One possessed of it is destined to suffer much self-inflicted pain. Bjartur's exaggerated spirit of independence is essentially pagan; the spirit of co-operation and awareness of others is Christian, or



stems from Christian thought. There are other small independent farmers in *Sjálfstætt fólk* who are not hindered in the battle of life to the same degree as Bjartur, for they are not governed by the same personality as he. He is larger than life and for this reason he cannot satisfactorily present Laxness's economic and political views. He, of all the farmers, is the least likely to arouse the reader's sympathy for the independent man. Kristinn E. Andrússon thinks that Bjartur is necessarily exaggerated in order to unite all the characteristics of the Icelandic *bóndi*, and that without his inhuman strength he would be cowed and therefore useless for the author's purpose. He quotes Gorky to support his theory: "Listamaðurinn verður að eiga hæfileika til að geta sett fram hið almenna í mynd einstaklings, dregið saman í eina persónu sérkennilegustu stéttareinkenni kaupmanna, embættismanna, verkamanna, venjur þeirra, tilhneigingar, óskir, hugmyndir, málfar o. s. fr. Með því skapar hann typer - og það er listin".<sup>5</sup> But Steingrímur Þorsteinsson argues that the writer and the politician in Laxness are each so strong that neither will concede to the other. In a French foreword he writes: 'Prenons par exemple 'L'Homme Indépendent'. Laxness ne croit pas que les plateaux déserts puissent être habités. Malgré cela on n'assiste pas à la fin du roman à la création d'une co-operative. On ne voit pas même que le paysan ruiné se transporte dans la capitale pour y faire partie d'un syndicat. Tout au contraire, il s'enfonce un peu plus loin dans l'espace désert: sa nature, et son destin sont plus forts que les opinions de l'auteur'.<sup>6</sup> I would go even further: not only, not being average, is Bjartur incapable of being

representative of the average independent farmer, and of the author's opinions in this sphere, but the very exaggerations in his character actually combine to build up a case against independence, making it a caricature which is grotesque in itself. Bjartur is of tragic stature, and in his case, character is fate. I feel that it is his dominant and fatal passion, rather than economic opposition, that ultimately brings him down.

Peter Hallberg has pointed out the similarity between King Lear and Bjartur in the way in which each is finally reconciled with his abused and maligned daughter. <sup>7</sup> I think there is a deeper likeness too, namely the wilful blindness of each, which is the result of overruling passion. Each, early on, alienates or cuts off the source of his own consolation, and in Bjartur's case, this is a source of very essential manual assistance as well. Bjartur's unbending nature and the misery that his independent spirit inflicts on the family surely contribute to Nonni's departure for America, and they are the sole reason why Helgi destroys himself. So, through his own fault, Bjartur is left with only one home-reared farmhand. The situation is worsened by his wilful estrangement from Ásta Sóllilja. He may ironically be compared with Þórir á Gilteigi who benefits from his daughters' easy virtue, for out of necessity they live at home, work in the home, and, into the bargain, provide Þórir with numerous grandchildren as a workforce. Bjartur on the other hand alienates those nearest to him, who could be his workforce, and his pride forbids him, in his loneliness, to take a third wife who could both help and console.

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Here then is a study of the barrenness of a life lived in almost total emotional isolation and it is a barrenness brought about by Bjartur himself. In his opinion the independent man does not need other people: 'Sjálfstæður maður hugsar aðeins um sig og lætur aðra fara sínu fram' (SJÁ, 434); and again: 'Sterkastur sá sem stendur einn. Maður fæðist einn. Maður drepst einn. Hversvegna ætti maður þá ekki að lifa einn? Að standa einn, er það þá ekki fullkomnun lífsins, takmarkið?' (SJÁ, 436). The quality of Bjartur's life and of the lives of those close to him is surely the answer to his questions. The tragedy of his private life, stemming from his inability to see the advantage of co-operation, is a reflection of the tragedy of the Icelandic community at large, where there is breakdown and chaos for want of the same spirit of mutual help, but it is the tragedy of the man rather than any economic argument that remains in a reader's mind.

There is another example of the bleakness of life when there is a breakdown of sympathy, in the portrayal of Ásta Sóllilja discovered in squalid surroundings. A fundamental and tragic change has taken place as a result of lack of love and understanding. Laxness shows how those who live in selfishness suffer as a result, but he does more; he shows how those who are the victims of this selfishness suffer and change as well. Ásta's experience of desertion and rejection, serve to coarsen and embitter her. The contrast is more poignant when her previous innocence is remembered. Formerly she had had a dream. Then she had envisaged a God who suffered because of the pain of man, and who was good. Life and certain people lead her to believe that God

is opposed to the innermost feelings of man: 'Guð, hann er á móti sálinni' (SJÁ, 389). This hardening and alteration in her outlook are maintained by her until her reconciliation with her step-father.

The estrangement of the step-father and the daughter is of the greatest significance. It is caused by Bjartur but it is sustained by the two of them, through pride. However, the distance between them is a source of pain to both. When there is reconciliation Ásta speaks to her grandmother about her feelings :

Já, ég var dauð, amma, svaraði stulkan.

Amman: Já það er mikið hvað allir fá að deya, nema ég.

Já en nú er ég risin upp frá dauðum, sagði Ásta Sóllilja.

(SJÁ, 52)

Life lived without forgiveness, lived in pride and separation is the same as death; the demolishing of pride, the restoration of forgiveness, re-union betoken Resurrection - Life. Once more and most finally Laxness insists that wilful isolation of any sort brings bitter fruitlessness and that understanding, forgiveness and love are the way to life.

In his essay 'Sjálfstætt fólk, Hamsun and Rousseau', T.L. Markey states:

*Sjálfstætt fólk* points to society as a corrupting evil. It is organised society with its banks, cooperatives, and regulations of sheep prices that crushes Bjartur. It is the evil of

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society, symbolized by the man from the the city who is sent to teach the children while Bjartur is away earning money, which corrupts Ásta Sóllilja, causing her pregnancy, her departure from Sumarhús, and her ultimate downfall. It was society that corrupted Rósa, and it was society that stole Helgi away from the life of a crofter. <sup>9</sup>

This approach seems wrong. Árni Sigurjónsson refutes the argument too: 'Markey överdriver klart rousseauismen i sin artikel om detta, anser jag. I jämförelse med Marx och Freud är Rousseau knappast relevant för verket, och Markeys uppfattning att allt ont enligt *Sjálfstætt fólk*s författare kommer från städerna håller inte'. <sup>9</sup> In reply to Markey it is fair to ask, how is it then that Bjartur, so far from civilisation and its corrupting influences, is at one stage near to incest? No, the corruption in *Sjálfstætt fólk* comes from man and his personal failings, and the man is chiefly Bjartur. He irresponsibly employs a debauched teacher to live in a one-room dwelling with his children, well aware of the sexual feelings that his daughter, all innocently, can arouse. He drives his children away from his home in one way or another. And one may ask too, where is the innocence, the sign of unspoiled, natural man in Bjartur's home? Quite simply it is not there as far as Bjartur is concerned. His home is not an idyll, and the writer has not pretended that it is. The point is very much that it is *not*.

To sum up it can be said that in *Sjálfstætt fólk* Laxness portrays a stark society in which there are multifarious religious

opinions, none of them exciting his admiration, and a society in which Christianity and the Church play almost no positive role. Man is portrayed as primarily weak (even Bjartur's courage never to submit or yield can be seen as weak), and Laxness demands for this weakness not condemnation, but compassion and love. Indeed he demands compassion and love on all levels of life, personal and economic too. The opposite of this love and consideration and union is made manifest in a spirit of independence. It is a pagan spirit and for all that Laxness rejects formal Christianity, many of the values that he upholds are those that are the boast of Christianity itself. Man is not alone and should not be alone; 'it is not good for man to be alone'.<sup>10</sup> Independence is both fratricide and suicide. Only outward-going love is right for life. Ultimately this love together with Bjartur's final capitulation and Ásta Sóllilja's 'Resurrection' are a sign that the pagan has no value and is overcome.

1. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Papar', pp. 170-203.
2. Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I. p. 217, and Sønderholm, p. 167.
3. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 158.
4. Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, p. 303.
5. Kristinn Andrússon, *Um íslenzkur bókmenntir*, Volume I. pp. 124-25.
6. Steingrímur Þorsteinsson, 'La vie et l'œuvre de Halldór Laxness', p. 8,

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7. Hallberg, *Háldór Laxness* (New York), p. 107.
8. Markey, 'Sjálfstætt fólk, Hamsun and Rousseau', p. 350.
9. Árni Sigurjónsson, *Den politiske Laxness*, p. 147, note 4.
10. Genesis 2.18.

Laxness's work during the 1930s definitely shows some influence of Marxism, but it is often also considered that it shows signs of Taoism too. Between the years 1925 and 1941 Laxness wrote a number of short stories which were published under the title *Sjö töframenn* in 1942. It is worth examining them at this point, because they are the first indication of any interest in Taoism in Laxness's published work. Shadows of it reappear, or are said to reappear, in much of his work from 1936 onwards. The stories are very unequal but their very unequalness witnesses to the author's development. Three of the stories show no traces of religious thought, so I shall not consider them here.

'Napóleon Bónaparti' (1935) bears a strong resemblance to much of Laxness's earlier writing in *Fótatastak manna*, for the whole tone is one of gentleness and compassion. However, this gentleness is not weakness, but something that calls for profound patience and respect for the unfortunate anti-hero, who is under the illusion that he is the Emperor Napoleon. It is reminiscent of Selma Lagerlöf's *En herrgårdsägen*, in the understanding and the courtesy shown to the one who is mentally ill. In Laxness's tale, however, normality returns without the aid of another person, but it returns too late. By the time that Jón Guðmundsson remembers and accepts who he really is, and remembers and accepts the reality of life and its tasks and challenges, then life and its work and the people who waited for him have all slipped away.

What then brought about this mental distraction in the first place? Although the story has a ring of Lagerlöf, it has none of her psychological profoundness; it is a very simple tale and it



has a very simple moral. The cause of Jón's breakdown is vanity. He sets his heart on realms beyond his grasp or capabilities. He cannot face everyday reality and responsibility and the result is personal disaster. He recalls séra Kjartan's wife Jóhanna in *Undir Helgahnúk*, and foreshadows Steinar Steinsson in *Paradísarheimt* who also leaves a trail of disasters through chasing after stars.

In spite of its clear and simple moral, there is no moralising or judgement. The first person who receives Jón, Napóleon Bónapartí, is the old priest and there is no derision in Laxness's description this time, for as he says of him, 'þetta var gamall og góður prestur . . . hann skipaði öllum að vera kurteisum við Napóleon Bónaparta. Hann sagði að Napóleon Bónapartí væri óhamingjusamur maður . . . Hann er gestur okkar hér á bænum' (TÖF, 244-45). Because of the priest's strong insistence on courtesy towards the suffering, Napóleon's presence on the farm is eventually looked upon as some kind of a blessing: 'Það var álitid hamingjuteikn yfir staðnum að þessi maður skyldi eiga þar konungsríki' (TÖF, 248).

In 'Napóleon Bónapartí' Laxness's compassionate attention seems to broaden. Hitherto it had focused on victims of society, or of men or systems, or perhaps even of God. But now there is no blame attached to anyone or anything, except to wrong-desiring. And those who deal patiently with the sick man do not even have the gratification of imagining that they are redressing an imbalance in an unjust world. And there is no material reward. They treat him with respect, not from respectability or moral indignation, but simply because he suffers. It is as if it were an honour for

them to deal with him thus. From this point of view 'Napóleon Bónapartí' is of great interest for, freed from duty, morality, righteous indignation, selectivity and theory it presents unglamorous goodness for goodness's sake.

'Pípuleikarinn' (1940) tells of a young boy who has some kind of open-air, mystical experience. Peter Hallberg sees this particular experience as an initiation into the world of poetry: 'Svo virðist að minsta kosti sem æfintýri drengsins sé einskonar vígsla til skáldlistarinnar.' This is a possible explanation. He also considers the meaning of the Icelandic flag in which the Piper is robed: 'Á slíkur klæðnaður að tákna að hann sé þjóðpersóna, holdtekinn töframáttur Íslands?'.<sup>2</sup> The strange attire suggests some interpretation along these lines. Erik Sønderholm argues that after many years of religious entanglement and confusion, and of emotional and social involvement, when he often had difficulty in keeping his political feelings in control in his essays, Laxness now allows the boy to recognise in the Piper 'sine egne idealer: den objektive fortælle måde, uden at ville pådutte læseren gode moralske læresætninger'.<sup>3</sup> This seems fair and reasoned, but it is still not entirely satisfactory.

Two worlds are portrayed in the story. The one is the real world of hard work, poverty, shame and blame which offers at least the security of routine; the other world offers escape, beauty, vision and inexpressible experience, but at the same time the darkness of the unknown. This may well be seen as an escape into the world of poetry, but it may also be entry into the inner world of mystic experience. Firstly, the language is that which is used

for the description of mystic ascent and descent. Secondly, there is spiritual division in the boy. One part of him is outside in the world, one part is in the darkness within, in the bag. This may be taken to represent the battle of the wills within one man. The worldly, safety-seeking will pulls in one direction, while the will to contemplation, self-knowledge and creativity pulls persistently in the other. Thirdly, there is difficulty in ascending the mountain. In 1940, when Laxness was writing this, he was already a writer of reputation, so his artistic mountain was virtually scaled. The ascent may then be not towards fame or artistic fulfilment, but to another kind of light. Then there is the Piper himself, the Companion on the Way: 'Þessi maður sem gnæfir við himin' (TÖF, 307), the very unearthliness of his size, the strange combination in him of both compassion and all the evil of creation, reminiscent of the Hindu idea that the Ultimate Being is both evil and good<sup>4</sup> — all this lends him a super-humanness, an almightiness that seems to go beyond the understanding of him as a simple personification of art. Finally, there is the indescribable perfume that is often associated with vision or ecstasy.

These points should not be laboured, but they do seem to suggest that the story is not solely about the writer and his craft, but, at a deeper and perhaps subconscious level, about the experience of a mystical world, in which there is darkness, but ultimate, if apparently transient light; in which there is fear, but ultimate, if apparently transient security; and in which there is descent into oneself, but ascent, with companionship too. Whatever the meaning that is given to 'Pípuleikarinn', it is

undoubtedly the expression of the possibility of experience, however fleeting it may be, of another side of the world, far removed from the sordid one here and now, and the story has nothing to do with Entoskin's facts ('Og lókusblómið ángar . . .').

In 1935 there are the first signs of what is generally considered to be Taoism in Laxness's published work, though he mentions it in his unpublished manuscript, *Rauða kverið* (1921-22),<sup>5</sup> and Erik Sönderholm thinks that Laxness already showed signs of being disposed to accept the philosophy of Taoism later in his life in his writing of *Barn náttúrunnar*.<sup>6</sup> Laxness's first mention of the *Tao Te Ching* is in *Alþýðubókin* in the chapter entitled 'Bækur' (1928), where he refers to it as 'sú bók, er ég met mest allra bóka um sálina, þótt ég skilji fæst sem í henni stendur . . . merkilegasta bók sem nokkru sinni hefur verið rituð í heiminum'.<sup>7</sup> Laxness relishes its wisdom and simplicity but later he confesses: 'Of course I cannot pride myself with having lived according to Tao-teh-ching'.<sup>8</sup> There is indeed some contradiction, for the Tao advocates non-contention and Laxness is intrigued by non-violence, but as far as real non-contention is concerned, he has been vigorously, politically engaged most of his adult life.

The reason why Laxness could say that he understood only a small part of the Tao is that it is cryptic and enigmatic in the highest degree, but the reason why others might say he did not understand it is different. The work is now generally considered to be an anthology on the art of government,<sup>9</sup> and the policies it

recommends are actually totally opposed to the kind that Laxness would ever wish to see implemented. For instance, the governor who wishes to ensure peace in his realm is advised to keep the people in ignorance, to eliminate their desires, their ambitions, their craving for possessions and in order to keep them in stillness he must feed the belly with food:

In governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act. <sup>10</sup>

The sage in his attempt to distract the mind of the empire seeks urgently to muddle it. The people all have something to occupy their eyes and ears, and the sage treats them all like children. <sup>11</sup>

This hardly coincides with the dream of an ardent socialist, campaigning for the rights of the proletariat. Laxness has overlooked this scheme for managing the masses, and given his attention solely to recommendations for those qualities that lead to personal serenity or that give rise to serenity in others. Even the pacifism in the Tao is not the kind that could have appealed to him, were it properly understood, for it is not a positive policy of non-violence, but rather a policy of studied laissez-faire, and generally speaking, not so much for the sake of peace, as of personal survival. All this is interesting, for it shows

that he acknowledges only that which is universally valuable and which is acceptable to the Western mind, that is, the mind brought up in Christianity, which sets store on the uniqueness of the individual. The impersonal attitude which belongs to the East, and which here regards the masses as 'the myriad creatures', he overlooks completely. For Laxness the Tao is serene and enigmatic. It has the subtle, half-smile of the East, and it has another advantage for him as well; it has not been dogmatised, nor systematised, or distorted in preaching or in action. It has never let him down. He may take it as he wishes. It is a personal discovery for him and he has no reason to react angrily against it.

I am generally cautious in labelling Laxness's writing Taoist. It is all too easy to diagnose Taoism in any character with a preference for peace and quiet. To do this gives a superficial reading to the *Tao Te Ching* and seems to presuppose that peace and stillness are unknown and even alien to Christianity. There is I believe a universal, country wisdom which contrasts well with universal, civic witlessness. Laxness has always listened to its voice. It is the voice of his grandmother and almost without exception the voice of all the aged throughout his work. It happens to have something in common with something which is lifted out of context from the *Tao Te Ching*, but to see Icelandic peasant wisdom as Taoist is as pointlessly complicated and irrelevant as to read Icelandic Lutheranism into the rural wisdom of the Chinese. Because he responds to the voice of universal wisdom, Laxness responds to the poetry of Lao Tzu.

'Þórður gamli halti' written in 1935 gives the first indication in fiction of Laxness's interest in Taoism. The story tells of an Icelandic fisherman and his difficulty in reconciling his revolutionary zeal with his complete belief in pacifism. Þórður's character illustrates not simple submission, but qualities of patience and tough endurance. He is totally opposed to rashness, violence and any means that justifies the end. Everything must be accomplished peacefully, slowly and with order: 'því ef nokkuð vinst, þá er það með lagi' (TÖF, 254).

In 1944 Laxness wrote of another old Icelandic fisherman he had encountered, whose bearing embodied the spirit of Tao: 'Látlausari, hlédrægari og góðviljaðri öðling þekti ég ekki. Alt sem kom nálægt honum lifði. Af tali um hversdagslegustu hluti við hann skildist manni betur orðið taó, alvaldið sem vinnur án erfiðsmuna og hættu, kemur öllu til þroska, sigrar án hetjuskapur og er voldugt án frægðar'.<sup>12</sup> It is probably the memory of this calm that he wishes to communicate in the character of Þórður. To Laxness it represents Taoism and Þórður's utterances about order and peacefulness might well be tracked back to Tao teaching. After all, his pacifism is much like 'the virtue of non-contention'.<sup>13</sup> He 'holds firm to stillness'<sup>14</sup> and believes that it is best to 'do that which consists in taking no action' and 'pursue that which is not meddlesome'.<sup>15</sup> He thinks 'woe to him who wilfully innovates'.<sup>16</sup> However, this early touch of Taoism is only slight.

Laxness's discovery of and admiration for the East is first clearly brought to light, in his fictional writing, in the story

'Fundin Indíalönd' one year later in 1936. Here Sjang Kí En is sent on a mission to discover the undiscovered fairest lands. He is willingly lured away from his task and only recommences after a period of ten years. No blame is dealt him for his forgetfulness, and he meets with ultimate success. It is a simple tale that expresses faith in the Constant, and affirms an unchanging value on the other side of pressure and time. That Laxness's deep regard for this timelessness was not fleeting is seen nearly thirty years later in *Úngur ég var*, in which he relates a tale of a guru and his disciple. <sup>17</sup> The disciple goes to fetch water for the guru, and while he is at the task he marries and has a child. On his return the guru seems unaware of the lapse of years. The two tales have much in common - submission, mission, omission, remission. The value and the aim endure. There is acceptance after estrangement, without question, judgement or blame, above all, that which governs our lives, namely time, is here of no consequence at all.

With 'Temúdsjín snýr heim' (1941) Laxness returns to the East, approaching it in greater detail. The story describes the visit of the Taoist monk Chang Chun, renamed Síng-Síng-Hó, to Genghis Khan, renamed Temúdsjín. <sup>18</sup> It reveals the essentially incompatible natures and philosophies of the sage and the insatiable warrior. Kristinn Jóhannesson has argued convincingly that Laxness has largely taken the words of Síng-Síng-Hó from *Tao Te Ching* itself, using the translation by Jakob Smári and Ýngvi Jóhannesson (1921). For example, Síng-Síng-Hó's words 'Sá, sem dvelst með hinu Eina líður ekki undir lok' (TÖF, 319), come almost directly from 'Sá,



sem dvelur með Alvaldinu, líður ekki undir lok'. Again, Síng-Síng-Hó's words 'Hið Eina streymir burt og fjarlægist. Og úr fjarlægðinni nálgast það aftur. Það elur önn fyrir öllu en hirðir ekki um að vera kallað drottinn. Allt sem lifir hvílir á því. Allir hlutir lúta því' (TÖF, 319-20), clearly stem from the translation: 'Alt, sem lifir, hvílir á því. Það varð Sveitir alt, og allir hlutir lúta því . . . Ástrikt elur það önn fyrir öllu, en hirðir ekki um að vera kallað drottinn'.<sup>19</sup> There can be no doubt that the voice of Síng-Síng-Hó is the direct voice of the Tao according to Laxness. What I should like to show is that much of what Laxness selects from the Tao is in fact contained in the religion and the culture of the West. I believe that because he has absorbed and warmed to this teaching in the first place, so he is in fact re-adopting and re-embracing it when it comes to him in a new guise.

To begin with it is as well to consider the idea contained in the word 'tao'. D.C.Lau writes:

There is no name that is applicable to the Tao because language is totally inadequate for such a purpose. And yet if the Tao is to be taught at all, some means, no matter how inadequate, must be found to give an idea of what it is like. This is a difficult task, for even the term 'Tao' is not its proper name but a name we use for want of something better . . . 'the One' is, in fact, very often used as another name for the Tao. Understood in this way, we can see that it is 'the One' or the 'Tao' which is responsible for creating and supporting the

universe . . . that the entity called the Tao existed before the universe came into being. <sup>20</sup>

The Tao, the One, 'hið Eina' may be likened to the Word, the Logos, of St John's Gospel. Kristinn Jóhannesson explains this further: 'Það er þannig að innihaldi til er ekki ólíkt Orðinu í Jóhannesarguðspjalli; logos, sem einnig er þýtt með Tao í kínverskum biblíufupýðingum'. <sup>21</sup> But the Tao is not only the source and sustainer of life. It is also wisdom, philosophy, a road to peace. Kristinn Jóhannesson draws attention to the many wider understandings of the concept, including the Way, the Rule, the Innermost, the Law of Life. The Way, the Truth and the Life, Alpha and Omega may then be added to the rendering of the idea as the Word. It seems important to recognise that these fundamental ideas of a wholeness and purpose running below and above and within life are not exclusively Eastern, but are Christian and to some extent universal as well. I stress this because, in studying Laxness's literary use of the Tao, it seems profitable to seek out not so much that which is alien to his proven inclinations, but rather, that which is the same.

Síng-Síng-Hó's religious philosophy is mysteriously revealed in his evasive answers to Temúdsjín. In its essence it is the direct opposite of the worldly and the material. Thus he lays no store on intellectual or physical power, or force of any kind. And as a result of this, he insinuates that the One cannot be defined, for this would be a victory for mental power. The One is the form of the uncreated, it is the other aspect of every thing, the

manifestation of the unseen and at the same time the unseen presence behind all: 'Það er form hins óskapta. Það er birting hins dulda. Það er leyndardómur hins augljósa' (TÖF, 320). The One is meek and weak, but it supports all things; it is both distant and near at hand: 'Hið Eina streymir burt og fjarlægist. Og úr fjarlægðinni nálgast það aftur. Það elur önn fyrir öllu en hirðir ekki um að vera kallað drottinn. Alt sem lifir hvílir því. Allir hlutir lúta því' (TÖF, 320). The One does not oppress or fight or torture; it yields: 'Það er einsog vatn' (TÖF, 320); in its intrinsic humility is its strength; in some way this humility is associated with mercy and security: 'Sumir hafa nefnt það Móðurskautið' (TÖF, 321); the One is found not in high places but among the lowly: 'En það leitar til þeirra stada sem liggja lágt' (TÖF, 320). Added to this, Síng-Síng-Hó will have Temúdsjín understand that those that seek for the One must too be meek, for 'nýborinn kálfur, aðeins kominn á spena, er líkur vini hins Eina' (TÖF, 320); that they must not trust in their own might for it is the pliant that win: 'Sú sem treystir liðsafla sínum mun ekki sigra. Mjúkt sigrar hart, og hið sterka fellur fyrir hinu veika' (TÖF, 321). He speaks of the transience of the material world: 'Heimsríki er einsog smáfiskur í suðu. Eldamaðurinn lítur frá og fiskurinn hefur losnað utanaf beinunum' (TÖF, 322); and he speaks in veiled terms of the blessings of the undisturbed life, without curiosity, but with inner contentment: 'Leiðir Alvaldsins liggja heim' (TÖF, 320). Those that live with the One are preserved from destruction: 'Sá sem dvelst með hið Eina lifur ekki undir lok'

(TÖF, 319); and a time of peace and contented simplicity is promised to those that follow the Way.

From an examination of Síng-Síng-Hó's responses, it can be seen that Laxness has chosen words, or precepts, from the Tao which best express the power of non-violence and peace, and which best describe the One as unexpectedly humble and having a parental solicitude for all. Thus his One is more like the God of the New Testament than the Jehovah of the Old or the impersonal Being of the East. Moreover, as throughout the New Testament, importance is not attached to material possessions or the getting of wealth, but rather to simplicity of life. And the kingdom is not a worldly one, literally to be overrun or subdued, but 'the kingdom of God is within'.<sup>22</sup> The meekness of the One, its quality of gentleness which yet conquers all, is like the Lamb of God and the victory of the Cross. It is not hard to see that there is little in the tone of this Tao that is unfamiliar to Christian thought. It might perhaps be argued that the One, because it is impossible to define, and impossible to lay hands on, is therefore alien to Christianity with its understanding of a personal God made Man, but this is not completely so. The One, here, does have solicitude and mercy and the fact that it cannot be contained or defined is no problem. The Tao's unwillingness to describe God is met in Christian thinking by apophatic theology, which teaches that 'human language when applied to Him [God], is always inexact. It is therefore less misleading - to refuse to say what God is, and to state simply what He is not'.<sup>23</sup> John of Damascus wrote, for instance, 'God is infinite and incomprehensible, and all that is

comprehensible about Him is His infinity and incomprehensibility'.<sup>24</sup> Finally the stillness and silent knowledge of God within that can be discerned in the Tao can be matched in Christianity by the hesychast tradition of the Eastern Church, now becoming known in the West as well. The name hesychast is derived from the Greek word *hesychia*, meaning 'quiet'. The hesychast tradition is that of silent devotion and inner recollection, by which the one who prays seeks 'a way of union' and 'an immediate experience of the unknowable God, a personal union with Him who is unapproachable'.<sup>25</sup>

There is now a general movement in the West towards the East, in search of its philosophies. It seems to be the consequence of dissatisfaction with materialism and technology. It is seen also in the work of theologians, who are either looking for the common underlying truth of the world's religions, or seeking to recapture a spirituality that has been stifled. John Wijngaard in his study *God Within Us* advocates a return to the quest for the Kingdom of Heaven within. As he understands it, the spiritual problems in the West stem from the way in which the West has tended to approach God as a creator *outside* us, rather than *inside* us, where He can be discerned as the source of all we are, and the inner well of being and energy. This external approach, he says

was due to a number of factors: the 'otherness' of God in the Jewish and Old Testament scriptures; the architect approach to God in Greek philosophy; the stress on work and achievement in the Western cultures; the focus on sin and human fallibility in

Augustinian and Protestant theologies. Western mystics would be inclined to stress the utter dependence and 'nothingness' of creatures, and the complete perfection and other-worldliness of God. But there have been exceptions. <sup>26</sup>

The exception that he singles out is Jan van Ruysbroeck (1294-1381), the spiritual writer from Brabant, and he relates Ruysbroeck's wisdom to the wisdom of the Tao. He maintains that if Ruysbroeck had known Taoist thought, he would have agreed with its main tenets: 'Like Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu he would hold that God is revealed in nature as the underlying divine presence which gives existence, life and shape to all beings. But as a Christian he would have added the dimension of the Tao revealing himself as a Person'. <sup>27</sup> Wijngaard also sees close agreement between Ruysbroeck's and the Taoist masters' demand for silence and humility. In phrases that can be matched by many from Taoism, he taught: 'God's transcending nature must be understood as oneness and simplicity, unscalable height and unfathomable depth, incomprehensible breadth and infinite length, dark silence and ferocious energy . . . In God is neither time nor place, before nor after, possessing nor desiring, giving nor taking, vices nor virtues, nor visible love, lightness nor heaviness, night nor day, nor anything else that could be put into words'. <sup>28</sup>

This kind of refusal to define and to contain, which is present in this approach and in Taoism, is obviously attractive to Laxness; so too is its calm, its disregard for worldly confusion, its stopping of desires and its peace of liberation. These last

qualities are all also central to the path prescribed by St Teresa (1515-82), which corresponds almost exactly to the way of prayer of Buddhism, following the stages of recollection, meditation and contemplation, and culminating in union. <sup>29</sup> But at this stage Laxness does not seem to have any particular interest in anything other than the primary peace of Taoism. It is not until *Kristnihald undir Jökli* that he gives any attention to the darkness that calls to the soul, the *nada, nada, nada, nada, nada* of St John of the Cross (1542-91). <sup>30</sup> The *nada* can be equated with the void of the Tao, but, as far as I can make out, the idea contained in the Tao of going to the void and holding fast to it, meaning penetrating deeply within one's Self to find union with the Indefinable, has been overlooked by Laxness. He is very selective in his use of the Tao. He disregards the cunning laissez-faire policy to be used for the purposes of political survival; he overlooks those passages which ignore the individuality of those making up the masses, he does not show any particular interest in mystical prayer, but he reveals himself almost exclusively as a pacifist with deep Christian roots. The *Tao Te Ching* has made an enduring appeal to him with its proverbial wisdom, its freshness, its freedom from dogma, its echoes of age-old peasant truth, but it is not a new way of thought for him. What he admires in it has always been present in Christianity, though all too often covered with scholasticism and a pre-occupation with action, and often distorted by violence.

However, the story 'Temúdsjín snýr heim' is all the same about the visit of the Taoist monk to Genghis Khan, and it does speak

favourably for the pacifism, the patience, the stillness of the follower of the Way. The Way stands out in opposition to rationality, worldliness and ambition, and it is not the intention of the author that it should be seen as veiled Christianity. It should be noted that the only spokesman for Christianity, who makes a very brief appearance, is portrayed in a bad light. His God is vengeful and extreme. He and the imam's Allah are spoken of in terms of might, whereas the One of Síng-Síng-Hó is only weak, but this is more acceptable to Temúdsjín: 'Þetta fanst Temúdsjín örðug kenning, og þó betri miklu en buslubænir þeirra Kristsmanna og Múhameðs' (TÖF, 322). Laxness's aversion to violence and war is underlined here, as it is in *Íslandsklukkan* seven years later.

1. Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II. p. 84.
2. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II p. 84.
3. Sönderholm, p. 194.
4. A. L. Basham, 'Hinduism', in *Hutchinson Encyclopedia of Living Faiths*, pp. 223-30.
5. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p. 157.
6. Sönderholm, p. 96, footnote 5.
7. 'Bækur', in *Alþýðubókin*, p. 28.
8. *Gjörningabók*, pp. 191-92.
9. D. C. Lau, Introduction to *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, pp. 32-34.
10. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, III, p. 59
11. *Tao Te Ching*, XLIX, p. 110..
12. 'Hvert á að senda reikninginn?', in *Sjálfsgæðir hlutir*, p. 229.



13. *Tao Te Ching*, LXVIII, p. 130.
14. *Tao Te Ching*, XVI, p. 72.
15. *Tao Te Ching*, LXIII, p. 124.
16. *Tao Te Ching*, XVI, p. 72.
17. *Úngur ég var*, pp. 45-46.
18. Sønderholm, p. 195, using material from Ralph Fox, *The Sage and the Conqueror* (London 1936), pp. 220ff.
19. Kristinn Jóhannesson, 'Laxness, Tao og Temúdjín', p. 28.
20. Lau, Introduction to *Tao Te Ching* bu Lao Tzu, pp. 16-18.
21. Kristinn Jóhannesson, 'Laxness, Tao og Temúdjín', p. 25.
22. Luke 17.21.
23. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 72.
24. Quoted by Ware, p. 73.
25. Ware, p. 73.
26. Wijngaard, *God Within Us*, p. 43.
27. Wijngaard, p. 48.
28. Wijngaard, p. 48.
29. Mascaró, Introduction to *The Dhammapada*, p. 16.
30. St John of the Cross, Sketch of the 'Mount of Perfection', *The Study of Spirituality*, p. 368.

Laxness was working on *Heimsljós* between 1936 and 1940. During this period he spent the winter 1937 - 38 in the Soviet Union. His enthusiasm for what he saw seemed to have lessened since his previous visit, but he justified the Bucharin trial and continued to support Stalin's foreign policy and in this way he remained faithful to the Revolution. ' Some part of his ideological outlook is expressed in his new novel, but as in *Sjálfstætt fólk*, the artist takes precedence over the politician.

*Heimsljós* is the second of Laxness's studies of a divided soul. The first is that of Steinn Elliði, the second, now, is Ólafur Káráson. And it is this struggle, this pull that is crucial to the work. In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* the two attracting poles are asceticism and sensuality. In *Heimsljós* they are, similarly, self-denial - an embracing of suffering - on the one hand, and self-realisation on the other. This will be looked at later. First the religious background of the novel should be considered in some detail.

In what respects, if any, does the back-cloth of this book differ from that of *Salka Valka* or *Sjálfstætt fólk*? In that it still shows a distinct deadness in Lutheran religious life, it resembles the back-cloth of its forerunners; in that it still displays a minority of characters who evince an irresistible simplicity, a warmth, a certain holiness and who stand out in light against the grey majority, it, too, resembles theirs; but in that there is now evident a politics, a definite scheming in the handling of religious affairs, there is a development of

Laxness's cynicism towards religion, although, all the while, his cynicism is rounded and softened by his sheer humour.

The first sign of the lifelessness of Christianity in the novel is seen in the atmosphere in *Fótur undir Fótarfætti* with all its harshness and retribution. It is here that the parish pauper, Ólafur Kárason, has his vision, inspiring him and encouraging him. The vision is taken almost exactly from the report of a similar event in the life of the folk poet Magnus Hj. Magnusson (1873-1916) on whom Laxness loosely based his novel. <sup>2</sup> The other descriptions of visions experienced by Laxness's young boys come to mind. What all the experiences have in common is the feeling of glorious well-being, and the certainty of being loved; a feeling of supreme optimism that carries them through. Ólafur's vision differs, though, in that it seems to be a summons to a life dedicated to poetry rather than to God.

Ólafur's life is painfully hard at his foster-home. Here he has his first taste of religious education. He is given the gospels to read, which indeed move him to tears, but he is also given the 'postillur' (HEI, I, 11), which have the same effect on him as they do on the narrator in *Heiman eg fór* himself (HEF, 14). Ólafur is said to be unable to regard a book of sermons as a real book when he is a boy, but later the harmful effect they had on him leads him to a wider prejudice against any book in which God or Jesus is named (HEI, II, 231). Laxness's implied criticism is not of religious writing in itself, but it is a criticism of the foolishness of oppressing the minds of the young, or indeed any minds, with onerous and unpalatable material. Few methods of

instruction could be more successful in turning Ólafur's inclinations away from the teachings of the established Church, and any disinclination which is born in him is surely strengthened by the spirit which pervades the foster-home. Ólafur goes his own way. He makes up his own mind about his God.

This lamentable system of Christian instruction is again shown up in an unfavourable light, when Ólafur, hardly an orthodox believer himself, is entrusted with the religious education of the country girl, Jasína. He concentrates on the incredible and the sensational within a Bible story, hoping thereby to kindle some awed response. When he approaches the New Testament, 'sem talar til sálarinnar' (HEI, II, 165), he has no greater success. The words 'sem talar til sálarinnar' must be regarded as the writer's own, rather than Ólafur's, for, although they appear to be Ólafur's inner thoughts, his teaching on the New Testament makes no attempt to reach Jasína's soul, but only continues to make an appeal to a primitive sense of wonder. Justly he fails: 'Þessi einfalda náttúrlega stúlka skynjaði af eðli sínu tvöfeldni hans' (HEI, II, 165). Ólafur is finally led to ask himself if the explanation for her resistance lies in what seems to him to be the lack of plausibility and the lack of truth of the doctrine that he is meant to expound. His teaching is vulgar. It ignores spiritual truth. He does not ignore this truth in his life, but when he is confined to a Christian syllabus, he is unable to pick out the essence of truth, the essential Christianity, and so he is unable to pass it on. Ólafur's vision is not held within the framework of conventional Christianity. If, in his life, he acquires a goodness

and a truth then it is a goodness and a truth that he receives from his own vision, his own variety of God. It is not Christian-based, therefore, as a Christian instructor he can have little success.

Here in *Heimsljóð*, Laxness repeats what he demonstrates in *Sjálfstætt fólk*, especially in the episodes with the teacher, namely that Christianity cannot be indoctrinated. It can be gleaned, it can be breathed in from the very few who radiate simplicity and certainty and joy. Such a person in *Heimsljóð* is the prison chaplain. But the professional indoctrinator and the unconvinced but noisy, surface Christian, with his dreary or sensational misinterpretations, are seen to be harmful, or at best, a waste of time. The kind of Christianity that Laxness depicts in *Heimsljóð* is the product of these misinterpretations. On the one hand sensation draws the weak mind, such as Jarþrúður's, into an emotional bigotry, on the other hand sternness and 'morality' attract the mind of a more unyielding frame. It is primarily this harshness that Laxness continues to condemn. Sígurlína in *Salka Valka* and Jarþrúður may not be attractive in their exaggerations, but they are not implicitly censured, for the writer sees down into the inherent frailty of their souls. But the family at Fótur undir Fótarfæti, and the succession of pastors throughout *Salka Valka*, *Sjálfstætt fólk*, and *Heimsljóð*, all withholding their sympathy, often seemingly incapable of love, are blamed.

The priests in *Heimsljóð* who illustrate a want of compassion are séra Brandur in Sviðinsvík and séra Janus in Bervík. There is

also a missionary in the prison , 'sem skildi guð en ekki mennina' (HEI, II, 239), but it is the dispassionate or the perverse, not the inept that Laxness decries.

Séra Brandur in Sviðinsvík is totally irreligious, ill-versed in the scriptures, an upholder of material values. Jón the snuff-maker, the arch-miser, is his ideal of a Christian man. The God he speaks of is the God of endless labour. His God is the one who helps those who help themselves. Maintaining this, he naturally feels himself freed from the responsibility of assisting others in distress. He takes his cue from God. If they were deserving, then God would have helped them first. This being so, and because he sets such high store on financial rewards, he refuses to make funeral arrangements for Ólafur's child without prior payment, and to the question: 'Hvað mundi Kristur hafa gert í yðar sporum séra Brandur?' he retorts: 'Svona tal vil ég ekki hafa í mínum húsum' (HEI, II, 99). He reacts in the same way when Ólafur reasons that Christ had greater than human endurance by virtue of being the Son of God: 'Huhu var hann guðs sonur, hvað á þetta tal eiginlega að fyrirstilla, má ég spyrja?' (HEI, I, 165). Séra Brandur is, as Gunnar Kristjánsson puts it, 'ein Verteidiger der "Stützen der Gesellschaft"', <sup>3</sup> and the slightest shaking of these pillars of society, any suggestion that the Creator has created enough of the world's goods for all men to enjoy, brings a prompt response - an evil spirit is at large; one must pray to the Father until it goes away. Any understanding on the part of another of the life or the disposition of Christ, any notion of a divine, generous, economic

plan and, of course, any stirring to implement it, are felt like a stab of pain, too near to the truth.

The second priest in *Heimsljóð* is séra Janus, an ungodly man with all his thoughts in the past. He is clearly aware of social injustice but he is not indignant, not incensed, not bitter, as that would imply involvement. He puts himself outside the problem, looking in, detached, cynical, of no moral or practical use at all. So he can observe, almost amused: 'Það eina sem er verulega hættulegt á Íslandi er að stela frá þeim ríku og það eina sem er verulega arðbært á Íslandi það er að stela frá þeim fátæku, elskan mín' (HEI, II, 147). Here are just two more of Laxness's priests who are in the wrong job. They make a mockery of Christianity, and a poor show of pastoral care.

Jarþrúður's case is one which shows the 'consolations of religion'. Her religion is compensatory. This is not to deny that she may indeed have a real love of God somewhere inside, but it suggests that the kernel of this love is abused and vulgarised for her own ends, as long as it seems necessary for her to fill a gap in her life. She is an epileptic, who, the reader is given to believe, suffers indignities at the hands of men. She seeks comfort by imagining herself to be one of the world's greatest sinners. It may be that she sees a correlation between sickness and sin, but this is not inferred. Her self-abasement can be interpreted in another way. Her humility is not without a certain pleasure, nor a certain pride. To be one of the world's worst sinners and to repent of this is not without significance. It is a

consolation not to be mediocre in this respect. It is an unhealthy, but not an uncommon attitude. It is a cry for help.

At their first meeting Ólafur is able to communicate some hope to Jarþrúður, a trust in God's especial love for her. She seizes this gratefully, but she also seizes the opportunity to be of service and of use. Ólafur is a drowning man and he clutches at a straw. The older woman is a fellow-sufferer and she feels love. After Ólafur's cure, however, the situation is obviously not the same: 'Strá er mikils virði í sjávarháska, en lítilsvirði á þurru landi, hún var þesskonar strá' (HEI, I, 293). Jarþrúður is no longer needed, for Ólafur is a sufferer no more. She becomes bitter and possessive. She resorts to the false weapons of religion. She moralises and she chides. As long as she is an encumbrance to Ólafur, as long as she can be no support to him, the channel of love in her is blocked. There is a lot of talk about God, but her view of the world is temporarily dark: 'Í hennar augum var aðeins til Ólafur Kárason; en afgangurinn af veröldinni var eitt óslitið samsafn af hörum' (HEI, II, 62). However, as soon as Ólafur is in genuine distress, a radical change overcomes her. She finds an inner strength. She becomes sure, competent, selfless. She comes into her own. Ólafur's eyes are opened to a new person: 'Eftilvill sá hann í fyrsta sinn í dag þá manneskju sem staðið hafði við hlið hans í tíu ár' (HEI, II, 175).

Laxness's depiction of Jarþrúður's religion demonstrates how, in times of emptiness, she subconsciously pulls out the sour weapons of religion, the 'thou shalt not's', rather than falling back on the Love of God, and yet is capable of sacrifice, free



from moral condemnation, when a real need is there. It also shows the way in which one person, Ólafur, can inhibit the growth of the personality of another, Jarþrúður. Ólafur magnanimously takes responsibility for Jarþrúður's sick body, but beyond that he is blind. Wrapped up in himself, he is unable to appreciate her hidden qualities or latent strength. His own self-preoccupation and general fear of practical life only allow the meanest side of her character to thrive. He is instrumental in blocking the outlet of her healthy, active love. The words 'eftilvill sá hann í fyrsta sinn í dag þá meneskju sem staðib hafði við hlið hans í tíu ár' (HEI, II, 175) have a strong ring of criticism of Ólafur, for a very definite wrong that he has committed.

The failure of real Christianity and the weak grasp that it has on the Icelandic society that Laxness portrays in *Heimsljós*, are accentuated by the uncompromising attitudes of three of the characters. Reimar, for instance, does not have to consider whether God is good or not. If God does exist, then He is the essence of willlessness, without opinions or feelings. That is precisely why He is God. If He had will and feelings, how could He be God with the world in the state it is in? It is this supreme detachment from the affairs of men that constitutes His Godness. The concept of such a God, remote from the pain and the ways of men, is fundamentally non-Christian. It is nearer the Hindu image of the One. As it says in the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'The Lord of the world is beyond the works of the world and their working and beyond the results of these works; but the work of nature rolls on. The evil works or the good works of men are not his work'.<sup>4</sup>

It is not suggested here that Laxness, much less Reimar, is consciously thinking of the *Gíta*, but it can be borne in mind that it was a formative influence on him as a young man. He refers to it as 'the holy book' in the manuscript of his unfinished novel *Rauða kverib* (1921-22), where he also refers to Vivekananda's *Karma Yoga*,<sup>5</sup> and it is noteworthy that the non-Christian thought that is thrown into the text here in *Heimsljós* is not contradicted. Reimar's voice also has a strong ring of Bjartur's. The tone is non-Christian once more. It has the toughness of the independent pagan man: 'En hvort sem nú er guð eða ekki, þá er aðalatriðið að þú viljir eitthvað sjálfur, og ef þú vilt eitthvað, þá er að nota skynsemina til að finna þau klókindabrögð sem til þurfa að koma því fram sem þú vilt, það er gáfan, sko' (HEI, I, 113). This high value put on personal will is far removed from the prayer 'Thy will be done!'.

The chief proponent of saga values is Jason. But the lessons of the sagas are raw. Jason prizes most highly the spirit of heroism and vengeance. Like his fellow country woman who reputedly regretted 'Ekki er gaman að guðspjöllunum, enginn er í þeim bardaginn',<sup>6</sup> Jason too regrets the scarcity of hand-to-hand encounters in the Iceland of his day. The past seems to be his religion and the contemplation of it is uplifting to his soul. His hankering for the past and his obtuseness are not portrayed without amusement, nor in an entirely negative light. The spirit is indeed pagan, but it is dispassionate. Jason's case against Ólafur is shown to be an attempt to recapture the fighting spirit

of an age that has passed. It is free from personal vindictiveness.

As far as Jason is concerned Christianity and Christian instruction are something that have to be gone through; they are part of the educational plan. He has no regard for the faith itself: 'Þennan Kristindóm sem það kallar' (HEI, II, 161). Like Bjartur he has brought up his daughter on Norse literature and its values. Jason alone has been responsible for her education and there has been no other influence. She has grown up to be one of Nature's children, a blend of wildness and motherliness, instinct itself; 'kristindómur var það sem maður mundi síst láta sér detta í hug að kenna Jasínu Gottfreðlínu' (HEI, II, 161). Yet again this seems to be an indication that Laxness sees only a limited power in Christianity as it is taught. The teaching constrains and is incompatible with the untrammelled, natural soul. Yet here too there is a feeling that the author's approval is not absolute. Her upbringing has left her out of touch, she is the laughing stock of the school and she believes nothing but the sagas.

It can be seen then that Reimar at times represents a fundamentally non-Christian point-of-view, and that Jason and Jasína are essentially pagan at heart. There is an overall impression that Laxness finds their attitudes preferable to much that he depicts elsewhere.

The simple people for whom Laxness seems to feel admiration and affection are represented, as in previous novels, by a small handful. They are Jósep, the pauper labourer, the old woman at the

asylum, Hlaupahalla, Hólmfríður, séra Johann, the prison chaplain and finally the family below the glacier.

It is interesting to note that some of these characters are not essential for the telling of the tale, nor even for the revealing of Ólafur's psychological development. They are introduced almost as personifications of the virtues they stand for. Thus Jósep is humility and long-suffering. But his humility is not specifically Christian. An impersonal power rather than a deity governs his life. As with Jason, it is an ancient, impersonal, non-vindictive virtue that Laxness seems to praise. Jósep accepts, but not from the hands of God. He only speaks passively. He does not blame: 'Ég var barinn' (HEI, I, 53).

The virtue that is illustrated in the old woman at the asylum is an unquestioning compassion, an unconditional, maternal love for those in her care: 'Ég á mín börn hérna í kringum mig, sem guð hefur gefið mér enda þótt hreppsnefndin sendi mér gallhraustan mann. Þeir sem eiga bággt eru mín börn. Ég hef ævinlega verið gæfumanneskja' (HEI, I, 139). Her attitude and gratitude stand out in ironic contrast to that of Ólafur, the poet of compassion, who, nevertheless, cannot bring himself to shake hands with the inmates there.

Hlaupahalla is also one of the victims of a harsh society, but she differs from Jósep and the house-mother in that she expresses not so much some praiseworthy quality of soul, but rather an idea. The idea itself reflects a development in Laxness's own outlook on life. I have pointed out that in the early part of *Salka Valka*, Laxness blames God for all manner of material distress, and that

towards the end he gradually begins to apportion some of the guilt to man. This attitude is maintained in *Sjálfstætt fólk*, so that God and man are shown as sharing the responsibility. Now in *Heimsljós* Laxness seems to be eased from his religious indignation and confirmed, instead, in socialist anger. He can speak through Hlaupahalla and say: 'Það er sosomeg auðveldast að kenna guði allar vammir og skammir . . . en það var sannarlega ekki guð sem stjórnaði þeim heimi sem ég lifði í, meðan ég lifði' (HEI, I, 168). To blame God is an easy way out, a way which avoids confrontation and saves one from facing reality and coming to terms with an exploiter who may be nearer at hand.

The understanding and fidelity which Hólmfríður displays towards her husband leave a strong impression. Like Jósep and Jason, she shows no resentment. Unlike Ólafur in his dealings with Jarprúður, she only sees the tragic waste in the life of another human being. She sees through the outside shell, right into the best which was once there, and cares for her husband for the sake of that alone. She is not serving a fantasy idol, as Jarprúður served Ólafur, but she is faithful to him for the sake of that which has tragically gone wrong. So she explains to Ólafur Kárason: 'Það er mannlíf sem er svívirðilegt . . . Hann var því miður ekki nógu vondur maður fyrir þetta glæpafélag . . . Hann var því miður ekki glæpamaður . . . Taktu eikartré og reyndu að gróðursetja það á berum klettum' (HEI, I, 184). It is as if Hólmfríður teaches that life crushes and disfigures some that are guiltless and that it is impossible to condemn.

In Laxness's long gallery of priests' portraits there is

suddenly a welcome ray of light with the appearance of séra Jóhann, the prison chaplain. Not since faðir Alban in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* has Laxness shown a glimmer of real respect for a man of the cloth. He has drawn stern, struggling priests, those that are worldly and stony-hearted, and again a number of droopy and out-of-touch curates, but not for twelve years one that has inspired esteem. Wherein then lies the difference? It lies surely in the priest's own personal love of God. This is a love of God alone, and not a love of dogma or of preaching: 'Aðalatriðið er hvorki að tala um Jesúm stutt né langt, heldur að þrá hann í hljóði; að hafa rúm fyrir hann í húsi sínu; og að vera glaður' (HEI, II, 236). This means a whole, radical turning of the heart towards God. It is no longer a question of actions but of inner disposition which comes from deep within the soul: 'Kristur lítur ekki á mennina eftir því hvað þeir hafa gert, bróðir minn, heldur eftir því hvort þeir finna hið sanna innihald stundanna og daganna djúpt í sálu sinni' (HEI, II, 235). It leads a person away from a constant, perhaps negative consideration of sin to a state of rejoicing in grace instead: 'Þegar árin færast yfir þreyttan mann ræðir hann ekki leingur um syndina, bróðir minn. Gleðin yfir því að hafa fundið náðina, það er Gleðin' (HEI, II, 235). And séra Jóhann confesses that he has learned more from the prisoners in his care, from the fallen, than from those outside the prison walls. It is through one's trials, he says, that one finds grace. In the presence of this simple man Ólafur feels total security. The old man is freed from the passion, the desire, the fury and

ambition of living and has acquired a sureness, a stillness and peace in their place.

Laxness's attitude to the family at the foot of the glacier reveals an interesting change in his outlook since the writing of *Salka Valka*. There is an almost folktale quality surrounding the scene in which Ólafur first visits the family. They are literally and metaphorically on a higher plane. They are completely involved in life, and yet they are, too, detached from it. They have always believed in the one, true God, they say, and they look upon their own lives as examples of God's goodness to mankind. But their life has been inextricably interwoven with misfortune and death. Laxness's tone is new, for their acceptance of suffering is not bred of repression. It is not cowed or servile. One may compare the episodes in *Salka Valka* which treat Sveinbjörg's illness, and the feeling of anger and injustice that colour the descriptions: 'Stendur það nokkurs staðar í biflífunni að guð sé góður?' (SAL, 234). There religious consolation is handed out to the dying woman. She is urged to accept the will of God in submission. With the family below the glacier it is quite the other way around. The words of the old woman, 'Ef guð hefði verið öllum mönnum eins góður og mér, þá væri jarðlífið fagurt' (HEI, II, 279), reveal an entirely new mood; while Örn clamours for social change down in the valleys below, the old people on the mountain resolve the question of pain by embracing it, merging with it and with the whole of life, acquiring thus a deep inner joy. This is not a rejection of social problems on the part of the author, but a sudden offer of a new kind of response - inner harmony. And there

is no criticism on the author's part towards their tranquility in the face of pain, for there is a serenity, a wholeness and a certainty in all that surrounds the pair: 'Í þessu húsi ríkti elskan. Þannig var mannlífið að eilífu stærst, - brosa með barni sínu þegar það hlær, hugga það þegar það grætur, bera það dáið til moldar, en þerra sjálfur tár sín og brosa á nýaleik og taka öllu eftir röð án þess að spyrja fram eða aftur; vera öllum góður' (HEI, II, 279).

There is dignity in all that they do. Even their movements while harvesting are shown as harmonious, displaying an intrinsic courtesy towards the created world. And in the home there is an unclutteredness as well, each object being, as it were, imbued with a soul, a dignity, a rightness of its own. These are first and foremost God-fearing folk. They are not held up as a model for Christianity, though there is not one aspect of their way of life or belief that does not bear its spirit. Peter Hallberg writes 'Barnshugur þessa fólks virðist í ætt við það sem Jesús segir um barnið og himnaríki'.<sup>7</sup> But the presentation of the family in its wholeness, its serenity and its essential childlikeness also seems to be taken by Hallberg as the first indication of Laxness's Taoism. I prefer to regard it as a plain reverence towards natural simplicity and, if it is not too romantic, as peasant peace. Peter Hallberg refers to Ólafur's words to the bed-ridden daughter beneath the glacier, when he gives her his mirror: 'Í þessum spegli á heima Eitt og Alt' (HEI, II, 279), and says 'Hið Eina er ein grundvallarhugmynd taóismans',<sup>8</sup> but Ólafur is not speaking necessarily of Hið Eina here. It was indeed his intention



to come up to the cottage in order to give the girl a replacement for her broken mirror, to give her access again to a world of beauty, but now he sees himself as a failure in his understanding of suffering and life. He can only offer an escape of beauty. The old woman has just explained her life as 'einn langur sólskinsmorgunn' (HEI, II, 279), and he has had to admit some kind of intrinsic failure in himself: 'Ég er aðeins skáld, sagði Ólafur Kárason afsakandi' (HEI, II, 279). He seems to realise that, for all his talk of bearing a Cross, others have done it more joyfully and better than he, so 'skáld' almost takes on the meaning of dreamer. The reflection of the glacier that he gives to the girl cannot be taken as containing 'Híð Eina', not the real essence, not now, not after joyful acceptance of life has been expounded by the one he sees as wiser and more profound than himself. Hallberg also says that Taoism appears in the chapter in which Ólafur has a revelation and hears 'kraftbirtíngarhljómur guðdómsins' (HEI, I, 16). 'Þessi lýsing á sér fyrirmynd í dagbókum Magnúsar Hjaltasonar, hinn merkilegu aðalheimild Halldórs; jafnvel hið sérkennilega orðatiltæki "kraftbirtíngarhljómur guðdómsins" er sótt þangað. Hinsvegar er Híð Eina frá Halldóri sjálfum'.<sup>29</sup> But again this is not necessarily a reference to Taoism. 'Híð Eina' that is referred to in the episode is personal, a personal god. 'Hann hafði skynjað híð Eina. Faðir hans á himnum hafði tekið hann uppá hjarta sínu norður við ysta haf' (HEI, I, 16). There are two things to remember here; the first is that according to Laxness's remarks in *Heiman eg fór* the writer has no need for a mediator (HEF, 27), that in effect he believes in a Unitarian God, so that

here in *Heimsljóð* 'Hið Eina' is a personal God. This is confirmed by the words 'faðir hans'. And the second thing to bear in mind is that Taoism, being somewhat more impersonal than Christianity, does not seem to offer the kind of religious, personal experience that the boy undergoes.

There is much in the bearing of the old couple that reflects the beliefs of the prison chaplain. There is much of his quiet, his love, his adogmatic worship that is reinforced in them. If this is recognised, then it is easy to agree with Gunnar Kristjánsson's opinion that the words of séra Jóhann about silent longing for Christ and about rejoicing (HEI, II, 235-36) are central to the novel: 'Vielleicht könnten diese Worte als die Pointe des Werkes bezeichnet werden'.<sup>10</sup> It must be remembered that we are now speaking of values that Laxness, by his undoubted respect, seems to be acknowledging as the truest and therefore at the heart of what concerns him most. And when one notes the careful positioning of the final meeting with the glacier-family, immediately before Ólafur sets out for the heights, the meeting in which the old woman speaks of her thankfulness, in which Laxness summarises the couple's principles, which echo the chaplain's, then it seems that Laxness is not only putting forward an example of a certain way of life, but that he is also wishing to underline the poignant, personal failure of Ólafur himself. I suggest that, at this critical stage, the writer is finally offering the reader a folk-tale image, perhaps indeed an exalted one, of humble, but not therefore less real success, a success stemming from the stillness and acceptance and joy of séra Jóhann and the glacier-

couple. I further suggest that this success is intended to stand out in solid contrast to Ólafur's frustrations of a completely different kind.

It is in those sections of *Heimsljós* that deal with spiritualism that a development in Laxness's attitude to religious affairs can be marked. His cynical attitude towards certain so-called 'religious' trends in Iceland in the early decades of the century is manifestly illustrated here.

Spiritualism was introduced into Iceland chiefly by Einar H. Kvaran in the early years of the twentieth century. Having returned from Canada a mellowed Christian reformer in 1895, Kvaran was really more concerned with spiritual than material progress, and having read F. W. H. Myer's *Human Personality and the Survival of Bodily Death* in 1904, he became a Spiritualist. He was soon joined by Haraldur Nielsson, the ablest 'new theologian of the time'.<sup>11</sup> Together with Þórður Sveinsson they founded the *Sálarrannsóknafélag* in Reykjavík in 1918. Through the publications of Kvaran and Haraldur Magnússon's extraordinarily popular preaching, Spiritualism managed to take a firm hold of the Icelandic imagination. However, what is unusual in Icelandic Spiritualism is that it found a place and sanction within the established Lutheran Church.<sup>12</sup>

The religious situation in Iceland during the early 1900s is marked by a struggle between the orthodox, conservative Christians on the one hand, and those of a more liberal mind on the other. The Spiritualists, with an almost naive faith in science, held a middle position. Nielsson maintains that Spiritualism is not a

faith but a science <sup>13</sup> - a science which allows a rediscovery of ties with the invisible world, which, he says, was considered normal in early Christian days - a part of faith. <sup>14</sup> Spiritualism was hailed as a golden opportunity to strike out against 'Materialism' in the Church and Kvaran could write of its apparent strengthening power for the Church, that it had given the people back the Bible, Christ, the belief in immortality and the Lord Himself. <sup>15</sup> But the Spiritualists seem to have been preoccupied with irrelevant phenomena such as levitation, automatic handwriting and séances for communication with the souls of their loved ones, rather than with life as it is, or even religious life as it should be, on this side, here and now. And this is the mainspring of Laxness's criticism of the movement; much in the same way that preoccupation with heavenly things, rather than earthly life, had been the mainspring of his criticism of the Church.

Laxness's derision and scepticism towards Spiritualism are revealed some time before *Heimsljóð* in a number of essays, later collected together in *Dagleið á fjöllum*. In his essay 'Hjá frægum miðli' (1929) he records, with irony, the proceedings of a séance with the medium Estelle Montgomery White in Southern California, at which he himself was present. The séance surely stood as a model for the séance in his novel. In the essay 'Straum- og skjálftamálin' (1936) he deals with various aspects of the movement such as healing, psychical research, ghosts and the absurdity of making pronouncements concerning things unknown. Laxness's vocabulary here, including such terms as 'metafýsískt

þrugl' and 'afbökuð guðfræði', <sup>16</sup> make his lack of sympathy clear. He writes with contempt of Spiritualist meetings at which priests preside, <sup>17</sup> and accuses Spiritualists of complete lack of interest in psychic matters: 'Það sem þeir leita að eru draugar, og þeir finna þá. Guðsorðalestur, bænir og sálmasaungur eru aðeins meðul sem þeir nota til þess að koma sér og miðlinum í það geðveikisástand sem útheimtist til þess að menn verði fyrir reimleikum'. <sup>18</sup>

There are two things to note in his handling of Spiritualist themes here. Firstly, of course, there is his irony, his humour and his obvious thorough dislike of the whole movement; and secondly there is now a deeper, more seriously critical attitude, which is revealed by the introduction of a definite scheming in so-called religious affairs.

Laxness's aversion to Spiritualism is best demonstrated in the séance in *Heimsljóð*. This is a delightful, tongue-in-cheek episode. Here he is seen at his best as a writer of comedy, correcting manners through laughter. At one level the séance is a robust dig at the weaknesses of those present, but it is primarily an exposure of what the author feels is the shallowness, the lie of Spiritualism itself.

What is perhaps more interesting is the handling of Ólafur Kárasón's miraculous cure. The episode is dealt with with characteristic cynicism. Þórunn, therefore, uses all the accepted Spiritualists' terminology, laying emphasis on the right current and on spiritual maturity, and true to the Icelandic incident, which is supposed to have served as a model, <sup>19</sup> Ólafur is cured of

his indisposition. Laxness disbelieved in the world of Spiritualism. It is therefore a little surprising that he allows Ólafur's cure to be permanent. It is true, of course, that he lapses into a self-induced inertia after his parting from Bera, but this is many years later, and Laxness's silence on his character's release from his initial and apparently chronic inertia is strange; there is none of his customary scepticism, which might be expected in a work that sets out to unveil hocus-pocus. It is felt that the boy will revert to his former state of psychological and physical surrender, for Ólafur's disease must be psychological and the cure must be psychological too.

There is, however, no ambivalence concerning Laxness's attitude to personal scheming and dishonest involvement in religious affairs.

In the two foregoing novels there are several instances of hypocrisy and dishonest cover-up. In *Salka Valka*, for instance, there is Jóhann Bogesen's address after the shipwreck (SAL, 158-59), but Bogesen is solely a merchant and makes no attempt to set himself up as a religious spokesman. In *Heimsljós* the hypocrisy is stronger; it is of a different brand, for Péter Pálsson clothes all his business transactions in pious garb. The implied condemnation is accordingly graver. A development can similarly be seen between *Sjálfstætt fólk* and *Heimsljós*. In the earlier novel Laxness presents a credulous people, living largely off their own credulity. The farmers are made to look ridiculous on their ghost hunt and they are ultimately ashamed. There are false beliefs, and men who are happy to believe, but these men are

the victims of their own ignorance, not victims of manipulation or any unscrupulous plot. In *Heimsljóð*, on the other hand, there are still false faiths, still men who are gullible, but, added to these, there are manipulators who manœuvre simple minds to further their own ends. Now, cover-up wears a religious mask. Superstition seems to have the blessing of the Church.

While considering superstition, it is worth while remembering that Laxness was engaged in writing *Heimsljóð* while on his second visit to the USSR, and this new mood of sharper criticism may be seen not only as a criticism of Spiritualism but also, to some extent, as a reflection of some of the impressions that he gained while he was on his carefully guided tour. These impressions are recorded in *Gerska æfintýrið* (1938). While in the Soviet Union Laxness had a brief introduction to the Russian Orthodox Church. His descriptions smack of Marxism. It is clear that the elderly archbishop of Mtskhet inspired in him a distinct reverence and respect, but otherwise, he forcefully expresses a radical dislike for everything connected with this church:

Af öllum þeim fjárplógsstofnunum sem auðvaldið notaði til að tröllpína gerskar þjóðir . . . var kirkjan einna blygðunarlausust glæpastofnun. <sup>20</sup>

Eingin óvin gætti maður átt svo vandan, að maður mundi óska honum blessunar þess kristindóms sem ríkti í löndum Rússakeisara. <sup>21</sup>

Sérhver rússnesk kirkja er að öllu óbreyttu vantrúarsafn. <sup>22</sup>

Laxness looks specifically at aberrations of faith and at superstition in particular. He sounds indignant, perhaps even idealistically outraged on behalf of the simple Russian peasants, 'þetta undarlega fólk sem er að skapast', <sup>23</sup> and it would seem that it is this indignation, aroused in him by his unfortunate and brief acquaintance with the distorted side of this church, the majority of whose priests had been methodically murdered by the state, that lies behind his clear condemnation of any similar distortion or abuse in the world of *Heimsljóðs*.

I have mentioned Laxness's dislike of the outlook that offers religion as a compensation for social misery, but his earlier characters who might be said to have done this, for example the Catholic priest in 'Og lótusblómið angar . . .' were well-intentioned and sincere. Now Pétur Pálsson introduces a new hypocritical tone. He is wilfully unconcerned about the conditions of the local people, except in those situations where his charity is beneficial to himself; after all, the aim of life, so he maintains, is life on the other side, and there is nothing wrong with peoples' lives except their views. The source of discontent, therefore, is wrong opinion. 'Við eigum að sjá ljós' (HEI, I, 179). He advocates what he terms 'skynsemiskristindóm' (HEI, I, 179). If faith cannot convince people that existence is good, then science must, for people need, not sacraments, but truths, and the great, right truth is Love in spite of everything, and God is love. These are all noble sentiments but there is irony, indeed comedy



throughout, for Pétur may speak of the necessity of keeping a halo clean, but his own motives themselves are rarely pure. Thus, for all his talk of Love, he feels no scruples at evicting Hólmfríður when she refuses to dance to his tune; and he is keen to insinuate that Ólafur is the cause of the fire that he himself engineers, and from which he hopes to derive hefty financial gains.

Pétur Pálsson's principal purposes, underlying all his pseudo-religious enterprises, are firstly, to have and to hold the support of all the populace, such as it is, so as to be able to rely on a respectful and grateful workforce, and secondly, to win precious votes for his and JJJ's true-blue Icelandic party, thus, it is hoped, confronting the new Left, the Bolsheviks, with a sizeable opposition. And to do this he must constantly avert public attention from unfortunate embarrassments, and attempt, instead, to attract it by some temporarily captivating diversion. Therefore he tries to cover the disaster of the trawler *Númi* by founding the Other World in Sviðinsvík. The Other World is understood to be the attained aim of the drowned men, and since Pétur makes the Other World accessible, a means of communication with the dead is provided for the bereaved women left behind. It is a convenient, an ingenious foil. In much the same way, he has the idea of building a new church in memory of the criminal ghosts and even of investing in a plane, in order to divert people's minds from JJJ's bankruptcy. After all, as he argues: 'kristindómur Er flugmál og flugmál Er kristindómur' (HEI, II, 42). The image of the plane may be thrown out in excitement, in his sheer necessity to side-track public energy, but the use he makes of the Church at

this stage for his own political game is more serious. It is not just an old notion, an ancient, possibly crumbling institution that he sells; the Church is to be the symbol of Old Iceland, the symbol of the nation's values, and it is to be a solid construction and a new one. It is to represent the old and the good in a new and a brightened way. It is to stand battle against the young movement of the Left Wing.

So much for Pétur Pálsson's spurious piety. There is self-seeking behind every plan.

At this point it is worth taking up one of Ólafur's replies to Pétur when he asks rhetorically what the point of life on earth can be if there is no life afterwards. Ólafur replies, expressing, surely, the author's point of view: 'Það er satt . . . Ef maðni líður vel, þá lángr maðni til að lifa eilíflega' (HEI, I, 178). The answer is fuller than that which is required and it serves to point out the division of which Laxness never loses sight, the division, on the one hand, between those who live well and can therefore afford the luxury of sensitive ideas, and on the other hand, those whose prime necessity is relief from material hardship. This other, seamy side is never genuinely, altruistically considered by the merchant. But it is there all the same, and it is considered, instead, by the doctor. From his strange standpoint he is more thoroughly aware of it. As the doctor sees it, the Church is as good as dead and has failed to reassure and sustain the faith of its flock. He understands that it is a matter of national importance that some kind of compensation be proffered. This compensation is necessary, both as

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a substitute for real belief and for that which is more tangible: potatoes, shoe leather and fuel. He sees that life in Sviðinsvík is of a minimal quality and for this reason, in his view, the Sálarrannsóknafélag plays a vital role for the community. If people have a belief in ghosts - well and good. What else have they to believe in? The doctor has nothing to gain by encouraging a foolish belief; that he condones the credulity of the people is a sympathetic and detached comment on the shameful barrenness of the local society, and of the moribund state of the local church.

In *Heimsljós* Laxness shows a great sympathy for the simple people of Sviðinsvík. Hitherto in life and in the Church they seem only to have known the judgement of God on man. But Pétur Pálsson is able to manipulate the local state church for his own political ends. Suddenly forgiveness is for sale. The empty moribund church collaborates for the sake of numbers and the people stream to the service for the re-interment of criminal bones, lured by what they understand as a sign of God's mercy on sinful man. The people are hungry for comfort, for harmony, for peace. They are easily swayed. Laxness writes with feeling: 'Þetta fólk sem var til kaups . . . þetta var myrt fólk' (HEI, I, 289).

At the beginning of this chapter I said that *Heimsljós* is Laxness's second study of a divided soul, dedication to compassion being one of the causes of rift in Ólafur Kárason. In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* the rift in Steinn's soul is the result of the ever-recurring war between the incompatible yearnings of the spirit and the flesh. The contrast between ecclesiastical asceticism and sensual self-realisation there is sharp and clear.

sharp and clear. A similar struggle is taken up again in Ólafur, but in a subtler and a poetic way.

As Laxness reveals a spiritual development in his novels, he comes to show that the Way for him is not through any organised authority or any established Church, but rather through a heart-proven sympathy for those in need. The very radical demands of the Way of Sympathy correspond to the rigorous prescriptions of religious self-denial, and since the obedience of the ascetic should lead to spiritual freedom, so, in the same manner, faithfulness to the Way of Sympathy should bring fulfilment in its train. But the Way is exacting and causes tension. As Steinn Elliði is drawn on the one hand towards self-discipline for the sake of his God and his innermost soul, so Ólafur is drawn to the Way of Sympathy with all that it entails, for the sake of his innermost nature as a poet. So, too, in the same way that Steinn is pulled fiercely in the opposite direction towards sensual delight, Ólafur is tempted to stray from the austere path of Sympathy by the promise of self-realisation as a public poet and by the attraction of the woman he loves. In both cases the demands of chastity or the demands of sympathy are at variance with the demands of the ego, and selflessness tussles with self-assertion and self-will. Steinn's choice of the monastic life, is, in my opinion, finally valid for him, for he demonstrates an inner conversion, at which very point the novel ends. Ólafur's choice of a suffocating union with the epileptic woman Jarprúður is noble beyond a doubt and seems even more valid than Steinn's choice, but the novel carries on. It is in the continuation that one sees that

his chosen Way of Sympathy lacks that grace which, in such cases, is essential to lighten life, to endow it and the lives of those around one with joy. It leads to a lyrical, but nonetheless real mental disintegration. Something goes wrong.

As Laxness's attention moved away from formal religion in the late 1920s and 1930s, it focused more on the oppressed conditions of certain sections of society, in particular, of course, on representative suffering characters. Now in *HeimsljóÐ* it is interesting to see the symbol of Christ the Sufferer emerge. Laxness may often have felt at variance with ecclesiastical outlooks, but the true person of Christ, as opposed to the sugary, falsified person of Christ, does not ever seem to have been a subject for his irony. Now Christ, in His long-suffering, becomes a model; and yet in some way He is only a lyrical symbol for something that is great.

Suffering for Christ's sake has always played a central part in Christianity. Indeed the Christian is enjoined by St Paul to become a fool for Christ,<sup>24</sup> but the goal of folly for Christ bears no relation to a goal of diminished responsibility. What is folly for the Fool for Christ is folly only in the eyes of the world. The fool is the willing sufferer; a person of voluntary poverty, counted fool not because of wrong or weak-mindedness, but because of simplicity, meekness, and ignorance of the world's values. The idea of redemptive folly has actually given rise to a specific type, the beggar-pilgrim, the holy fool, in Eastern Orthodox lands.<sup>25</sup> This type was a common sight in pre-revolutionary Russia. There is for example the pilgrim Grisha in

Tolstoy's *Childhood*. Another type of joyful sufferer is Lukeria in Turgenev's story 'Living Relic'. She is a chronic invalid who attains a state of almost blessed detachment from her pain. Speaking of God she says: 'He sent me a cross to carry, which means he loves me. That's how we're ordained to understand our suffering'<sup>26</sup>. This attitude is worth bearing in mind when considering Ólafur's illness in his youth. There is no self-pity, no exaggeration with Lukeria. Her physical condition is worse than Ólafur's, but she transcends her body. Her illness, so-to-speak, purifies her.

Grisha and Lukeria are Christ figures taken into literature out of life. In imaginative literature the other-worldliness, the innocence, the suffering of the Fool for Christ are often preserved, but they are mostly lifted out of their original, specifically Christian setting, so that what remains is the portrayal of the guileless man, suffering in a hostile world in which he seems to walk alone. This is the literary 'Jesus-figure'. Dostoyevsky's *Idiot*, Prince Myshkin, is probably the literary character most deserving of the name. In his notes for 10 April 1868, Dostoyevsky writes: 'N.B. The Prince - Christ'.<sup>27</sup> The Prince's innocence is convincing.

The term 'Jesus-figure' is open to misuse. This is so because of a tendency to dilute and sentimentalise the person of Christ, to dissociate the suffering Christ from His teaching, His Resurrection and the plan of Redemption. There is a danger of belittling God-made-Man, Christ-God into holy clown. When this happens we are left with possible so-called Christ figures like

W. S. Gilbert's Jack Point, Isaac Bashevis Singer's Gimpel the Fool, and Charlie Chaplin. They call forth our love, our pity, our feelings of protectiveness as they present us, variously, with the pain and the often inescapable broken-heartedness. But usually they do no more. They do not teach; they do not heal; unlike Prince Myshkin they are not appealed to as the ones who perceive the truth; in their worlds they are only derided, not also intuitively revered. There can be little doubt that, to a certain, but, I think, a limited degree, Laxness is presenting Ólafur Káráson as some such literary Jesus-type.

In 'Ingáangur að Passíusálmum' Laxness has written about this literary type: 'Jesús-gervíngurinn hlýtur ævinlega að standa mönnum fyrir hugskotssjónum sem tákn hins undirokaða fyrirlitna mannkyns sem er þó um leið æðsta sem vér þekkjum, guðdómlegt í eðli sínu'.<sup>28</sup> He sees Chaplin as the most perfect contemporary expression of this figure, embodying and exemplifying in the most international way the rejection of the insignificant and powerless man. There are even signs in *Heimsljóð* that Laxness has borrowed from Chaplin films to add colour to certain scenes. Gunnar Kristjánsson suggests that Ólafur's new clothes for his trip to prison recall Chaplin's distinctive and awkward rigout.<sup>29</sup> I would myself suggest that Ólafur's persistent request for the sheriff and his presentation of himself at the Police Station recall Chaplin's own return to the sheriff at the end of *The Pilgrim*, obedient, bearing flowers, showing his total inability to take advantage of or grasp the idea of an opportunity to escape.

Gunnar Kristjánsson sees another indication that Laxness half

has it in mind to portray Ólafur as a Jesus-figure, in that he juggles with facts. <sup>30</sup> Magnus Hjaltason, the folk poet, on whom the character of Ólafur Kárason is based, died at the age of forty-three, but Ólafur evaporates at about thirty-three to thirty-four, the age of Christ at His death. This is then Laxness's doing. I would agree with this had Ólafur met with an accidental death, but he did not; he chose his ending, knowing full well the season, Easter, and his age, Christ's. I suggest, therefore, that Ólafur is playing a saviour role which he chooses for himself. For the most part Laxness does not so much present a ready-made Jesus-figure, as a figure that leaps into the role himself. Ólafur is very human, very charming, and he is in love with the poetry of pain, but there is a very tough difference between unselfconscious sacrifice and a self-indulgent pose.

How can it be seen that Laxness is creating a character who himself chooses the role of the sufferer? Chiefly, I think, from the fact that the novel is seen through the young poet's eyes alone, everything is filtered through his thoughts. The reader is never, for instance, allowed to see Jarprúður, or Jóa or Örn alone. They are only seen in relation to Ólafur. The author makes very few comments, which is why the reader must be all the more perceptive. The book could in fact be written in the first person. It is Ólafur who calls himself the carrier of the Cross, not Laxness; Ólafur who makes the Cross not personal but that of mankind. How he loves these terms: 'drottins krossberari' (HEI, I, 46), 'krossberari . . . mannkynsins' (HEI, I, 204)! But nowhere else in the work are the words used in honest recognition



of his worth. On the contrary he is told: 'Stigðu niður af þessum andstyggilega krossi!' (HEI, II, 105). True, we are dealing here with the jealousy of a young woman, but her use of the expression shows the way in which his behaviour is judged by those who know him. He has evidently not got on humbly with his cross-bearing. He has been enjoying the pathos of it all.

Then, too, Ólafur uses loaded words. He appropriates quotations from the Gospels: 'Hví slær þú mig?' (HEI, I, 204), the words of Christ in Gethsemane; 'Hvað er sannleikur?' (HEI, I, 204), the words of jesting Pilate; and then there is an early dream of Ólafur's in which he is told: 'Þú ert ljós heimsins' (HEI, I, 59), words recalling the Sermon on the Mount, and it is an early vision that seems to confirm him in the idea of his holy, poetic mission. The words go to his head. That Laxness does not support all this overt solemnity, that he does not totally condone the role-play is revealed in lines such as the following: '*Þá sagði hann eins biturlega og hann gat: það er sárt að eiga hvergi höfði sínu að að halla*' (HEI, I, 159) (my italics). Nearly all that Ólafur says in a biblical tone seems to me to be self-pity, vanity or presumption.

And in what way does he suffer more than other men? In what way is his life Christlike in its unfolding and its quality?

Gunnar Kristjánsson ventures to suggest a resemblance between Christ and Ólafur in that both are separated from a distant father; that the journey of the mother and boy child to the farm recalls the Flight into Egypt. <sup>31</sup> With respect I find this an exaggeration. The Father of Christ has not deserted Him irresponsibly; and the Flight into Egypt is undertaken with the

protection of Joseph. Then again he sees an illustration of the Christ-child in Ólafur's words about himself, already a father: 'Honum . . . fanst hann sjálfur í raun réttir vera það eitt litlabarn heimsins sem nokru máli skifti' (HEI, I, 246).<sup>32</sup> But this is infantile self-pre-occupation, not innocence. Further he sees in Ólafur's cure a symbol of Christ's baptism,<sup>33</sup> but after His baptism Christ begins a ministry of teaching and healing, whereas Ólafur, after his, begins to chase the girls, though it is true that the healing is a turning point between a comparatively hidden life and one that is more in the public eye. Finally Gunnar Kristjánsson points out that Laxness's use of the word 'eign' instead of 'plássíð' is unusual in Icelandic. It has strong associations with John 1.11: 'Hann kom til eignar sinnar og hans eigin menn tóku ekki við honum'.<sup>34</sup> But Ólafur is not actually rejected like Christ, nor is he put to death by those who do not like his message.

In what way is Ólafur's life Christ-like in its quality? He is a hypochondriac. He exaggerates and lies about the duration and the intensity of his indisposition. He is a far cry from God's fool Lukeria. He is cured, and charged with ingratitude by the girl who cures him. He moves to a new district, where he cannot shake hands with the inmates of the asylum. He makes a comfortable footing for himself in Hólmfríður's kitchen and he takes it all for granted. He falls in love with Vegmey but when she becomes pregnant he is incapable of responsible action. His manner before the pastor is ingratiating. He chooses pious words to make a good effect. This is quite unlike Prince Myshkin, who is unaware of the

social prudence of modifying one's speech for the sake of personal advantage. When he lives with Jarþrúður he dreams and gives little moral support to her or the child. He appears to have little love for children. Before leaving for Reykjavík he kisses his child to ease his conscience and forgets it immediately. He is not actually interested in people unless they are ill: 'Vér höfum skyldur aðeins við þá sem þjást' (HEI,II,9). He seduces his scripture pupil. He fails to consider his wife or the development of her personality. He suffers from self-pity, and self-indulgence. He undergoes mental disintegration, retreats back into his illness and, in the name of Beauty, he opts out. Such is our Jesus-type. This is a cruel judgement and of course it is not a whole one, but it serves to underline all his understandable, human meanness and self-delusion, so that he may be judged not only by what he says about himself, but by what he does.

Ólafur is not actually nobler than other men. His life is not actually Christ-like, nor does he suffer substantially more than others in the community. Nearly every one is oppressed and hungry, with children that die. Jarþrúður must surely suffer more. What is it then that makes him love to imagine the weight of so much misery upon his back? I believe it to be an untrained, poetic sensitivity.

As a boy Ólafur develops a poetic sensitivity which he believes to be the fruit of his mental and physical disease. There is a direct connection in his mind between the two: 'Þegar maður er bæði andlega og líkamlega veikur, þá verður maður ósjálfrátt skáld' (HEI,I,64). This sensitivity, bred of illness, coupled with

his vision of light, leaves him with the conviction of a calling both to poetry and pain. His is some kind of holy mission to translate his suffering into poetry for the sake of others. It is as if he sees suffering as a fire through which he must go, in order to have anything of value to pass on. But for a long while, even with his illness behind him, his experience of life is small, his sympathies are untried and are therefore only beautiful but sentimental words.

Ólafur's problem as a poet is that he is in love with beauty. But unfortunately life is not all beauty and apart from theoretical, languid suffering there is a lot of ugliness and injustice to endure. This is something that Ólafur does not want to bear. This is what I mean by untrained, poetic sensitivity. It lacks balance and toughness. It is comfortable and easy but basically it is unfair. It is this voluntary blindness to real hardship and despair that permits him to consider himself a carrier of the Cross. He is not truly so. With his sensitivity as it is, and with his dread of unpleasantness, at some point inner tension is bound to break out. He has to decide what sort of a poet he is to be. In Örn he meets his counterpart and is jostled out of his ease.

In her article 'On the Style of Laxness' Tetralogy - "World Light"<sup>25</sup> Svetlana Nedelyaeva-Stepanavichiene expresses the opinion that Ólafur Káráson and Laxness have only one voice, that all the author's views are represented in the young poet's. To a certain degree I think that this is true. It would seem that Laxness can safely entrust to Ólafur a number of his most serious

reflections on poetry and life, but certainly not all, and one hopes that not all the poet's expressions are those of Laxness himself, for instance: 'vér höfum skyldur aðeins við þá sem þjást, vér elskum aðeins þá sem eiga bággt' (HEI, II, 9).

I think, though, that it is certainly Laxness's own voice that is heard when Ólafur speaks of the inestimable value to a poet, in terms of suffering and experience, of losing that which one treasures most: 'Hafi maður mist það sem hann elskar heitast þarf ekki að yrkja, hreimurinn í rödd manns segir allan skáldskap lífsins' (HEI, I, 199): when he speaks of the invisible friendship 'sem ekkert afl í alheiminum getur skilið frá okkur eins leingi og við höfum hæfileika til að bera þjáningar mannlífsins og mæta ránglæti heimsins' (HEI, I, 102); it must be Laxness who speaks through the poet saying that 'vorkunnin . . . er eftilvill sterkari en ástin' (HEI, II, 197); and there can be no doubt that it is the author speaking in harmony with Ólafur with the words 'Heilt hjarta, hálf líf . . . Lífið gerist í tveim skautum og er uppá móti sjálfu sér, og það er þessvegna sem það er líf. Að hafa mist það sem maður elskar heitast, það er eftilvill hið sanna líf, að minsta kosti sá sem ekki skilur það, hann veit ekki hvað er að lifa; hann kann ekki að lifa; og það sem verra er, hann kann ekki að deya' (HEI, II, 145), words which embody the idea of the value of suffering and of voluntary broken-heartedness and of willing solidarity, as a prerequisite for a life of full significance. It is not unreasonable to say that Laxness's voice is behind Ólafur in all that concerns sympathy and suffering, so long as there is no trace of self-pity or selfishness; all this

is in tune with the sympathy advocated in *Sjálfstætt fólk* (SJÁ, 389). But when Ólafur comes to meet Örn, he meets new poetic ideas, new ideas about suffering and solidarity which are alien to him and which seem to be those of the writer as well. Erik Sønderholm has made a thorough study of the views of the two poets and concludes: 'Man kan diskutere, hvem af de to mænd der har ret. Laxness besvarer ikke dette spørgsmål, sin vane tro overlader han sin læser at tage stilling til problemet'. 36

I have said that Ólafur wishes to escape from harsh reality and that he does so by running to beauty and the contemplation of the clouds. Responsibility, symbolised by a house, robs him of his freedom as a poet: 'Þegar hann sá fyrir sér grátin andlit þeirra tveggja átti hann snögglega hús. Að vera einn, það er að vera skáld. Að vera háður óhamþingju annarra, það er að eiga hús' (HEI, II, 16). With Örn, to be a poet is radically different. His poetry has another and an active role to play. For him misery and deprivation are very real. They are horrible but they must be faced. For Ólafur, Hólsbúardísa, the mad cripple, is a grotesque exception to be hounded from the mind. For Örn she represents Sviðinsvík itself; he declares passionately: 'En hver sem heldur að fegurðin sé eitthvað sem hann getur notið sérstaklega fyrir sig sjálfan aðeins með því að yfirgefa aðra menn og loka augunum fyrir því mannlífi sem hann er sámpættur, - hann er ekki vinur fegurðarinnar' (HEI, I, 239). The man, he says, who does not fight against the agents of evil, who sanctions misery by his apathy or schemes, that man blasphemes when he has the name of beauty on his lips. Here in the discussion between the two poets is the core of

the very fundamental question for Laxness, about beauty and life. Is one to behold selectively or to take part, or, from Laxness's own experience: Is one to opt for the monastery or the market place? It seems that here, Örn's opinions are those of the writer. Laxness cannot condone Ólafur's inaction, the contrast between his love-laden words and his terrified retreat from life. From this discussion, Ólafur begins to come to a new discovery about himself and life: 'Það þarf afskaplegt þrek til að vera maður. Örn, heldur þú að ég hef þrek till þess?' (HEI, I, 240).

The extreme test for Ólafur comes on Jarþrúður's return to the hut, after what he believes has been a final parting. Here the choice is before him in all its terrifying starkness. On the one hand lie comparative comfort, the right conditions for work, and love, and on the other hand, now, right before his eyes, lies the challenge of the true poet, of the disciple of the Way of Sympathy. Here is the epileptic, depending solely on him. The disciple follows his calling. Theory is put aside. He gives in: 'Aumingja Jarþrúður mín. hvernig gat mér nokkurntíma dottið í hug að ég skáldið gæti skilið við þá sem eiga bággt?' (HEI, II, 134). It is a noble, a heroic but a bitter and a devastating choice to make: 'Skilja allt eftir! . . . Alt. Alla sína drauma. Allan sinn skáldskap. Alla sína von. Alt sitt líf. Alt' (HEI, II, 135). The untrained, poetic sensitivity is suddenly harnessed, thrashed and broken in. But something is still wrong.

Günter Kötzt has examined certain similarities between *Heimsljóðs* and Hermann Hesse's *Peter Camenzind*.<sup>37</sup> The attitude to suffering in the two works also bears comparison. In *Peter Camenzind* Peter,

the poet and disciple of St Francis, in dedicating himself to an ailing cripple youth, makes a decision comparable to that made by Ólafur. Peter reflects: 'What had been the point of my studying the Saint's life and learning the wonderful hymn to love . . . if a poor and helpless creature now lay there suffering when I knew about him and it was in my power to comfort him?'. He seems to hear a message from God: '"You, a poet! . . . You, a disciple of the Umbrian saint! You, a prophet who would teach men to love! . . . And yet the very same day on which I honour this house as my resting place you flee from it and think of driving me away!'"<sup>38</sup> Of course the sacrifice entailed in Ólafur's choice is of greater magnitude than Peter's, but it is not the size of the sacrifice but the mental and spiritual attitudes that accompany it that are of concern, for it is they which lead to or away from fulfilment or joy. Faðir Alban's conversation with Steinn Elliði may be remembered here: God does not want our sacrifices but our hearts (VEF, 103). Peter finds joy and fulfilment in the service he gives his friend, but with Ólafur it is different. It is as if he strains against his nature, following the letter of the law; his heart is not in it. The letter of the Law of Sympathy forces him to make his choice. There is no life in his spirit or his heart. There is tragedy instead. Ólafur goes through the fire of suffering, not purified but burnt to ashes. As a poet he has magnificent theories but from his actual life there is nothing but escape to pass on.

Peter Hallberg recognises the contradiction in Ólafur's life: 'In spite of the poet's inhuman hardness of heart and his culpable



flight from life, there is a paradox in the fact that his ruthless longing for beauty seems to draw nourishment from a love of his fellow mortals and seems, in its turn, to keep this love alive' <sup>39</sup>. His role as a poet does to a very great extent keep him distanced from real life, and poet he is, first and foremost. He is told in a childhood vision that he is the light of the world, and this to him means a poet, a kind of prophet. Erik S nderholm sees a significance in Laxness's choice of the title *Heimslj s* 'der som bekendt i Johannes Evangeliet er en betegnelse p  Jesus; den der skal frelse menneskeheden er digteren'. <sup>40</sup> He sees him as a kind of saviour-poet who will save the world through his understanding of suffering: 'Hans liv er Kristi efterf lgelse. Hans lidelseshistorie ender i romanen en p skdag, hvor han vel d r, men hans livsv rk, hans ideal, skal leve videre'. <sup>41</sup> Gunnar Kristj nsson is similarly appreciative: '  tt  lafur K rason komi engan veginn fram i Heimslj si sem bo beri kristinnar tr ar er hann  o greinileg eftirmynd  ess manns sem hefur fari  a  r  um Thomas a Kempis.  lafur s r a alsmerki mannsins . . . i  vi, sem Thomas a Kempis kallar a  bera krossinn, sem er alls sta ar . . . Hann er holdtekja  ess manns sem afneitar sj lfur s r til  ess a  finna sj lfan sig'. <sup>42</sup> My judgement of  lafur is harsher than these critics'. I find him beguiling and full of charm, but at the same time, because of the gulf between his words and his ways, a sham and a failure. However, since his poetic theory, his belief in participation in the suffering of others, comes over so forcefully in the novel, in spite of the dismal example of his

actual life, I am led to agree with Sønderholm that the ideal of sensitive poet in Ólafur will endure.

These opinions are at variance with those of Lars-Göran Eriksson who, writing in 1955, sees a primary influence of Marxist thought in the novels *Salka Valka*, *Sjálfstætt fólk* and *Heimsljós*. He argues that characters like Bjartur who eventually learn sympathy, or like Ólafur Kárason who believe in it do so because they are caught in the framework of the old society 'þar sem samúðin er hin eina brú milli mannanna'.<sup>43</sup> He uses Ólafur's words 'Heilt hjarta en hálf líf' to describe the life of the glacier couple, implying that their life is deficient: 'Hið sanna líf er kannski annað. "Að hafa misst það sem maður elskaði heitast, það er ef til vill hið sanna líf"'.<sup>44</sup> I have tried to show that the glacier couple illustrate the way in which passion and sentimentality can be happily transformed into compassion and an all embracing joy, and to show that I believe that this is Laxness's conviction. For Eriksson, however, Ólafur and the glacier couple only stand for man's weakness, whereas Örn represents man's greatness. Eriksson maintains that Laxness does not advocate sympathy, but rather 'nauðsyn þess að mennirnir standi saman einmitt með því að sýna hversu mikið skortir á það'.<sup>45</sup> I agree that Laxness does not advocate soft sympathy and that solidarity among men is called for earnestly, but Örn, the passionate revolutionary, disappears from the novel and it is the words of the glacier couple and the prison priest, not his, that linger on. Eriksson believes that at the time of these novels Laxness was Christian no more, but that he allowed his Christian

background to inform his Marxist thought, but the gentle toughness of the final message does not seem to me to have a Marxist tone. It is a message of peace and harmony, and of a personal commitment to individuals, not the masses. It speaks for a total embracing of the whole experience of life in its reality, and not in an idealised or poeticised form.

1. Árni Sigurjónsson, p. 134.
2. Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p. 13.
3. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 86.
4. Bhagavad Gita 5.14-15, p. 67.
5. Hallberg, *Den store vävaren*, p. 71; and Laxness in personal conversation with me, 1981.
6. Quoted by Hermann Pálsson in *Sagnaskemmtun Íslendinga*, p. 21.
7. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p. 54.
8. Hallberg, 'Lítla bókin um sálina', p. 122.
9. 'Lítla bókin um sálina', p. 122.
10. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 85.
11. Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Literature*, p. 252.
12. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 81.
13. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 81, footnote 25.
14. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 83, footnote 32.
15. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 83, footnote 34.
16. *Dagleið á fjöllum*, p. 180.
17. *Dagleið á fjöllum*, p. 172.
18. *Dagleið á fjöllum*, p. 173.

19. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p. 36.
20. *Gerska æfintýrið*, p. 185.
21. *Gerska æfintýrið*, p. 186.
22. *Gerska æfintýrið*, p. 189.
23. *Gerska æfintýrið*, p. 238.
24. I Corinthians 4. 10.
25. Arseniev, *Russian Piety*, pp. 106-111.
26. Turgenev, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, pp. 217-18.
27. Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, translated and introduced by David Magarshack. Introduction, p. 21.
28. 'Ingangur að Passíusálmum', in *Vettvangur dagsins*, p. 105-06.
29. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Úr heimi Ljósvíkingsins', p. 14.
30. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Úr heimi Ljósvíkingsins', p. 14.
31. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 54.
32. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 55.
33. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Religiöse Gestalten', p. 55.
34. Gunnar Kristjánsson, 'Úr heimi Ljósvíkingsins', p. 13.
35. Svetlana Nedalyaeva-Steponavichiene, 'On the Style of Laxness' Tetralogy: "World Light", pp. 71-87.
36. Sønderholm, p. 208.
37. Kötzt, *Das Problem Dichter und Gesellschaft im Werke von Halldór Kiljan Laxness*, p. 109.
38. Hesse, *Peter Camenzind*, p. 114.
39. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), p. 139.
40. Sønderholm, p. 202.
41. Sønderholm, p. 201.
42. Gunnar Kristjánsson 'Úr heimi Ljósvíkingsins', pp. 34-35.

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43. Lars-Göran Eriksson, 'Vandlæting og þíslarvætti', p. 7.
44. Lars-Göran Eriksson, 'Vandlæting og þíslarvætti', p. 13.
45. Lars-Göran Eriksson, 'Vandlæting og þíslarvætti', p. 13.

*Íslandsklukkan* is the first of three novels which show Laxness's political engagement. It was published between 1943 and 1946, that is during the time of the occupation of Iceland by American and British forces during the Second World War. Another event that was in the minds of the Icelanders at that time was the regaining of total independence, from Denmark, in 1944. Both matters intensified the feeling of national independence and pride which is reflected by Laxness in his trilogy. His attention is now absorbed by social and political affairs. It has moved away from both the inner man and the problems of the individual exposed to hardship or pain. In *Salka Valka* and *Sjálfstætt fólk* there is a growing awareness of the problems of society and social injustice, but, while the earlier works are passionate indictments of an exploiting society, they are also, and chiefly, subjective, compassionate studies of its victims. They are first and foremost dramas and tragedies of man. In *Íslandsklukkan* the author's tone alters. He is distanced and objective. It seems to me he is not creating characters which are frontierless or universal. They do not react like *Salka Valka* or *Ásta Sóllilja*. They seem to be symbols of national qualities rather than man in his smallness or his greatness. And because national freedom, political identity and cultural heritage are now Laxness's principal concern, rather than the predicament of the human being, religion, in its widest sense, is therefore of little significance here, though formal, external religion, as opposed to an inner religious disposition of reverence, plays some part.

The first thing to be noticed about this external religion is

that the Church stands for class. It is a worldly not a spiritual institution. The Lutheran Church was forced upon Iceland, a Danish colony, by Denmark, the overlord, ousting Catholicism in the sixteenth century, perhaps about one hundred and fifty years before the action of the novel takes place.

The representatives of the Church are the Bishop, his wife, his housekeeper, séra Sigurður, and Arnas's wife. Together they play safe: if you're a good Christian things will go well for you. But if you are poor and destitute, then that is God's judgement on you. To intervene would be to interfere with Divine Justice. We are the cause of everything that happens to us, and therefore, by implication, in no way responsible for our neighbour. Fundamentally, this approach means that, for them, Christianity is a collection of pretty sentiments. To take its teachings seriously would have an inconvenient effect, as the housekeeper puts it early on: 'Ég er viss um að guð er með þeim ríku en ekki þeim fátæku. Og biskupsfrúin veit, að ef hún talaði við aumingja þá mundi hún ekki hafa tíma til neins annars og Skáholtsstaður leggjast í auðn' (ÍSL, 52).

This attitude recurs but *not* relentlessly. Arnas presents disturbing ideas to the men of the cloth at Skálholt. He seems sceptical and listens to their skilful twisting and interpretations. The subject is poverty. Arnas asks in essence: Why is there poverty? What is its meaning? What are we to do about it? Or more specifically: 'Eru snauðir menn guði þóknænlegir og ber oss að líkja eftir þeim? Eða er fátæktin drottins vöndur fyrir illvirki landsfólksins og trúarneyfu?' (ÍSL, 229).

But these are not truly philosophical or theological questions. Arnas knows the answers. They are social questions. He throws them out in order to disturb and compel the clerics to look to the other side of the dividing abyss, the other side of the derelict, symbolic bridge, to consider the injustice which they condone, and he uses the address 'Yðar fromheit'. Of course this is discordance, but Laxness makes no comment, only allows the good men to wriggle out of their uncomfortable position. The cathedral priest makes a convenient reply: 'Fátæktin gefur einfalt hjarta sem er guði þekkara enda nær statui perfectionis en heimsfrakt og veraldarviska' (ÍSL, 230). He then offers two misunderstandings from the Gospel: 'Og fátæka hefur vor lausnari talið í hópi sælla, segjandi vér skulum jafnan hafa þá hið næsta oss' (ÍSL, 230). He recalls the words 'Blessed are the poor', but he overlooks the words 'in spirit', and he remembers the words 'Ye have the poor always with you' and he forgets the continuation 'and whensoever ye will ye may do them good'.<sup>2</sup>

Arnas takes this up; if Our Lord wishes that there should be poor people, so that Christians can reap benefit from their example, is it not wrong to ameliorate their lowly and edifying state? (ÍSL, 230). The cathedral priest once more fights off this cynical attack, and justifies the heaven-blessed estates of man, for the higher orders are ordained to seek salvation for their souls through prayer and the offering of alms (ÍSL, 230).

Arnas raises for discussion the awkward question of human justice, or rather human, legalised injustice and its relationship to Christian belief (ÍSL, 232). The vain search for human justice



runs throughout the work. The cathedral priest repudiates any hint of the Christian's responsibility. His harshness is all the more distinct because Laxness portrays him as a devout, overtly pious man, delightfully humbug and strict in his discipline and fasts. Séra Sigurður counts on spiritual justice, a satisfying means of seeing sinners done in, whereas Arnas looks for earthly justice, a dangerous quest which rocks the ecclesiastical boat.

The Bishop himself sits on the fence, taking refuge in his responsibilities. He has so often envied the beggar, sleeping carefree by the waterfall, he says, but, alas, the Lord has laid upon him the heavy burden of office, and so such simplicity is denied him (ÍSL 231). Here is another ironic glimpse of the well-to-do Icelander, who can afford to be lyrical about the peasants' life in its apparent picturesqueness, such as we see in the bailiff's wife in *Sjálfstætt fólk* (SJÁ, 21-22). It is a blinkered view of life, devoid of brotherhood or understanding. Arnas can make no headway with these people. The Bishop's wife speaks of the sin of destroying the bridge of Christian charity that God wishes should be raised between the rich and poor (ÍSL, 231), but when it comes to the question of rebuilding the actual structure of the real bridge for the use of beggars and travellers for access to the bishopric, then her enthusiasm wanes. The honour of Iceland would hardly have risen so high if Skálholt had been taken over by hordes of starving riff-raff from the other side (ÍSL, 231).

Erik Sønderholm's opinions do not seem to differ substantially from mine. He points out that Laxness shows Christian charity refusing to bridge the gap between the classes, and the poor as

having a moral purpose in their poverty, namely to demonstrate the virtue of asceticism. He continues that there is necessarily a double morality running throughout the book, one law for the poor, from whom a high standard of sexual morality is expected, and another law for the privileged. And he gives the example of lax women drowned in the name of Christianity on the one hand, and the acceptance of the Danish king's mistresses on the other. <sup>3</sup>

These ideas about religion are not the theme of *Íslandsklukkan*, but they are all present and they add grim depth to the portrayal of an unjust society.

There are other religious attitudes in *Íslandsklukkan*, but they play a sub-role. They appear chiefly in a debate between criminals and beggars before the court session at Þingvellir. Here, among diverse voices, emerges a dominant longing for justice. In some ways it is a cry to God. There is a general manifestation of discontent, but it seems to be implied that the injustice that is endured by the masses is, in some measure, allowed by them, through their own fault, because of their own social immaturity or passivity. Justice is not to be looked for from the authorities, and it will not come of its own accord. This is the voice of the blind man, the visionary: 'En réttlæti verður ekki fyren við erum sjálfir menn . . . En einn dagur mun koma. Og þann dag sem við erum orðnir menn mun guð koma til vor og gerast vor liðsmaður' (ÍSL, 305).

Once again Laxness avoids commenting but the speech brings the discussion to a close, or perhaps not so much to a close as to an opening, a promise, and a future, these themselves being

dependent on a responsible response. The vista that is opened seems to be the hope of the author himself.

The blind man's vision of a responsible, sober-minded people heavily outweighs the old-time humility of the branded holy-man who speaks with him and Jón Hreggviðsson. The holy-man is unable to cope with Jón's passion for personal justice, yet he evinces a certain, true brotherhood, a lowliness and compassion: 'Er okkur vandara um en þeim?' (ÍSL, 302), he asks with regard to the other criminals; 'Hversvegna er ég ekki höggvinn, hversvegna er ég ekki festur upp, ég var þó ekki betri en þeir' (ÍSL 303). But his self-abasing attitude seems almost spineless. It does not accord with the needs of the day. Laxness again makes no comment but he positions his words between Jón's impassioned declamation against the heartlessness of the authorities and the visionary speech of the blind man, so that the branded man's words seem to be stamped with the author's disapproval.

I believe we see here a ripening of Laxness's earlier opinions concerning the connection between human suffering and God. He seems to have worked out his anger and righteous indignation, gradually apportioning some and then all of the blame to man the oppressor, and now finally turning to the victims, man the oppressed, and summoning men to responsibility and manliness. When, and only when the masses shoulder the new role of responsibility will God be with them, becoming the leader, not of ductile sheep, but of mature, discerning, balanced and deliberating people.

The branded holy-man may faithfully echo some of the attitudes

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of the simple people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Iceland, but Laxness presents these attitudes as being no longer serviceable. Jón Hreggviðsson's elderly mother is portrayed in a similar, but perhaps more sympathetic way. She is an example of persistence and long-suffering, but she is rather mawkish or pallid. But even though in *Íslandsklukkan* Laxness generally seems to demand sterner things of simple people, he does not mock her. Yet she has no influence. She is not, like the glacier couple in *Heimsljós*, made a grand model of simplicity or peace. Her piety sustains her personally, but it is not recommended for anyone else.

The old mother and the branded man reflect the mood of a religion that seems to be fading away; the blind man offers a vision; the rest of the common people betray a much rougher faith. Sometimes it is demonstrated in a grim humour in which God is played off against the Devil:

Ég er búin að biðja guð í allan vetur að fá að verða höggvinn í staðinn fyrir brendur, sagði maðurinn.

Af hverju heitirðu ekki á Andskotann maður, sagði Jón Hreggviðsson.

Hann sveik mig, sagði maðurinn kjökrandi. Þegar Pokurinn er búinn að svíkja mann fer maður að biðja guð.

Mér heyrir þú vera lítilmenni, sagði Jón Hreggviðsson. Hættu þessu snökti. (ÍSL, 42)

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This is a roughness that is a remnant of dark superstition and testifies to a lack of genuine belief. It is also the bleak humour that comes from a merciless environment.

Throughout *Íslandsklukkan* the tone of society is merciless and the image of God held by all people, both high and low, seems likewise to be devoid of all love. Theirs is a God of vengeance who avidly metes out punishment for sin. When plague sweeps the land it is as if His craving for retribution is insatiable: 'Eftilvill hafði guðinn enn ekki höggvið nóg, mávera að enn leyndist einhversstaðar hældræpur maður . . . Í sinni reiði hafði guðinn ogsvo slegið stólinn' (ÍSL, 381-82).

This impersonal God, 'guðinn,' seems not to be a glimpse of Laxness's own view of God, but the accurate reflection of the people's idea of some celestial, legislative power. This is not a god to approach, much less to love. It is fear the people want, fear that controls their lives. They respect those who punish. As the vagrant says, 'Ef einginn hýðir okkur leingur, hvers á maður þá að líta upptil? (ÍSL, 303). Fear of man and of God is an inherent part of the people's life. Love of either is extraneous.

So we see the damage done to the people by this harsh interpretation of Christianity, as well as the manipulative way in which the ruling classes profit from it. But these people and their reactions only form a back-cloth. In front of them are three major characters: Jón Hreggviðsson, Snæfríður and Arnas Arnæus. They fit into no accepted conventional Christian world. Both Kristinn Andrésón and Peter Hallberg see this lack of Christianity as stemming directly from Laxness's growing

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admiration for the Icelandic sagas. While working on *Íslandsklukkan* Laxness was engaged in editing them and modernising their spelling. Two articles by him, 'Inngangur að Passíusalmum' (1932, revised 1942) <sup>4</sup> and 'Minnisgreinur um fornsögur' (1945), <sup>5</sup> testify to his admiration for them. Kristinn Andr sson believes that the latter article is the key to the novel. <sup>6</sup> Much of it deals with the style of the sagas but Laxness also considers the saga writer's attitude towards fate. He claims that a belief in fate is always pessimistic and he characterises it as a dark view of life, 'yet at the same time, as one that is fearless. This belief, he says, implies that there is no connection between luck and outstanding personal qualities, and so it frequently happens that the most excellent people are stricken by terrible misfortune. <sup>7</sup> It is this fatalism that is essentially foreign to Christianity, for it does not acknowledge a divine plan with scope or design for personal growth in the individual, nor does it acknowledge the power of free will. Kristinn Andr sson argues that the three principal characters become victims of this fate, which they submit to and over which, like the saga heroes, they have no control. I would go further and say that they voice no hope and do not, even defiantly, appeal to any god. Hallberg writes that Laxness points to the fact that there is scarcely a trace of any Christian outlook in the sagas and comments: 'H b sama v ri h gt   segja um p   slendingas gu sem hann sj lfur var   skrifa'. <sup>8</sup>

Hallberg has made a comprehensive examination of the main characters' non-religious attitudes. <sup>9</sup> There seems little to add. He sees J n Hreggvi sson as untouched by Christianity, pagan in

his general outlook and in his own particular brand of admiration for Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, as well as radically lacking in any moral sense. I would only like to enlarge on it by saying that I recognise him as pagan not so much because of his attitude to fate, but because of his cynicism and self-reliance. His response to events is not fatalistic, like Snæfríður's, but stems more from a sense of impotence. He is resigned because the dehumanised system is too big, not so much because some dark, elemental and impersonal force is relentlessly compelling the action on. His cynicism and self-reliance are deeper than his belief in fate. Jón is, to a great extent, a symbol of the oppressed Icelandic peasantry and he is representative in his grimness and resilience. But perhaps, in reality, it is the indomitable spirit of the Icelander rather than just the peasant that he symbolises; for Jón is not a believer where other poor men believe; he does not sing hymns when those around him do so; he would rather the Devil were appealed to than God; he shows no tolerance towards people who are conventionally pious. This is clearly shown in his conversation with Arnas's Danish wife. From his talk she erroneously jumps to the conclusion that he has repentance in his heart and that he will therefore be forgiven his sins. But sin is an utterly alien concept to him. His ideas of right and wrong are his own. They might be renamed 'expedient' and 'unnecessary'. He is refreshingly free from self-analysis, but at the same time lacking in reflection. He is also childishly, egoistically irresponsible instead: 'Ég hef aldrei drýgt neina synd. Ég er ærlegur stórglæpa maður' (ÍSL, 403). With him there is no inner man, with the

probability of sin; no conscience; only the external man and the struggle for survival and the probability of crime. Christian concepts, ideals and articles of faith are either sheer nonsense to him, or completely foreign to his mind.

He is psychologically independent too - spiritual is hardly a word to be used in connection with him. This again indicates an approach which differs radically from the Christian's, which would attribute all benefits to God and consider man as being dependent on God for all good. Jón would reject such an idea outright. He relies solely on himself and has, in any case, little materially to be thankful for: 'Ég hef aungva trú á öðru réttlæti en því sem ég frem sjálfur . . . En hvort ég er svartur grár eða hvítur þá hræki ég á réttlæti utan það sem er í sjálfum mér Jóni Hreggviðssyni á Rein; og á bakvið heiminn' (ÍSL, 318-19).

On the occasions when Jón pulls through, he does so by his native cunning and his complete lack of moral scruples. This is why he seems to represent an indomitable national spirit rather than a slice of society. He does, of course, come from a certain social class and bears its features, but he differs from its other members. He recalls the independent Icelander well-known to the Norwegian court in Viking times. Jón is churlish and hardly civilised to be sure, yet he still resembles the type, dangerously outspoken, bowing to no foreign potentate, seemingly not subject to the same social conventions or, in his case, the same moral or religious conventions as less free-spirited men.

Snæfríður is on a higher intellectual plane. It is clear that she does not share the religious opinions of her class. In her



independence, her coolness, in her stoical bearing when she is rejected she too seems to be a symbol of the abused but indomitable land. It seems that Laxness has to have recourse to pagan types for the characters that he portrays, for the Christianity of the day, as he depicts it, only gives rise to disfigured men, robbed of their nobility. In the sagas he recognises a spirit that is noble and unbowed. Such is Snæfríður's.

Snæfríður's paganism is seen not so much in her behaviour as in her silences, her words and her attitudes. For instance her actual behaviour to her husband is unaccountably gentle and long-suffering, and this generosity is extended towards him even after atrocious treatment at his hands. It is ideal Christian comportment. But her underlying attitude in accepting a husband whom she despises, 'heldur þann versta en þann næst besta' (ÍSL, 76), is fundamentally pagan, dramatic and senseless, fired by a suicidal pride. In the same way, when she accepts séra Sigurður as her second husband, although this seems a prudent and reasonable thing to do, it is not so. It is essentially in tune with her pagan attitude to life. It can hardly be regarded as capitulation or compromise. It is emotional self-destruction. Once more she commits herself to a man and to a religious environment that she despises. The innermost part of her is inaccessibly detached from it all. She is untouched by Christianity. She admits to her sister, the Bishop's wife, that her way of life is not like theirs: 'Mín hamingja er ekki uppskrifað eftir bænabók' (ÍSL, 173). Séra Sigurður recognises the pagan voice in her: 'Ég hef altaf

vitað að túnga skáldakynsins forfeðra yðar og formæðra er af heiðinni rót' (ÍSL, 199).

That she considers theology in particular a complete nonsense is revealed not by the author's comments, but by her silences and her words. Thus in the discussion over the meal at Skálholt, she alone remains silent and asks to be excused from expressing an opinion (ÍSL 231). But in later years she does burst out in exasperation: 'Það hef ég laungum vitað að eingin fræðigreind stendur nær klámi en guðfræðin, sé hún rétt kend: jómfrú áður hún fæðir, jómfrú um leið og fæðir, jómfrú eftir hún hefur fætt. Ég roðna, gömul ekkjan' (ÍSL, 384). This criticism is undefended and recalls the young Laxness's own lack of literal belief in the Virgin Birth, expressed in his essay 'Trú' in *Alþýðubókin* (1928-29), <sup>10</sup>, and the same tone is maintained in *Dagleið á fjöllum*. <sup>11</sup>

Snæfríður is also cynical in her references to Christ. She calls him 'það stungna tröll' (ÍSL, 300). The author actually refers to this as blasphemy, an unusually subjective word, but perhaps this is for séra Sigurður's sake: 'Guðlast hennar virtist ekki leingur ná honum' (ÍSL, 300). In her mind Christ is clearly the symbol of a vindictive morality, but even if he is stern, the tools of the establishment are harsher still: 'Og hvað segir ordonnantsían, sem er þó snögtum strángari en sjálfur krosshánginn' (ÍSL, 300). But all this is only thinly veiled anger against the moral establishment that has condemned her.

Snæfríður expresses one other idea which would appear directly challenging to conventional Christianity: 'Hver hefur þínst meira

fyrir hinn á þessum heimi, guð fyrir mennina eða mennirnir fyrir guð?' (ÍSL, 279). The same kind of question was asked by the dying woman in *Salka Valka* (SAL, 235). What the question principally reveals here is Snæfríður's resentment towards the oppressive Christian teaching that she has been exposed to, a teaching over which the crucified Christ hangs, not as a figure of compassion but as a kill-joy, a constant reminder of man's sins and guilt, and the punishment coming his way. But because of the weight of human suffering, Snæfríður rejects the idea of man's irreparable debt to God. Ostensibly these are only the words of a character in a drama, but I suspect that they also sum up Laxness's own feelings. He permits them to stand boldly and without contradiction.

Snæfríður's independence, not so much social as spiritual and emotional, is revealed in her attitude to mercy. Unlike her Christian contemporaries, she counts on none at all. During her conversation with the acquitted women she says as much. It is not that hope has been extinguished in her, it is that it has never been there:

Ég er dæmd . . . Sá dómstóll er hvorki til með álfum né mönnum, sem sýknar mig, sagði hún.

Altend þó á himnum . . .

Nei, ekki heldur á himnum, sagði Snæfríður. (ÍSL, 315)

This is the essential voice of the unbeliever. Mercy is for a weaker species than hers.

Finally there is Arnas Arnæus. He is not so much pagan as agnostic, a humanist and a searcher. He is not impressed by the Lutheranism that surrounds him in Iceland, and like Laxness as a young man he looks for the action that should result from Christian teaching. He probes deftly but he does not find it at Skálholt. He is more attracted by the Catholicism that was formerly a part of Icelandic life. He greatly admires and regrets the fate of Jón Arason, the last of the Catholic bishops. In his wanderings he finds himself in Rome and in the midst of Catholicism.

What is at the heart of Catholicism is unclear to him: 'Er það rétt, er það rángt, mín frú. Ég veit það ekki' (ÍSL 243). On the one hand the spirit of the Reformation is far away from him in the North. On the other hand, whom can one rely on? He has read that it never even occurred to one of the popes, Leo X, to believe in the soul of man. There is ambiguity everywhere. However, something other than the intellect is deeply stirred in him in Rome. He catches something of the feeling of the universality of the Catholic Church. He is overwhelmed by the human warmth of religious festival and procession: 'Þá vissi ég ekki fyren ég sagði við sjálfan mig: þessari prósessíu fylgir þú hvert sem hún ætlar' (ÍSL, 244). Here are people and pilgrims from every nation and Arnas is struck with regret that, now, there are no longer any Icelanders among them. It is if he feels that Iceland is excluded from the surging life of the whole. The Reformation and Lutheranism have deprived the people of something larger, something on a world scale. There is a great tide gathering up all

the nations of the South; all the peoples are merging and mingling and Arnas is carried along with them as well. But he does not allow his inner self to be squarely challenged. Such a challenge would demand a full response. He would be without his old defences. Learning and history are safest. Just as with his love for Snæfríður, he turns the other way. His work and his manuscripts take precedence over human love and spiritual challenge. He is afraid, unwilling to commit his heart and his soul; just when he has discovered something, he leaves: 'Ég hafði verið að leita að gömlum íslenskum bókum, og það hafði sest að mér tregi vegna þess ég fann þær ekki. Altíeinu fanst mér ekkert gerði til þó ég hefði ekki fundið þessar gömlu bækur. Ég hafði fundið annað í staðinn. Daginn eftir fór ég burt úr Rómaborg' (ÍSL, 244). Arnas's reaction to the universality of the Catholic Church, and his sense of national loss at the religious changes brought to Iceland by the Reformation echo the thoughts expressed by Laxness himself on the same subject. <sup>12</sup>

Arnas, if he believes at all, seems to do so too broadly for his belief to be confined within one single religious compartment. He is wide-minded and looks at matters from all sides. When he appears to show sympathy for Catholicism the Bishop's wife asks him if he thinks there are two kinds of truth, one for the North and one for the South. To this he replies that there is a mountain in China whose name varies according to the position from which it is viewed. So, if Arnas accepts the validity of one aspect of a matter, he will not, because of this, insist on the invalidity of the other aspects. Erik Sønderholm considers that his liberal-

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minded image of the mountain applies not only to religion, but also to justice. Arnas, he says, knows that the understanding of justice is not unchanging, as the priests at Skálholt would maintain, and he goes on to compare the conflicts between heavenly and earthly justice in *Íslandsklukkan* and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*. In the early novel, he says, Laxness chose the heavenly, then afterwards turned sharply towards earthly justice. This turn of heart continues to be supported in the later work. <sup>13</sup>

Peter Hallberg regards Arnas's indulgence as stemming from the attitudes of his Icelandic ancestors, who, though permitting the introduction of Christianity, yet continued to allow blood sacrifice, if it were carried out in private. Arnas himself cites this example of prudent tolerance. Hallberg thinks that Laxness and Arnas are of one mind in these affairs 'einmitt vegna þess að hún [þvílík ráðstöfun] virðist bera vott um efa og jafnframt ógeð á öllu ofstæki'. <sup>14</sup>

A number of Arnas's moral views, too, lie outside any rigid religious framework. Like Jón Hreggviðsson, he has little understanding of conscience, from the conventional Christian point-of-view. Only lack of discretion constitutes a wrong or a crime. He supports his argument eruditely, but with instances from Moslem lands. As far as his relationship with Snæfríður is concerned, he says that nothing has happened if there is no proof (ÍSL, 274). When she asks then if their friendship will not always be regarded as a crime, he replies that human happiness has always been considered so, and has never been enjoyed except in secret and against the laws of God and men. Their law forbids happiness.

This is a suddenly bitter view from Arnas, but I think we must also recognise in it a certain washing of his hands. He does not want to be implicated or made responsible. He avoids the responsibilities of love and friendship. By generalising bitterly in this way, he passes the blame and avoids facing the issue realistically. There are other occasions when he betrays a lack of honesty with himself. What is felt as an embarrassment to him he blames on fate or on the gods:

Örlögin ráða skipkomum, guðirnir, sagði hann. Það er sannað í íslendingasögum.

Já það er mikil hepni að til skuli vera guðir og örlög, sagði hún. (ÍSL, 267)

In the same way Arnas hands over responsibility to the gods when fire approaches the collection of manuscripts: 'Nú er best goðin ráða. Ég er þreyttur' (ÍSL, 428). I do not think that he actually believes in these gods or in fate as such, but rather that he repeats the old axioms out of cultural habit. To appear to give way before an inexorable fate condones his lethargy. It is a weakness not a strength in him. There is no inexorable fate rolling on. Others can save the books and in fact make efforts to do so, but Arnas gives up, overcome with willlessness and emptiness and blames the gods instead. Kristinn Andrússon compares him with Njáll when he dooms himself and his family by refusing to remain outside when Flósi attacks. <sup>15</sup>

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Arnas Arnæus is gifted and courtly, an outstanding man of the world, but to some extent he is lacking in personal integrity. In terms of Icelandic culture and heritage, his goal in life is honourable, but it is ruthlessly and selfishly pursued, and in this very pursuit he displays a want of a deeper selfless honour that might have brought him peace. In the end, rather like Bjartur in *Sjálfstætt fólk*, he finds himself alone, and that which he set his heart and his life on leaves him tired, empty and unsatisfied. I do not see him as a victim of fate but a victim of his own impersonal relations. That he puts value not on the human being and human feelings but only on cultural relics is well demonstrated in a telling conversation between him and Snæfríður, in which the two of them misunderstand each other:

Já hann Jón gamli Hreggviðsson, sagði Arnæus. Það var móðir hans sem geymdi einn mesta dýrgrip sem til er á Norðurlöndum. Já, sagði Snæfríður, hennar hjarta -  
Nei nokkur gömul skinnblöð, greip Arnas Arnæus frammi.  
Ég bið forláts. (ÍSL, 245)

From a religious point of view *Íslandsklukkan* is a dark work. Kristinn Andrésson regards it as solely pessimistic. According to him it is a tragedy for three individuals and for the nation as well. <sup>16</sup> He does not even notice the optimism of the blind man who envisages a time of maturity and then a going forward. Much of this pessimism is all too justified. Unlike all of Laxness's



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previous fictional works, there is not one sure voice to listen to, no single character with exceptional human warmth, except perhaps Jón's old mother, whose figure is very faint, and there are no children. The distanced and impersonal style allows only exteriors and façades to appear. There is much social indignation and passion, but little warmth. Perhaps for Laxness, too, this was a time for distancing and taking stock.

1. Matthew 5.3.
2. Mark 14.7.
3. Sönderholm, p.221.
4. 'Inngangur að Passíusálmum', in *Vettvangur dagsins*, p.7-44.
5. 'Minnisgreinar um fornsösur', in *Sjálfsgödir hlutir*, pp.7-74.
6. Kristinn Andrússon, *Det moderna Islands litteratur*, p.224.
7. 'Minnisgreinar um fornsögur', in *Sjálfsgödir hlutir*, p.35-37.
8. Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p.121.
9. *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, pp.121-29.
10. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p.198.
11. *Dagleið á fjöllum*, p.177.
12. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, pp.13-14.
13. Sönderholm, p.221.
14. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (Reykjavík, 1975), p.65.
15. Kristinn Andrússon, *Det moderna Islands litteratur*, p.223.
16. Kristinn Andrússon, *Det moderna Islands litteratur*, pp.226-28.

The Americans had promised to leave Iceland after the war but they proved unwilling to do so and instead they proposed to rent the most important air-base for ninety-nine years. The time for the 'loan' was eventually reduced to six and a half, and has since been extended after Iceland became a member of NATO. This event gave rise to a storm of protest from the Icelanders, who felt that their newly regained independence and their country were being sold. This is the background to Laxness's next novel, *Atómstöðin*, which is set in Reykjavík in the years immediately following World War II. The political situation and its implications are well documented by Peter Hallberg and Aldo Keel. <sup>1</sup> Kristinn Andrússon argues that the novel is essentially a satire on the Establishment and that the story of Ugly is only of minor importance. <sup>2</sup> I cannot agree with this view. The political significance will fade in time. I prefer Hermann Pálsson's opinion that a new evaluation needs to be made: 'When we reduce *The Atom Station* to its ultimate literary form we can hardly fail to recognise its archetypal affinity to quest romance'. <sup>3</sup> Pálsson quotes from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*: 'Translated into dream terms, the quest romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxiety of reality but will still contain that reality'. <sup>4</sup> So Ugly leaves the security of her home environment in the North and journeys into a new world, Reykjavík, in the South. Here her ideas and inherited values are shaken. When she returns to the North she finds that she has outgrown her home, after her encounters and experiences in the South. She departs again, knowing that she is going into the

unknown, which seems to offer her comparative security; she goes with a determination to grow and to find her own stature, and to earn, not so much her own bread as her own self-respect. *Atómstöðin* is the story of a quest which is embarked upon but not yet fulfilled. It is about the search for and the denial of ultimate values.

The new world that Uglá comes face to face with is Reykjavík, city of rampant, racketeering capitalism, boom city, part of which is made opulent through the profits of war. We are shown a society that is diseased and corrupt. It is without true integrity. Its riches, its abandoning of its traditional values and its national pride have led to a shameful emptiness, a rich misery, manifested here in a decadence with a veneer of American culture.

There is no place here for religious belief. The cook's religion is weighed down by sin and man's wickedness (ATÓ, 14), similar to the belief of the Salvation Army in *Salka Valka*, and the cook herself is a fanatic and does not have Laxness's serious sympathy. In the same way, the séance is not to be taken seriously. As in *Heimsljós*, it is a hoax and a lie. It is a symptom of the disease as a whole. The people are rootless and in search of sensation, not faith or values. As Dr Búi likes to explain matters: 'Áður gátu börn sigrað guð með því að elska hann og biðja; hann gerði þau hluthafa í almættinu. Nú hefur guð flutt sig burt, við vitum ekki hvurt, nema ef eitthvað kynni að vera eftir af honum í smálenskamrísku félaginu. Og börnin gera uppreist gegn vanmegnan sjálfsins í tímanum' (ATÓ, 126). He says this with specific reference to the children's vandalism, but the adults are

seen to be suffering from the same lack of security and dissatisfaction, so the words could equally well be applied to them. Dr Búi says himself: 'sá heimur sem ég hef lifað í er dæmdur' (ATÓ, 203).

This awareness of meaninglessness does not imply that Laxness or his Reykjavík characters hanker after the security of religious values and life as they used to be. Even though the solid good of the old order has disappeared, there is little indication that positive Christian values are actually missed. On the other hand, certain negative Christian attitudes are still abroad. Thus the moral outrage evinced by Búi's wife and the 'kona' who writes to the newspaper on the subject of unmarried mothers amounts to a hatred for those who violate the respectable moral code.

Búi himself believes virtually nothing. His religion, he says, is not Lutheranism, but is nearer to that of the one man in Christendom who believes nothing, and this, it appears, is the Pope. But because it is politic and because it suits his purpose and his purse, he has made himself a rule 'að styðja Jesú kallinn á þingi, mest af því ég er samþykkur okkar ókrossfesta þrekkjúða Marx, að krossinn sé ópíum fólkinu' (ATÓ, 155). Búi Árland, like Parliament, sells his soul. He is passive, cynical and resigned. He is of no use in the moral quest of the novel, since he participates in the big compromise of life, and in the lie.

His wife, on the other hand, is not guilty of compromise. This would imply that she had some appreciation of the validity of standards and goals other than her own and that she lets them down. This is not the case. Her mind is totally opposed to any

idea which is not bred within her own social sphere. She is lacking in all moral sense. She appears as a symbol of wasted womanhood and misunderstood, misused feminine sexuality. Hermann Pálsson writes that she 'personifies decadent bourgeois society, corresponds to the dark sinister female of romance'.<sup>5</sup> She is a symbol, primarily; she does not develop. She is indeed the only character that does not seem to call forth the author's compassion. He never allows us a glimpse of her, unmasked. Yet, for all this, he does not communicate to the reader any stringent personal antipathy towards her. Here we can remember the feeling that is almost class-hatred that he displayed twenty years earlier, in 'Og Lótusblómið ángar . . .'. The later figure of the spoilt woman is drawn without comparable malice, because Laxness now views such a type not so much as a product of a corrupt background, but more as its victim. The Organist's words, with reference to the children, can be applied to everyone corroded by a bad environment: 'það er ekki hægt að komast hjá því að hlutur sem liggur í saltvatni taki í sig salt' (ATÓ, 56).

Much less is it the children's fault that they behave as they do. They grow up in a home where the mother gives them an extreme example of gross selfishness and where the father has washed his hands of parental responsibility. The father figure has given up, not only with his own children, but with children in general. It is typical that he loosely puts the blame on God for letting men down: 'hvað á að gera við börn. Æskulýðshöll, segið þér. Eftilvill. Áður fyr, meðan við þektum guðinn en ekki manninn, var einginn vandí að ala upp börn. En nú: guðinn, hið eina sem við

þektum, - hann hefur svikið okkur. Eftir stendur maðurinn einsamall, hið óþekta. Getur æskulýðshöll hjálpað í því falli?' (ATÓ, 127). It is no wonder that his own children are strangers to respect and courtesy, that they steal and kill minks, indulge in drunken orgies and get pregnant at the age of fourteen. They have absorbed the salt from the atmosphere.

This sickness of the South is most forcefully conjured up by the different responses to Aldinblóð's pregnancy and to pregnancy in general. The child's initial reaction is to take her own life, but she need hardly trouble herself with the expenditure of such emotional energy, for, without consulting her, her father arranges an abortion for her straightaway. Reykjavík sees no wonder in children; it chooses abortion, death, so that Aldinblóð says of the doctor, 'hann drap mig' (ATÓ, 143), and her baby is referred to as 'krakkinn' (ATÓ, 138). Uglya, on the other hand, is amazed at the beauty of children, at the children of 'guðinn briljantín' at the Organist's house: 'ó þau voru svo miklar blessaðar elskur' (ATÓ, 129), and she chooses life and returns home to the North, to give birth to her child, where it is unconditionally welcomed.

There is religion in the North, but it is doubtful exactly what it comprises. The farmers in Uglya's home district have coined their own belief, stemming chiefly from saga principles. It is, at least, certain that they do not believe in the God of Christianity and the other Judaic religions. They restore only the fabric of their local Christian church, and even in the restoration they effect an essential difference, for, above the altar, instead of a religious painting, they introduce a plain glass window giving a

view over the slopes of their land. This is of considerable psychological significance. Their faith is not dominated by the Old or New Testaments; nor is it constrained by a written law or a visible body of authorities. It is free. It is of the open land and in the open land, elemental.

Yet, at the same time, the people to a certain extent accept, or at least make use of some of the observances of Christianity. Thus Ugla's child is officially baptised in the church. A ritual, perhaps one seen as a superstition, is still observed. Ugla herself is sceptical, but séra Trausti reassures her: 'Taktu ekkert mark á því sem ég kann að lesa uppúr handbókinni með vörnum: í huganum skírum við hana til allífsbrekkunnar' (ATÓ, 174).

Séra Trausti, himself a Lutheran priest, is a strange combination of beliefs. He moves simply and freely among his cynical flock, having confidence in those who trust simply in the guidance of the Holy Spirit (ATÓ, 190), understanding the Scriptures without the mediation of the Pope (ATÓ, 191). Yet he also demonstrates that his governing belief is not that of the Lutheran Church but rather one more akin to the belief of the local inhabitants. So, in baptising Ugla's child, he does not say in so many words that he is not baptising her into life in God through the Church, but he implies that life is to be found elsewhere, in the slopes of the surrounding land. He gives one to understand, that, whereas earlier churches protected their people from the distracting beauty of nature, he and his people see and believe in another way. They believe not just in the vague

goodness of the created world, but in something more personal: 'Við trúum á landið sem guð hefur gefið okkur; á sveitina þar sem fólkið okkar hefur átt heima í þúsund ár; við trúum á hlutverk sveitanna í íslensku þjóðlífi; við trúum á grænu brekkuna þar sem allífið á heima' (ATÓ, 164). His faith is a blending of an almost fanatical faith in the spirit of the countryside and in the Holy Spirit itself.

By contrast, the Holy Spirit is an almost unknown quantity to Uglá's father, Falur, and to his associates. According to him, their God is the one that remains when all the others have been taken away:

Það er að vísu hvorki lútersguð né páfaguð; og því síður Jesúguð, þó sá kunni að vera tíðnefndastur í fyrirskipuðu lesi prestsins; og ekki heldur þeir Þór, Óðinn og Freyr; jafnvel ekki sjálfur graðhesturinn, einsog þeir halda fyrir sunnan. Okkar guð er það sem eftir er þegar öll guð hafa verið talin og sagt nei, ekki hann, ekki hann. (ATÓ, 167)

Their God is the Indescribable. With an echo from *Tao Te Ching*, 'The name that can be named, /Is not the constant name',<sup>6</sup> Falur says 'Að útskýra guð væri að hafa aungvan guð' (ATÓ, 167).

Dr Búi is impressed by the men from the North and says that they worship the horse, 'einu lifandi verur sem hafi sál' (ATO, 155). But much of Búi's nature, like that of these men, is cynical and what he says cannot be taken at its face value. Uglá tends to think that the local men take refuge in unreality.



Economically the farmers are divorced from the realities of modern life, but as Falur explains: 'við lifum . . . við lifum' (ATÓ, 165). But Ugly also sees the men as play-acting, considering themselves as characters from folk-tale (ATÓ, 164). Geir í Miðhúsum, for example, wants never to leave the valley alive, but wishes to spend eternity higher up among the saga heroes and poets (ATÓ, 161). Others play the role of the sceptic or the horse-worshipper etc. Jón á Barði's faith is described as 'sú hestamannatrú sem nær mundi að kenna við völsa [a heathen phallus idoll en krist' (ATÓ, 160). He never mentions the church other than as God's mare and the priest is the stallion of the soul-stud (ATÓ, 160). His prayer is a crazy gibberish beginning with 'Faðir vor' (ATÓ, 161). It should not be confused with the garbled prayer of Tolstoy's three old men, mentioned in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (VEF, 299). There, the apparent nonsense stems from a holy confusion, which replaces the reasoning of language. Here, there is no real prayer, only meaningless repetition. The horse-worshipping is a game and it does not ring true.

Yet while this is a non-productive approach, other aspects of the northern farmers' lives are strong and robust, free from inhibitions and from the prohibitions of a moral code. In Hermann Pálsson's words: 'In this valley . . . life is lived without conflict or sin. Man exists, as it were, in an unfallen state, and in such a context, freedom is an inherent quality in being alive'.<sup>7</sup> Life is accepted and warmly embraced, and the child that Ugly is carrying is assured of its home and its security. There is

no judgement. The South denies and aborts, whereas the North responds in the affirmative and welcomes the unborn.

Yet it is this life-affirming environment that Uglya decides to leave a second time. Why? It does not seem an exaggeration to say that she leaves because the God of the North is neuter. Falur explains: 'Snorri Sturluson hvorugkennir guðið og ég ætla mér ekki þá dul að vita betur en hann' (ATÓ, 166). The God that the northern farmers choose to envisage is, therefore, impersonal, and it is the impersonal quality of the God that they admire and aspire to and this is reflected in their manner of life. Here are no tears or laughter. Here there is no room for love, nor for any talk of the soul. Here is no mystery, no wonder. But instead there is a stoic aspiration to emotional insensibility, and a repression of sentiment and tenderness, which are regarded as a fault. It seems that Uglya herself finds that these impersonal, neuter values are insufficient and hollow in the life outside. She is brought up never to cry, but in Reykjavík, despite her training, she discovers the truth of tears. To Aldinblóð she says, 'og sá sem grætur deyr ekki; grátur er lífsmerki: gráttu, og líf þitt er aftur nokkurs vert' (ATÓ, 144). She is brought up to disregard romantic love. She resists her shy policeman in spirit, out of pride and independence, but when she can appear in a different light, as a saviour, then she acknowledges the truth of her feelings for the father of her child. So having grown through the repressive, stultifying attitudes of her background, having outgrown the neuter God, she can no longer remain and thrive in an

atmosphere that denies the life of the emotions and the non-sentimental heart.

In his article 'Theology and the Atom Station' John MacQueen writes that 'Iceland, in fact, is the only image of Falur's god, and the event which gives the novel its title is the betrayal of that image by an atheistic community in the south. The god only survives in the north . . . that it is from the north that salvation must come, remains perhaps the central point of the novel'.<sup>29</sup> He further suggests that the god, being neuter, 'may be incarnate in woman or man. Uglá is thus certainly a symbol of the divinity in Iceland, which the politicians cannot control'.<sup>30</sup> I would not be quite so certain about this. I can hardly see Uglá as a divinity. She is a robust country girl looking for the truth and for life. She turns her back on the values of the countryside of which MacQueen would make her a goddess. A few people, it would seem, do retain an image of a God of the wild open countryside, but these people are in many respects remote and out of touch. It would rather appear to me that salvation is to be looked for in the haven of the Organist's house. Uglá leaves the North and makes her way there.

On the surface, these two environments have certain attitudes in common. For example, each affirms the right to live and the dignity of life; neither puts much store on money; each is detached from the current affairs of the political world; each has a trust in the future. Yet below the surface there are fundamental but subtle differences in approach. The Northerners may be detached and objective, but they are also untried. They do not

value money because they have never known it. The Organist, on the other hand, knows well what money is, but has seen its destructive power, seen through it and beyond it, and therefore, putting no store on it, can even burn it; but when money will save, then he is prepared to sacrifice his home to procure the necessary sum. To see through money and yet to see its beneficial power is different from scoffing at it out of ignorance.

Almost in the same way, Uglá's child is accepted in the North. Their reaction is good and uncomplicated. The people do not know what 'respectability' is, so they cannot offend against it. But in the Organist's house, the acceptance of illegitimate children is not simply an acceptance without judgement, it is an acceptance born of the experience of loneliness and the stigma of illegitimacy, and born of wonder at the irrepressible mystery and beauty of each life, totally irrespective of 'respectability'. So 'respectability', like money, is not unknown, but it has been tried and tested and discarded as a sham.

Much of the good of the North seems, in fact, to be untested, automatic, sterile tradition, whereas the good of the Organist's house seems to be the outcome of thoughtful examination, as well as the fruit of passionate experience, all of which result in an innate personal reverence for everything that has life. In Judaic-Christian words the Organist might well have exclaimed 'Let everything that has breath praise the Lord', 'o be it the roses that he cultivates, be it the prostitute with the unfathomable soul (ATÓ, 50), be it all loose women, for there are no loose women (ATÓ, 27), be it the children, of whom, whatever their behaviour,

one may speak no ill (ATÓ, 119), be it policemen, criminals or unmarried mothers aged fourteen, all, in his eyes, all are free from condemnation, worthy of respect and wonder and joy: 'Okkar tími, okkar líf- það er okkar fegurð' (ATÓ, 24). Unlike the farmers who are rooted in the past, the Organist lives intensely here and now: 'Við erum allir hér nú' (ATÓ, 120). He rejoices in all, forgives all, makes no demands. To quote Hermann Pálsson again: 'As a literary type, the organist belongs to the same category as the Wise Old Man we often find in romance. He is, essentially, a redeemer, and once we realise that his mother belongs to the same archetype as the Holy Virgin, we can hardly fail to see that he is a kind of Christ figure'. ''

Of course the Organist does not confess the Christian faith. He is opposed to, rather than in favour of, the kind of Christianity that has evolved. He sees only too well the damage that Christian morality has done to his mother. The doctrine of her youth taught her that all men were lost sinners, and she, as a sinner and as an unmarried child-mother, has been robbed of all peace of soul and mind (ATÓ, 122). She has watched at night and prayed to the Christian God, 'óvin mannlegs lífs' (ATÓ, 122), to forgive her her sins. Yet she is without bitterness and only full of unconditional love for her fellow men, though she betrays a certain disillusionment towards God: 'Maðurinn er fullkomnari en guðinn' (ATÓ, 122). And the only words she remembers in her old age are 'gerið þið svo vel' and 'guð blessi ykkur' (ATÓ, 122). The Organist is no spokesman for formal Christianity, but he and his mother are personifications of compassion and open-heartedness.

As a Wise Old Man the Organist is instinctively revered by those in his circle. Uglá is filled with confidence in his presence and feels that he knows what is right for each one of them. The shy policeman regards him as being above God, and Kleópatra sees him as a holy man. Even Búi Árland admits he was always well ahead of his contemporaries. But his wisdom is not knowledge or information, neither is it limited to erudite or artistic spheres. It is found primarily in his far-sighted philosophy and, in the face of chaos, in a serenity which is full of a joyous faith.

Because the Organist lives essentially in one place, and in the present, unfettered by the past and undisturbed by the future, he has an understanding of the unimportance of place and of the transience of things: 'Við erum öll næturgestir í ókunnum stað' (ATÓ, 214), and the awareness of the shortness of time does not detract from his delight: 'En það er yndislegt að hafa farið þessa ferð' (ATÓ, 214).

He seems not to grasp desperately at his own identity, but instead to be content to have faith in the eventual perfection of the whole, which he rejoices in. A man's life is not an end in itself but a contribution. Around him is atomic tension, fear of atomic annihilation, but he looks beyond with optimism: 'Fólk er ódauðlegt. Það er ekki hægt að afmá mannkynið - á þessari jarðöld' (ATÓ, 211). It may well be, he says, that the world will be destroyed by war but he believes that there will rise up 'nýtt blómaskeið . . . kjarnorkusprengjan afmáir borgir en ekki landafræði; svo Ísland heldur áfram að standa' (ATÓ, 212).

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The only really dangerous crime in society, he says ironically, is to come from the country. The urban way of denigrating that which is unspoiled and simple, its lack of wonder and perception will cause the cities of the world to fall. His dream is of a return to innocence, peace and simplicity. This is his vision for the world after the holocaust: 'Þá hefst menning sveitanna, jörðin verður sá garður sem hún aldrei var fyr nema í draumum og ljóðum -' (ATO, 213), and there will be rose trees and swans on the water. His heart is not troubled. He is a man of intrinsic peace.

Once again it is possible to compare the Organist's faith in the future with that of the Northern farmers. *Falur* reassures Uglá that the peace of their rural life will remain even when the metropolises of the world have collapsed: 'Hér mun meira að segja verða lifað á kú og á barnið gott eftir að Parísarborg, Lundúnir og Róma eru orðnir lítilsháttar mosavaxin hölkn' (ATÓ, 165). But it is only an uninterrupted continuation of the present that he promises. It is complacency - privately optimistic but not visionary; it only offers a continuation of rough comfort, not purification through fire, nor resurrection to beauty on the other side of suffering and horror.

The cultivation of his roses is a sign of the Organist's belief in the ultimate triumph of the simple, the natural and the beautiful. To grow roses in Reykjavík is no easy matter; it requires persistence and faith. It is not justifiable to say that he places aesthetics above morality because he expresses himself in terms of flowers and beauty. His morality consists in his total reverence for life, and total reverence takes time and it takes

account of the dignity of others. His doors are not closed to the world; they are open; they offer refuge and understanding.

Hermann Pálsson sees the Organist's vision as 'the return of man to the primal world of myth, to the ideal landscape, the unfallen state of Eden, to Paradise regained'.<sup>12</sup> He interprets the Organist's approach in biblical terms and in his footnote echoes Isaiah 51.3: 'Yes, Yahweh has pity on Zion, has pity on all her ruins; turns her desolation into an Eden, her waste land into the garden of Yahweh'.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that Hermann Pálsson roots Laxness in the Bible, for it supports the position I take with regard to 'Temúdsjín snýr heim' (*Sjö Töframenn*) — that Laxness's Taoism is in fact easily related to Christianity.

How much Taoism actually is there in the portrayal of this redeemer figure? Ólafur Jónsson asks: 'Var ekki líka organistinn fyrsta heila mannlýsing Halldórs sem alfarib mótast af margumræddum "táoisma" hans?'.<sup>14</sup> To attempt to answer this, it would be well to look briefly at the model for the character, namely Erlendur í Unuhúsi, who died in 1947, the year before the novel was published. It is dedicated to him: 'Þessi bók er samín í minningu Erlends í Unuhúsi . . . en honum á ég flest að þakka'.<sup>15</sup> Erlendur had appeared in an earlier unpublished manuscript: *Rauða kverib* (1921-22), where he is described as being richer in Tao than any other man.<sup>16</sup> He also appears in *Heiman ek fór* (1924) as meistari Ásgrímur. In a letter to a friend in 1925 Laxness describes Erlendur as being 'eins og Jesús Kristur í sjón, óháður heiminum og öllum ómerkilegum girndum . . . það sem hjá kaþólskum mundi vera nefnt heilagur maður'.<sup>17</sup> Erlendur is gratefully



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remembered by Laxness in two essays: 'Eftir gestaboðið' (1947), <sup>19</sup> and 'Steinn Steinarr' (1958). <sup>19</sup>

The Organist is often supposed to be a Tao figure, but I have reservations. In *Atómstöðin*, there is, in fact, no mention of *Tao Te Ching* by the Organist himself, and his philosophy does not seem to be stamped by any specifically Taoist features. He is detached from and raised above the confusion and the stress of life; he sees into the heart of people and things; he has faith in the triumph of the good and the beautiful; he is unmarked by pharisaism and the perversion of Christianity which turns Christ's teaching into little more than a code for sexual morality, and a great deal less than a way of compassion and love.

These qualities are not confined to Taoism. They belong to well-integrated, free, peace-loving people wherever they may be. The Organist is not bound by any one school of thought. Of course the serenity he displays is advocated in *Tao Te Ching*. This is undeniable. But it is found elsewhere as well.

The Organist embodies optimism and hope in *Atómstöðin* and he has a great influence on Uglá. She demonstrates this optimism in her sexuality, that is in her femininity, her maternalness, her capacity to protect and foster. She is all Mother, Earth Mother. Children are natural to her and welcome. Her own pregnancy is regarded with no alarm. All children are beautiful to her, and it is through their beauty that she begins to understand the all-embracing love for mankind that the Organist's elderly mother shows (ATÓ, 130). But it is not only innocent children that come to her; Dr Búi's children are given to her too by some kind of

'óflekkaður getnaður' (ATÓ, 102). These she takes to herself, baptising them with her own symbolic names. Laxness allows his own large-heartedness to speak through her. She sees beyond the hard exterior of the spoiled teenagers, to the vulnerability beneath.

It is the children that are the hope for the future. This is not only a personal feeling for Ugly, it is a strength of feeling that acts as a sub-theme underlying the Organist's belief in resurgence; resurgence in the future; children tomorrow; flow; procession; continuation. And because of this Tomorrow, which is theirs, the children must be cared for and loved Today. This optimism and faith in the future testify to an essentially religious spirit.

Ugly's optimism is also demonstrated by her attitude to sexual love. It is apparent that she has come to the realisation of the church's fear of, and therefore, condemnation of sexual love, and so she has come to regard the church as having been 'höfuðóvinur mannlegrar náttúru í tvö þúsund ár (ATÓ, 174). In this, she echoes Laxness's own views at the time of writing *Alþýðubókin*.<sup>20</sup> But she herself is not burdened with any feelings of guilt or shame. When considering her relationship with her shy policeman she is positive: 'ef það var rángt, þá er lífið sjálft hinn svívirðilegi glæpur saungvarans og skáldsins' (ATÓ, 94). This is a step further on from Ásta Sóllilja's feelings, which were confused (SJÁ, 374).

Ugly's positive values and optimism are finally depicted in her relationship with Dr Búi. Ugly represents new life for him. Some part of him is drawn back to the simple life and he sees her as the connecting link: 'þér hafið jarðsamband' (ATÓ, 47). However, he

has really already given up in life. Significantly, it is he who arranges the abortion. Hermann Pálsson writes: 'this is an interesting feature, as the antagonist in romance is often an enemy of life and explicitly associated with sterility'.<sup>21</sup> John MacQueen has pointed out that Búi is a Satan figure.<sup>22</sup> Thus Ugly recalls his words to her: 'Alt sem þú biður um skaltu fá - einhvernveginn hafði ég aldrei komið þessu saman og heim fyren nú, að gamalli kristindómsklausu sem ég hafði lært krakki skaut aftur uppí hug mér: alt þetta skal ég gefa þér ef þú fellur fram' (ATÓ, 222). According to Pálsson 'her real antagonist is not the Tempter, but the very spirit of capitalism he personifies'.<sup>23</sup> Ugly rejects Búi and the things that he stands for. He offers her escape to Patagonia, but it is a negative escape, sheer flight. It is not the promise of the Organist's land of flowers. Dr Búi is on the way out of life; Ugly is on the way in. For him the world is doomed and will soon be full of savages, but such despondency is alien to her: 'Ég sem hélt nú væri heimsmenningin að byrja . . . Ég hélt við værum að byrja að verða menn' (ATÓ, 202).

Búi Árland relinquishes ultimate values. Willlessly, and yet, at the same time, I believe against his will, he finds that he sells his soul, while Ugly begins to learn to save hers, to save it by means of service and love and hope. But saving the soul is not easy; it is an art. The Organist knows this art and passes it on to the young girl. As she says of his flowers as she watches the sham, patriotic funeral procession: 'Hvers virði hefði mér þótt að lifa ef ekki hefði verið þessi blóm?' (ATÓ, 223).

Finally, what does Laxness's religious position seem to be in *Atómstöðin*? Most markedly, he appears as a pacifist, that is, not a pacifist in the political sense, but in a more profound, inner sense. The all-pervading serenity and compassion of the Organist are clearly greatly admired by him. It is not just a case of not taking up arms in war, but of not taking up arms in any situation, which by no means implies indifference or neutrality. On the contrary, it implies an undisturbed and constant fidelity and solidarity. There is no special indication that this is supposed to be interpreted as Taoism.

Christianity fares rather poorly again. As in *Íslandsklukkan*, there are no Christian figures that have the writer's wholehearted approval. The Organist's mother is holy in spite of Christianity and not because of it. Christianity is the two-thousand-year-old enemy of human nature and love (ATÓ, 174); marriage is the sacrament 'sem heilagir menn máttu skýrpa á' (ATÓ, 146); there is only one sexual perversion and that is celibacy, the boast of the Catholic Church (ATÓ, 27). Christianity is there to obstruct life and vision, to cut off man's view of the beauty of the created world (ATÓ, 164). And Laxness is still pleased to rail against and speak irreverently of Catholic beliefs: of the Immaculate Conception (ATÓ, 102); the Virgin Mary with a penis and twins (ATÓ, 130); the man who believes nothing, the Pope (ATÓ, 155). Lutheranism comes off no better than Catholicism. In the North, there is latent hostility towards it since it was imposed by the Danes (ATÓ, 167). There is wide-spread scepticism. It never occurs to people to believe what the priest

says in the pulpit (ATÓ, 169). After so many years, Laxness still dwells on distortions of Christianity.

1. Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II. pp.139-45. See also Keel, *Innovation und Restauration*, pp.8-23.
2. Kristinn Andrússon, *Íslenzkar nútímabókmenntir 1918-48*, p.335.
3. Hermann Pálsson, 'Beyond the Atom Station', in *Ideas and Ideologies*, p.321.
4. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), quoted in 'Beyond the Atom Station', p. 323.
5. 'Beyond the Atom Station', p.327.
6. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, I, p.57.
7. 'Beyond the Atom Station', p.326.
8. MacQueen, 'Theology and the Atom Station', *Afmæliskveðjur heiman og handan*, pp.80-83.
9. MacQueen, pp.81.
10. Psalm 150.6.
11. 'Beyond the Atom Station', p.327.
12. 'Beyond the Atom Station', p.329.
13. 'Beyond the Atom Station', 329, footnote.
14. Ólafur Jónsson, 'Í heimi sagnamanns', p.80.
15. Quoted in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p.153.
16. Quoted in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p.157.
17. Quoted in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p.154.
18. 'Eftir gestaboðid', in *Reisubókakorn*, pp.111-15.
19. 'Steinn Steinarr', in *Gjörningabók*, pp.137-38.

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20. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p. 203.
21. 'Beyond the Atom Station', p. 328.
22. MacQueen, p. 83.
23. 'Beyond the Atom Station', p. 323.

*Gerpla* was published in 1952, and thus like the two preceding novels, during the time of the Cold War - a time when Laxness expressed himself as a convinced pacifist. His political addresses are collected in *Dagur í senn* (1955), and there he states his conviction that war and the cold war are the obsession of politicians and not the people. 'Contemporary events may be reflected in his novel, but as Hallberg says, 'it might perhaps be necessary to subject it to a searching scrutiny in order to see that this is true'.<sup>2</sup>

*Gerpla* is a study of ideals. The greater part of it is taken up by belligerency, by actual war and all its attendant values: honour, heroism, stoicism and personal detachment; the lesser part treats peace, prosperity, the home and the farm. That it turns out to be a sad tale of lost illusions and wasted opportunities for life demonstrates clearly just where the author's sympathies lie. It is also an extremely funny work, but the irony does not serve so much as a relief from horror as an unsparing spotlight on it. It is written in strict saga style, combining material taken largely from *Ólafs saga helga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, but within the strict limitations of the form, Laxness has used licence. By means of heavy irony he shifts the perspective so that, now, hardly any of the ancient code of honour is presented with respect. It is seen to be worn-out, harmful, empty, bringing nothing but devastation and pain.

Laxness's religious views do not seem to have altered in this work. It is manifestly clear that he does not support saga values, but the book - which could be called the statement of a

pacifist — does not seem to have progressed from the subtle pacifism of the *Organist*, but rather it seems to be a confirmation of the old attitudes in *Íslandsklukkan*, an enlarging on his feelings about tyranny and bloodshed. What Laxness approves in the narrative is peaceful domesticity, and the simplicity and prosperity of communities that support themselves by agriculture or the work of their own hands. What he deplores is false ideology, war-mongering, and religious fanaticism and hypocrisy. His satire is especially directed at the Church's attitude to war.

I shall look firstly at those aspects of *Gerpla* that focus on peace.

In his essay 'Halldór Laxness, Swift and the Eskimos' Rory McTurk points to the atmosphere of serenity and happiness that surrounds the domestic scenes of Þormóður's family life, until this smooth running is disturbed by the challenging re-emergence of heroic values, with the appearance of Þorgeir's severed head. He also points out the strong emotional hold that Þormóður's family, particularly his little daughters, have on him right up to his death. 'The true "idyll" or "ideal" of *Gerpla* is the fruitful life of the farmer'.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand McTurk suggests that Laxness's description of life among the Eskimos is not entirely the unmarred paradise that critics have usually taken it to be. Peter Hallberg, for instance, writes: 'Það er einhver hrifandi tímalaus friðsæld yfir þessu nátturufólki'.<sup>4</sup> McTurk, however, notices a certain disparagement of Eskimo food, love, poetry and their disproportionate punishment for infidelity, which is in some measure encouraged anyway. Aldo Keel, too, recognises that



'dieser Gesellschaftsformation ist Grausamkeit bekannt'.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, apart from these defects, the picture of life in Greenland is portrayed as one blessed with peace and plenty. The Eskimo people are not occupied with weapons or deeds of gallantry. They do not kill or understand revenge. They have no kings, no bishops, no legal authorities, only 'bónda þann er sér hefur gert tunglið að soðningarstað, og svo konu einhenda er byggir sjávarbotna' (GER, 409). Most significantly the community is shown here to be 'sannlegur smiður sinnar hamíngju' (GER, 377). Happiness and well-being do not therefore depend on oppressing others, but on good relations, consideration of the needs of society, the family or the tribe, on hospitality, and on the cultivation of the available natural resources for the needs of existence.

Laxness also shows the economic prudence of agricultural life in Norway, as opposed to plundering. Ironically, he speaks of Sigurður sýr sticking at home in disrepute: 'Sigurður sýr . . . réð fyrir auði mikla meira, bæði í reiðufé og dýrgripum, en víkingur mátti ná með æfilegum frægðarverkum á fjarlægum löndum' (GER, 302). This is important. The principal motive for raiding is gathering wealth, but Laxness demonstrates that such exploits bring comparatively poor returns in the long run. In fact there is a viable alternative to raiding, if only blood lust can be subdued. Sigurður sýr is an example of the successful man of peace who has chosen the new method of finding a living for himself and his followers. Because of his peace and prosperity in Norway Régis Boyer looks upon him as 'le portrait du bon roi et du chrétien tolerant'.<sup>6</sup> Then again, in Iceland Þorgils Arason speaks in the

same vein: 'eg hef auðgast mest af hinu, að drepa eigi menn . . . og ræð eg þér að gera eftir mínu dæmi, góður dreingur, og far heim til bús þíns og auðgast á því að gefa mönnum líf' (GER, 324). Laxness seems to include in the idea of economic enrichment a corresponding accompanying spiritual wealth, for, if all goes well, a peaceful outlook, an ordered life, and a magnanimous mind result in material well-being, as is illustrated in the establishment and in the person of Þorgils Arason.

But at the same time it is those who desire and value peace who suffer most at the hands of the oppressors and the war-mongers. All over Europe there are scenes of misery brought about by them. Alfeugus, the Archbishop of Canterbury is a rare exception among the clerics in *Gerpla*, in that he suffers humiliation and death, rather than sanction them (GER, 193). In Iceland life is constantly being disrupted by the obsession of the few with murder and revenge. In Norway the peasants relate their successive troubles and insults, including that of Ólafur and his three wise men and twelve apostles contaminating the drinking water. In France the result of tyranny is the same. The old woman whom Þorgeir lodges with observes: 'En Kristur hefur alla menn skapta fríðmenn, þó að landstjórnarmenn og hetjur vilji jafnan drepa oss' (GER, 257). In Ireland Kolbakur, before he is taken as a slave, sees his entire family murdered by so-called heroes and skalds. Kolbakur and the French peasants are Christians; they expect a different treatment; this is not what Christ commanded. The two cultures, the pagan and the Christian, clash. But of course it is the perversion of Christianity by Christians, turning it into a justification for

butchery, that is shown as the greatest evil. Wherever the action occurs there is evidence of the misery wrought by the false ideology of war and revenge and by the passionate perversion of Christ's peaceful doctrine.

*Gerpla* is a parody of Glorious War, so that its brutality is clearly exposed. But war is also shown as a recourse for moral cowards. Here is might — not right; the impact of weapons and not moral conviction. This understanding is expressed by Kolbakur, for he learned in Ireland 'að stáli trúir þeir menn einir er blaut hafi hjörtu' (GER, 332). It is also expressed by a Norwegian peasant: 'Í styrjöld munu þeir einir miður hafa er trúá stáli' (GER, 471). It is found too in the narrative description of the night before the battle of Stiklarstaðir, this being most certainly the voice of the author: 'Sváfu margir útlendir menn í væni þess er þeir mundu með tilbeina Krists, Þórs og Jómala og þess stáls er hræddir menn virða guðum fremra, brjóta gervallan Noreg undir sig' (GER, 490). Thus Laxness seems to say that those who are faint-hearted or who do not have the inner authority and certainty that come from true conviction need and use weapons to add conviction to their cause and to add to their own deficient strength. In perceiving the real moral weakness of those who need and rely on force, Laxness shows a glimpse of hope. These men are weaker than the oppressed men of integrity. As Peter Hallberg expresses it: 'Þormóður clearly has a premonition that the slave Kolbakur, with his peace-loving ideals, represents those who shall finally inherit the earth'.<sup>7</sup> The probability of Kolbakur's ideals becoming dominant over those of the old pagan gods shows how peaceful Christianity may take root

not through brute missionary force or zeal, which is clearly condemned, but rather through the example of such a lowly man, a slave, in his patience and moral uprightness. However, it must be stressed that in *Gerpla* it is peace itself, rather than its source, that is important, peace at any cost, so that the peace that can spring from Christianity is valued above a Christianity that just happens to be peaceful.

With regard to false ideology Erik Sønderholm makes the following comment:

Hans [Laxness's] egen tilknytning først til katolicismen og senere til marxismen havde belært ham om, hvordan en ideologi kan blænde sine tilhængere, så de bliver kritikløse tilbedere, der simpelt hen forhindres i at erkende noget som virkeligt, der strider imod ideologien; de ser virkeligheden gennem ideologiens farvede briller. Af egen erfaring vidste Laxness, at en overbevisning ofte er dyrekøbt, men til gengæld kan den give mening i livet og bevirke, at en mand udfører store gerninger, men lige så vel vidste han, at ideologien nødvendigvis skaber intolerance. <sup>9</sup>

How far Laxness's attitudes to ideologies have in fact been moulded by his own ideological flirtations is hard to assess. He has often allowed his characters to be led astray from the reality of simple, daily life, and this to their own detriment, but mostly they are led astray by escapist dreams not by a socially dangerous ideology itself: Ólafur Káráson by the dream of beauty,

Steinar Steinsson by the dream of a paradise on earth. Now in *Gerpla* there is little that is dream-like that is illustrated but rather the demonic force of an ideology. It is shown as the motivating force behind Þorgeir the warrior and as the pointlessly destructive force behind Þormóður the heroic poet. Though Þormóður's quest starts as an unrealistic dream, he has the lesson of reality to learn. He leaves his home to avenge the murder of Þorgeir. His disillusionment when he meets the king and the warriors he has dreamed of is poignant. The heroism and the gallantry that he had looked for are exposed as meanness and vulgarity; his foster brother is unknown; his Lord and King is pathetic and uninterested. For him he has composed a lay and paid too dearly for it: 'Þetta kvæði keypti eg við sælu minni og sól, og dætrum mínum, túngli og stjörnu; og við friðleik sjálfs mín og heilsu, hendi og fæti, hári og tönn; og loks við ástkonu minni sjálfri er byggir undirdjúpin og geymir fjöreggs míns . . . Nú kem eg eigi leingur fyrir mig því kvæði, segir hann, og stendur upp seinlega, og haltrar á brott við lurk sinn' (GER, 493).

Laxness's presentation of ideologies as a demonic force in *Gerpla* must be attributed to his horror of fascism and violence. There is too much passion and anger for it to have stemmed solely from his own embarrassing religious infatuation from the past. Steingrímur Þorsteinsson writes that *Gerpla* is 'a parody of "Fóstbræðra saga" . . . using the characters and motives of the saga to display the aggressive war madness of our own age (Hitler, Stalin, etc.) and of all time'. <sup>9</sup> Steingrímur was writing in 1972. At the time of working on *Gerpla* Laxness had not yet

turned his back on Stalin. This did not happen publicly until the publication of *Skáldatími* in 1963. There, explaining the attitudes of like-minded writers to the Soviet Union in the preceding decades, that is, the attitudes of those who revered it, he writes; 'Við trúðum ekki af því aðrir lygju að það væri gott, heldur af því að við lugum því okkur sjálfir. Afneitun staðreynda fylgir oft dýrmætustum vonum manna og hugsjónum'.<sup>10</sup> So in *Gerpla* Laxness is not actually attacking Communism. In 1965 he writes with even more feeling, expressing his pain during the writing of *Gerpla*. It seems to be pain not just because of the wretchedness of the subject matter, but also pain at the disillusion of those who have been deceived by their hopes and by the very fabric of their ideals: 'Den er den mest tragiske bok jeg har skrevet. Jeg har skrevet den under store lidelser. Parallellene skulle være klare nok. Vi vil aldrig glemme de skaldere og helter som rente i fotefarene til Stalin og Hitler'.<sup>11</sup> Again he is looking back some twelve or thirteen years and adding to his memory of the dark subject matter the more recently acquired dark knowledge of the tyranny behind the idealistic screen of Communism and its former leader. Hannes Pétursson also supports the view that the belligerent characters in *Gerpla* are modern in nature: 'Menn einsog Þorgeir voru lítils ráðandi á söguöld, að mínum dómi, en hafa aftur á móti nýlega steyppt mannkyninu út í hörmulega styrjöld'.<sup>12</sup> And Erik Sønderholm also makes the point: 'Det er tydeligt, at den oratorisk begavede og sadistiske Olaf har lånt væsentlige træk fra Hitler og hans håndlangere'.<sup>13</sup> Finally Laxness himself says: 'Ég vildi fjalla um persónur sem hafa verið

til á öllum tímum, um menn sem eru alltaf að leita að einhverjum allsherjar sannleik; og leita að sínum konungi. Auðvitað er þetta stílað uppá nútímann og alla tíma. Ég hef aldrei trúað á stál'.<sup>14</sup>

Laxness's pacifism must be regarded as part of his religious outlook. The background to it has already been thoroughly researched from a political point of view by Peter Hallberg and others.<sup>15</sup> Here it is necessary to examine the other side; his abhorrence of fanaticism spilling out in bloodshed and the Church's general blessing on war - 'that wholesale manslaughter loved by kings and heroes, sanctioned by religionists and moralists and glorified by scalds'.<sup>16</sup>

In order to invigorate and intensify his picture of religious fanaticism and perverted Christian teaching, Laxness has often distorted accepted historical tradition in *Gerpla*. He has also been merciless towards the Church. There are few who escape his attack. Only Kolbakur and Alfegus seem to have no ulterior motives of self-interest, and they are quiet and are scarcely heard against the roar of the holy cause. Laxness seems to betray a personal antipathy that is still smouldering. There is amassed bitterness and no forbearance. In *Heimsljós* and *Íslandsklukkan* his feeling of disappointment and indignation caused by his experience of the Catholic Church seemed to have waned. He seemed to have distanced himself, to have become stiller. Now his indignation seems to be re-awakened. His anger is renewed by the Pope's and the Church's open support of the Korean War and of war in general. In particular it is worth quoting his words from an article in 1952: 'Þegar ég sé mynd af tveggja ára gömlum börnum úr Kóreu,

sem hafa ásamt mæðrum sínum verið steikt lifandi með napalm sprengju fyrir ástar sakir hvítra manna á Kristi, þeirrar ástar sem hans heilagleiki páfinn lýsti svo skýrt um daginn að við ættum að bera í brjósti þegar við berðumst við kommúnista, þá fer um mig hrollur orðlausrar smánar'.<sup>17</sup> And in *Gerpla* he does not balance his picture of Church violence and politics with Christian virtue. It is true that Kolbakur is a Christian and comes from a Christian background but he is depicted first and foremost as a pacifist and a victim rather than an active Christian. In *Gerpla* there are no serious studies of believers. There are largely only religious fanatics, megalomaniacs and fools, and each class is the butt of Laxness's cynicism.

First among the fanatics is King Ólafur himself. Laxness's depiction of him deviates from the historical tradition of him as portrayed by Snorri Sturluson, but of course Snorri, in writing his history, is also presenting the saint of the Olaf cult. We do not know what Ólafur was really like because of the cult that arose so quickly around him, and the probability of ecclesiastical and nationalistic politics promoting a figure for veneration. As *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* says: 'Olaf is a good example of a patriot who met a violent death being accorded the title of martyr, even in the Roman Martyrology . . . dynastic and patriotic considerations greatly helped his cult'.<sup>18</sup> What sort of a figure is it that Snorri gives us? He is a rounded character: 'maðr siðlátr, stilltr vel, fámálugr, þrr ok fégjarn', careful to instruct the people: 'En á hverju þingi lét hann upp lesa kristin lög ok þau boðorð, er þar fylgðu'.<sup>19</sup> He builds churches, arranges



masses and baptisms. He gives money for a church at Iceland's Þingvellir and money for Iceland's bell. <sup>20</sup> Before battle he prays for the souls of those who will die and recommends gentleness towards the people. On the other hand Snorri makes no secret of his violent behaviour, or of the cruel proceedings that he promises against great or small who will not adopt Christianity <sup>21</sup> and he gives the details of the tortures that he inflicts. <sup>22</sup> He is a zealot, a man of his times, marked by his pagan culture, who has little understanding of much of Christianity. The pagan and the Christian do not blend and so there is contradiction and tension. The character that Laxness creates, on the other hand, is not rounded by any virtue at all. It is grossly exaggerated. Here is the boor, the plunderer, the ambitious man always accompanied by his twelve apostles. He has a primitive understanding of Christianity; he strikes a bargain with Christ, so he believes; he will bring Christ souls and Christ will work miracles in return. There is selfish motivation behind his conversions, for the one who brings the people to salvation will, he believes, be raised to eternal life. He instigates tortures and executes them himself. Laxness lets Sigvatur skáld explain his character. He was, he says, little-witted. Only two ways were open to him : baptism or murder, 'en þó hyggju vér að Ólafur Konungur hefði þá rétt gert, ef hann hefði í nokkru efni af sjálfum sér kunnað skil góðs og íls' (GER, 414). But although there are times when Ólafur is harmless enough, for example in his dealings with women and during his time in exile near Kiev, he is chiefly portrayed as a sadistic and dangerous tyrant. He is not the rounded character of history,

nor the less rounded one of hagiography. He is the symbol of the great dictator.

Laxness himself has said: 'Ég hef í rauninni enga andúð á Ólafi digra þó hann sé engan veginn geðfelldur í sögunni'. <sup>23</sup> Why then has he disfigured him so? There seem to be two reasons. Firstly he wishes to make use of him as a monarch in order to epitomise autocracy with all that it entails. There is no doubt that monarchs take the most blame here, and the better to apportion this blame Laxness alters Snorri's account. Thus, for instance, before the Battle of Stiklarstaðir, according to Snorri, it is not the king but Finn Arneson who urges violence: ' . . . ef ek skylda ráða. Þá mundu vér fara herskildi um allar byggðir, ræna fé öllu, en brenna svá vendiliga byggð alla, at aldri kot stæði eftir, gjalda svá bóndum dróttinsvikin'. <sup>24</sup> But the king, because the peasants' resistance is against him and not against God, which would be graver, commands that 'menn fari spakliga ok geri engi hervirki'. <sup>25</sup> In *Gerpla* however it is Ólafur himself who encourages unmitigated outrage: 'Er það mín skipan að þér þyrmið aungu kykvendi er lífsanda dregur í Noregi, og gefið eigi skepnubarni grið þar til er eg hef feingið alt vald yfir landinu. Og hvar sem þér sjáið búandmann við hyski sínu á akri eða eingi, á þjóðgötu eða eikjukarfa, þá gangið þar milli bols og höfuð á' (GER, 486). Not only is Ólafur now made responsible for commanding violence, but the degree of violence he calls for far exceeds that which Finn Arneson advises with Snorri. In much the same way Laxness chooses to make Knútur the actual murderer of Úlfur (GER, 419-20), whereas Snorri records that he was killed only by

Knútur's command. <sup>26</sup> According to Sir Frank Stenton 'there is no obvious ground for rejecting the . . . tradition current throughout the North that . . . he was murdered by Cnut's orders'. <sup>27</sup>

Secondly Laxness seems to have distorted the picture of the saint-king in order to have another stab at the Church, at its un-Christlike policies and at its political canonisations, all this the better to extol peace. As Régis Boyer writes, 'Ce que veut Laxness, c'est exalter la paix par tous les moyens qui sont à sa portée. A cet effet, il fustige le viking, stigmatise le tyran . . . Pour les mêmes raisons, il ridiculise la religion hypocrite, les superstitions, le fanatisme, tous les moyens dont se servent les tyrans pour opprimer les faibles'. <sup>28</sup> Steingrímur Þorsteinsson is also uneasy in this respect: 'I feel that a man who himself chose to bear the name of a saint (Kiljan) might have shown a little more consideration towards the patron saints and national heroes of others'. <sup>29</sup> Laxness had of course long ago put away the practices and customs of Catholicism, which include the veneration of the saints, although he still retained his saint name. There is a tension here in his desire to vilify the things he had adhered to earlier.

Grímkell the bishop is also portrayed as a fanatic. Early on, in his youth, he seems gentle and simple, but he soon acquires those qualities that fit him for a position in the church: fanaticism, hypocrisy and guile. His Christian understanding is ironic and typical of all the clerics in the book. Speaking of torture he asks: 'Með hverjum hætti öðrum skal frjálssa landsmúginn?'

(GER, 309). And again: 'þau er banna að höggva menn þá eða eyða bygðir þær er í móti þybbast Lausn Sálunnar' (GER, 310). He approves Ólafur's solemn vow to torture and burn all those who resist conversion and he prays and sings before public executions; 'Og var með þeim hætti Noregur gefinn Kristi að fullu' (GER, 312). Grímkell's pilgrimage to Rome is not of a spiritual nature. It is political. He goes in order to ensure that he himself will have the Pope's authority and backing when Ólafur returns to Norway from Kiev, as its overlord. Régis Boyer sees this chapter, Chapter 50, as breaking the narrative, but understands its expediency for Laxness's argument: 'Je sais bien que cette incise importe, puisque c'est de la sorte que Laxness fournit l'explication - mi-grotesque, mi-tragique comme tout son livre - du phénomène, pour lui aberrant, en vertu duquel Ólafur le barbare, le bafoué, l'intéressé, le cynique deviendra Saint Olaf révééré de toute la chrétienté'. 30

Nearly every churchman in *Gerpla* is depicted as sullied by self-seeking and cruelty. Some explanation for this must lie in the clash of cultures in the tenth and eleventh centuries which is being described. The pagan and Christian mentalities are totally opposed in spirit. That most Christians in *Gerpla* have not learned to renounce murder, cruelty and love of wealth, that they have not entered into the spirit of their new faith, that they make use of it for their own ends, creates a paradox giving rise to mass conversion by force and other aberrations carried out in Christ's name. Such was indeed the case and Laxness makes use of the material, making it relevant to today: 'eg vildi fjalla um

persónur sem hafa verið til á öllum tímum'. <sup>31</sup> It may be taken that the criticisms against the eleventh century clerics and Christians and their vices, hold good for clerics and Christians who manifest paradoxical violence today.

The sagas from which Laxness draws his inspiration give ample evidence of the contradictions between the Christian and the pagan. The author of *Fóstbræðra saga* explains matters away by saying that 'Kristni var ung ok vangor'. <sup>32</sup> He also contrives to justify aggressiveness from a Christian point of view. He is often naive in this, for although he seeks to justify, he only ends in betraying a ridiculous notion of the Christian God. Thus he says of Þorgeir: 'Eigi var hjarta hans sem fóarn í fugli; eigi var þat blóðfullt, svá at þat skylfi af hræzlu, heldr var þat hert af inum hæsta hqfuðsmið í öllum hvatleik'. <sup>33</sup> This is a god that hardens hearts, not softens them. In the same tone he writes: 'Ok af því að allir góðir hlutir eru af guði gqrvir, þá er öruggleikr af guði gqrr ok gefinn í brjóst hvotum drengjum ok þar með sjálfræði at hafa till þess, er þeir vilja, góðs eða ills, því at Kristr hefir Kristna menn sonu sína gqrt, en eigi þræla, en þat mun hann hverjum gjalda, sem til vinnr'. <sup>34</sup> From such arguments it could be deduced that it is almost a duty to act violently in order to show appreciation for the gift of courage.

The curdling of the pagan and the Christian are even more pronounced in *Gerpla*. No opportunity is missed. The outward marks of Christianity are enforced on or are adopted by the Vikings, so there is some external compliance. Thus many receive prime-signing or even baptism 'þótt fáir gaumgæfði trúarlega skilning'

(GER,214). The pleasures of a victorious army are set before them - plunder, murder and rape - and the only price to be paid is to be baptised and to accept Christianity. Pagan attitudes are by no means eroded. After all, the political and ecclesiastical authorities maintain these attitudes themselves. The advantages of Christianity are those of power and influential patronage. Christ is reputed to be more powerful than the old gods. He is the greater warrior; Christian armies are not left helpless like the Vikings who fought 'utan heilags anda áblástur og af aungum guðlegum rökum' (GER,292). Apart from the martial patronage of Christ and the prizes of heaven, there are other advantages to be gained from contact with Christian nations. Because of the universality of the Church, it follows that other Christian armies will be friendly; Christians, and that of course means Christian armies, will also naturally have the support of the Pope (GER,292). Christianity becomes a reason for and a justification for war. Its followers are suddenly in a superior position and it is their moral obligation to wage war on those who do not accept the warrior God or their views. They are compelled to this by 'helga síðferð' (GER,219). A final advantage accompanying Christianity is that of culture. Culture, learning, art and courtliness all stem from Christianity and not from Odin. This is recognised by Ólafur, and, characteristically, he also includes swordplay here (GER,218).

Everything that Laxness rebels against is embraced in the outlook of the brand of Christianity that he portrays. It is a tool in the hands of churchmen, kings and politicians. There is no

unwavering, moral principle, no integrity, no sense of justice. It is true that Porkell hears something of a new way of reasoning, that right and wrong are to be judged not according to victory or defeat, but according to theological wisdom. However, this is beyond his reasoning powers, so he makes certain that he has a bishop near at hand, to guide him as to when Christ wants murder or torture or burning to be carried out (GER,267). There are laws, but these are to be bent. In necessity, that is, when churchmen and armies require it, they are to be set aside and women and children may be killed and churches burned (GER,234). The Ten Commandments themselves are flexible (GER,234). But whatever happens, the authorities are safe. Bishops are always at hand to interpret the law and to say whether or not a course of action is Christ's pleasure and to give absolution when things go wrong (GER,246). Above all the Christianity of public men, of churchmen and of armies is public in nature. It is political and external. It is not a personal morality. It has nothing to do with relationship with God. It makes no demand for an inner change, for metanoia, but it is a good measuring stick by which to judge and condemn others.

The Gerpla Church has taken that which is holy and desecrated it. War is purported to be a holy matter now, a battle for Christ and for His kingdom; but in reality it is an outlet for unrestrained human greed and aggression. The churchmen do not themselves want peace. Grímkell reasons that the time for peace, the time when swords will be turned into ploughshares, has not yet come, since not all kings yet acknowledge Christ. In the meantime

it is unwise to oppose the killing of the enemy (GER, 309-10). Christ Himself is actually far down on the list of priorities. So Ríkarður complains about those men who have borne enmity firstly towards him and only secondly towards God and the Church. Again, before battle, when cannon fodder is short, when there is a crisis, then suddenly other gods and idols are tolerated: 'En því beiðumst eg af yður að Krist skuli eigi lægra bera þeim Jómala' (GER, 487); and however much the opposite is stated by Ólafur, the fear seems to be not that God will be offended by this, but that the Pope, the Patriarch and the Emperor will withhold their favour.

Laxness's irony is so concentrated, there is so little respite, the work is often so rich in humour that there is a danger that, because it is a caricature, it will not be taken seriously. But seriousness is there, as is the gravity of Laxness's conviction that the Church becomes dishonourable, dishonours its God, becomes evil when it gives a blessing, for whatever cause, to 'killing people off idiotically in a war'. 35

Laxness's satire also extends to those at the other end of the religious scale, the ascetics. They are found both in the Celtic Church in Ireland and in the Orthodox Church in Kiev.

The account of Þorgeir's and his companions' brief stay with the Celtic monks is extremely comical but, as might be expected, it is not without implied criticism. To begin with, the monks too are fanatics. They fail to see clearly. They look constantly to heaven, not aware of anything around them, and they are actually deaf (GER, 173). They fail to get their spiritual priorities right. Thus they have a concern for the dead, but they ignore the living.



They are so occupied in honouring Belinda's tooth, that they delay in rescuing the shipwrecked party, so that a number of them die (GER, 174). It is, I think, significant that Belinda appears to be untraceable. Perhaps this is the point, that the original owner of the relic hardly seems to have existed.

The sum of the encounter with the monks is elusive; but while there is comedy and implied criticism, there seems to be a measure of respect as well. When Þorgeir is rescued, he is prepared to die rather than suffer the indignity of charity, but the ancient monk sings animatedly 'Elskið yðra fjándur' (GER, 174-75), kisses him and welcomes him on shore. The monks evince a genuine wish to serve, which is incomprehensible to the seamen. They are sublime fanatics, 'með glöðu yfirbragði' (GER, 177), but at the same time, they are ridiculous, eccentric, divine and dirty, while their only weapon for defence is 'fátæki Krists' (GER, 179). It is related how they have had to struggle to attain their present state of detachment, that their earlier monastery was wealthy and filled with treasures but that this was all lost during Viking raids. Then they discovered that church wealth and culture is a distraction from God and as such must be forsaken. Since that time they have striven for poverty so that now they have nothing to lose. They have also had to learn that those who trust to themselves will surely fall. They believe in a miraculous quality in life and in life itself, but only after everything has been given up for God (GER, 180-83). This is admirable teaching and it might be thought that Laxness favours it, but it is naturally not as simple as that. He brings in the incredible and the absurd once

more. The teaching has not simply been learned from experience or from philosophical reflection on life; it is imported to them by God's emissary, the Archangel Michael, together with the tooth of the twelve-year-old virgin, Belinda. If the monks are, for a while, sublime, they are rapidly made ridiculous again. It is as if Laxness is afraid that he might be thought to be impressed by religious simplicity or asceticism as before. This tendency to ridicule is observed by Stefán Einarsson when he writes; 'As soon as the feeling threatens to change to sentimentality the satirist is ready to slap the reader in the face. Here again we come to the fundamental opposition of sympathy and detachment in Laxness' art. To explain that satisfactorily would be to find a key to his work'. <sup>36</sup>

Something of the same tone prevails in the scenes which take place in the East. There is a clear derision of veneration of relics, for instance the finger of Stephan, the body of Vladimir and the heads of many who had fallen. The people burn candles before these skulls for the salvation of their souls. Typically, in this context, Laxness fixes his attention solely on exaggerations. But there is not only misguided piety here in Kiev, but, as in Western Europe, there is the bad influence of churchmen. There is however a difference, for here their interest seems to be chiefly financial. The churchmen sidle around the people and manipulate them, making excuses and offering spiritual compensation prizes for death on the battle field. The Patriarch declares that those who fall in battle for the good of the cause, are blessed immediately in heaven, without spending time in

purgatory (GER, 430). The people are also urged to give as much money as they can, in memory of saints and martyrs (GER, 431); further, all those who give money to skulls for the sake of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia are promised forgiveness of sins and remission of time in purgatory (GER, 437).

There is no record at all of the concept of or the actual selling of indulgences in the Eastern Church, and this is in fact what Laxness is describing. Nor has the Eastern Church ever supported the doctrine of purgatory. The inaccuracy concerning purgatory is of no importance here, but that relating to indulgences is more significant because it shows that Laxness is getting carried away in his enthusiasm, in his enjoyment at attacking the church wherever it is; he is saddling one branch of Christianity with the disorders of the other, irrespective of historical or doctrinal accuracy.

That Laxness is concerned uniquely with negative aspects of the Church and its history is seen also in the fact that he completely ignores the blossoming of the Kievan State. Here was precisely the kind of state that would have appealed to him as a fervent young man, immediately after leaving the monastery in his twenties, looking for ways of improving the conditions of ordinary people, regretting that the Church seemed to fail to do so. After the conversion of Vladimir, the Kievan State became 'the scene of unique social experiment which did not appear until much later in Europe'.<sup>37</sup> Nowhere else in Europe were the social services so highly organised. Moreover, another thing which ought to have appealed to Laxness, even at the time of writing, as a man of

peace, 'there was no death penalty in Kievan Russia, no mutilation, no torture; corporal punishment was very little used'.<sup>33</sup> But this rare and desirable state of affairs goes without a mention, for it does not serve the writer's purpose, which is to expose the obscenity of the Church as a shedder of blood.

Yet for all their morbid aspects, the scenes in Kiev have something of the feeling of an intermezzo; there is at least a slight pause from the bitter-comic attacks on officials. Ólafur turns to religion here in a new way and, through the teaching of the monks, he begins to understand the necessity of becoming obedient and submissive to Christ. Asceticism has always seemed to have had an appeal to Laxness and he appears to have retained his respect for monastic communities. As in the incidents in Ireland, the content of the monks' teaching itself is not scoffed at, though the macabre occupation of polishing skulls can be equated with the venerating of Belinda's tooth, each being a matter of ridicule. However, there is a general softening of his mood here. Ólafur is indeed offered the 'consolations of religion' in Kiev and such consolations had been derided in *Salka Valka*. Now there is no more derision of them, and Ólafur has indeed seen all other consolations pass him by. But of course the period of tranquillity does not last long for Ólafur, and he takes to his war-mongering again with renewed vigour.

In *Gerpla* Laxness is not attacking private religion, though he shows the reader very little of it; nor is he attacking the monastic way of life. His main attack is on non-monastic, public

religion, the mask of religion, the Church's vast political and temporal power, with particular reference to its predilection for war.

1. 'Vandamál skálskapar á vorum dögum', *Dagur í senn*, pp. 194f.
  2. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), p. 167.
  3. McTurk, 'Swift, Laxness and the Eskimos', p. 61.
  4. Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, p. 172.
  5. Keel, *Innovation und Restauration*, p. 71.
  6. Boyer, 'Essai sur la Composition de "Gerpla"', p. 10.
  7. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), p. 173.
  8. Sønderholm, p. 244.
  9. Steingrímur Þorsteinsson, 'Halldór Laxness and the Icelandic Sagas', p. 107.
  10. *Skáldatími*, p. 303.
  11. Quoted by Keel from an interview in *Arbeiderbladet*, 14 August 1965, in *Innovation und Restauration*, p. 69, footnote 161.
  12. Hannes Pétursson, 'Þorgeir Hávarsson í Fóstbræðrasögu og Gerplu', p. 57.
  13. Sønderholm, p. 247.
  14. *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, p. 24.
  15. Hallberg, 'Stríð og friður', in *Hús skáldsins*, Volume II, pp. 170-73.
- Kötz, *Das Problem Dichter und Gesellschaft im Werke von Halldór Kiljan Laxness*, p. 131.

See also Laxness, 'Fisher í Kantaraborg: hugarfarsbreyting

- nauðsynleg - en atómbomban lifi', pp. 124-25; 'Fisher biður um atómspreingju - með skilyrði', pp. 126-28; 'Trúarbrögð og friðarhreyfing', pp. 129-31; 'Það sem allir ættu að geta skrifað undir', pp. 132-35; 'Það sem okkur nútímamönnum er nauðsynlegt öllu öðru fremur er að gera stríð óhugsandi', pp. 136-39; 'Vér íslendingar - og trúin á stálið', pp. 140-46; 'Sósíalismiinn er siðalögmál mannkynsins', pp. 154-57; 'Íslensk hugleiðing í tilefni friðarþings þjóðanna', pp. 158-60; 'Vandamál skáldskapar á vorum dögum', pp. 191-216; 'An Iceland Voice', pp. 259-66, in *Dagur í senn*.
16. 'An Iceland Voice', *Dagur í senn*, p. 260.
  17. 'Íslensk hugleiðing í tilefni friðarþings þjóðanna', *Dagur í senn*, p. 159.
  18. *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, p. 301.  
See also Stenton, *Anglo Saxon England*, p. 400.
  19. *Ólafs saga helga*, p. 53.
  20. *Ólafs saga helga*, p. 168.
  21. *Ólafs saga helga*, p. 56.
  22. *Ólafs saga helga*, p. 75.
  23. *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, p. 25.
  24. *Ólafs saga helga*, p. 281.
  25. *Ólafs saga helga*, p. 281.
  26. *Ólafs saga helga*, p. 227.
  27. Stenton, *Anglo Saxon England*, p. 398.
  28. Boyer, 'Essai sur la Composition de "Gerpla"', p. 18.
  29. Steingrímur Þorsteinsson, 'Halldór Laxness and the Icelandic Sagas', p. 107-08.

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30. Boyer, 'Essai sur la Composition de "Gerpla"', p. 12.
31. *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, p. 24.
32. *Fóstbræðra saga*, contained in *Íslensk fornrit*, Volume VI, p. 161.
33. *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 128.
34. *Fóstbræðra saga*, p. 133.
35. 'An Icelandic Voice', *Dagur í senn*, p. 265.
36. Stefán Einarsson, *A History of Icelandic Prose Writers*, pp. 227-28.
37. Kovalevsky, *Saint Sergius and Russian Spirituality*, p. 22.
38. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 88.

After *Gerpla* Laxness seems to have modified his political views. He was awarded the World Peace Prize in Vienna in 1953, and in his speech there is no mention of Capitalism, and no attack on the United States as might be expected. <sup>1</sup> A greater event was the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955. After this he became, in some measure, a cultural ambassador for Iceland, travelling widely abroad and avoiding criticism of NATO and the United States. It is significant, for instance, that he did not repudiate the American war in Vietnam. On the other hand his criticism towards the Soviet Union increased from this time on. <sup>2</sup> Laxness's literary work also lost the tone of political fervour that it had had for the last fourteen years. A new reflective period began.

*Brekkukotsannáll* was published in 1957. In nearly all of Laxness's novels one of the major characters is motivated by an obsessive belief that is often detrimental to himself or to others. These characters lack that ease and sympathy that seem to be esteemed by the writer. Opposed to them are the faithful ones, those who give stability and value. Now in *Brekkukotsannáll* the two attitudes to life are put in the scale and weighed. A choice has to be made. There are two possibilities: the way of wealth and fame, when the outer person alone is appraised and when integrity easily slips away; or the quieter, reflective way. Garðar Hólm, the singer, has been induced to follow the former and he pays the price. *Alfgrímur*, one generation younger, yet with an



almost identical background, is more cautious as he sets out into the world.

What seems to be under review is not publicity or the actual setting-out into the world of art, but the spirit and the truth which are the mainspring of an artist's or a sensitive person's life. This spirit and truth seem to be contained within the idea of *the true tone*, and the image of the true tone constantly recurs. In the novel the tone often refers to something related to art but its implications may be more generally applied.

There are three characters who are concerned with the tone, Garðar, Álfgrímur and séra Jóhann. Séra Jóhann exerts a great influence over both Garðar and Álfgrímur as boys. But it is seen that, as a man, the singer's understanding of the tone differs from the priest's.

Garðar Hólm has apparently discovered the true tone, but his life ends in tragedy. He seems a simple Faust figure, who enters into a contract with the Devil, Guðmundsen, and who, for the promise of fame and fortune, offers the price of his happiness, his integrity, and his soul. Erik Sønderholm has also seen a likeness here, but he has allotted the roles differently. So, for him, Garðar is Mephistopheles, Álfgrímur is Faust and Guðmundsen's daughter becomes Gretchen. <sup>3</sup> In fact Garðar plays both roles. First he is tempted and then, in his turn, he tempts. Álfgrímur is only exposed to temptation. He considers it but he does not succumb. For Garðar the tone seems strictly artistic and is associated in his mind with purity: 'það er til einn tónn - og hann er hreinn' (BRE, 120), but it seems to have a paralysing

effect: 'sá sem hefur heyrt hann sýngur ekki - framor' (BRE, 167). Garðar is certainly drawn by it but feels it is linked with anonymity and misfortune, and that it brings its own anxieties. Yet he deems those who sacrifice body and soul to get it more enviable than others who get quite near to it. He also sees those people who sacrifice and fail as being more enviable than those who actually achieve fame with no knowledge of the tone's existence at all, presumably because he believes that the latter serve a kind of art-mammon, in ignorance of spiritual or artistic sensitivity, whereas others give their lives in striving for something pure. Or is it really envy? For him the tone is also something of a burden, a responsibility, almost a scourge - a kind of infatuating Lorelei vision, that cripples and ruins those that come too near. Yet it remains essential and desirable for all this. When the worthlessness of fame is recognised, when the artist knows he has remaining to him only one shelter, his cottage at home, even then, he claims, it is worthwhile: 'Guð taktu það allt frá mér - nema einn tón' (BRE, 182).

Laxness allows Garðar to speak for himself. It is necessary to remember that his are the words of a man who has compromised himself. He speaks from a certain experience and from disillusionment, but not without a desire to make an effect. There may be some truth in some of what he says, but there is a measure of artificiality as well. Álfgrímur is his younger double, a ready listener, impressionable, a captivated audience at last.

But although Álfgrímur resembles Garðar in many outer respects, he is basically different. It is significant, for instance, that

Garðar's singing voice is discovered when he has been drinking, whereas Álfgrímur's is discovered when he sings at the funerals of unknown men. Here are the representatives of the two types, the one with coarseness and ambition, the other with sensitivity, wanting no reward. Álfgrímur desires the true tone in a different way. Garðar Hólm, Satan-like, tempts the boy with images of wealth and fame, which he rejects. Only the true tone is a worthy end. 'Ef ég næ ekki hreinum tón þá kærí ég mig ekkert um að vera frægur' (BRE, 273).

Álfgrímur understands that the tone is something other and greater than sheer artistic purity but possibly something smaller, quieter too; for which reason he is willing to burn Guðmundsen's money; willing to forego a career in music, and instead, to study to become a priest, though this is not his preference, and then, he says: 'kanski kemst ég einhverntíma svo langt að heyra þennan hreina tón sem hann séra Jóhann heyrir' (BRE, 311).

Séra Jóhann's understanding of the tone seems to be given the greatest significance in *Brekkukotsannáll*. He is the successor of the prison chaplain in *Heimsljós*, both being modelled on the priest of that name who baptised the author. <sup>4</sup> He believes in the tone; never has a day gone by when he did not believe in it, and he passes on his conviction to his younger friends. But his belief is wider, more compassionate and less restricted than Garðar's. He sees the tone, not as an unattainable genuineness in art, a blessing and a curse in one, but as a grace that lives, 'lifir', that is - that has existence, not just in favoured artists but in all good men. He also recognises a particular privilege in having

the ability and the grace to express this tone, this inner life, in music; but although he has never been able to do this himself, it has not detracted from the tone which he has heard. To express the tone in art is an extra gift from God, but the most important thing, which is possible for everyone, is first to hear, to listen to that genuineness, that note of purity, or, judging from his own example, one could say, that note of simplicity, which, he believes lives in all good men:

Í öllum góðum mönnum lifir réttur tónn, ég vil ekki segja einsog mús undir fjalaketti, heldur einsog mús á milli þils og veggjar í húsi. En það er sérstök náð ef guð lofar mönnum að syngja þann tón sem þeir heyra . . . ég hef aldrei borið gæfu til að syngja þann tón sem ég hef heyrt. En sá tónn er jafngóður fyrir því. (BRE, 163)

To a great extent, then, the tone can be interpreted as a kind of inner truth, an inner vision or light, which men can become aware of, and hear and heed.

The difference between Garðar's attitude and 'Alfgrímur's is again brought out in their discussion about the meaning of self: 'Anma mundi segja : það sem þú ert sjálfur það ertu og annað ekki,' says the boy. It is as if the boy's 'grandmother' knows the necessity of looking inwards, of finding the tone, the light, and of acknowledging it and-being true to it. Garðar misunderstands: 'Þar skjöfast kellingunni . . . það sem maður er sjálfur, það er það eina sem maður er ekki' (BRE, 269). He has not valued the

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inner life, so of course he cannot agree. His inner trueness has been forced to collapse. He continues: 'Það sem aðrir halda að maður sé, það er maður' (BRE, 269).

It is important to see connections here, one connection linking séra Jóhann's idea of the true tone living in each good man and the 'grandmother's' belief that you are what you are inwardly and nothing else; and another connection linking Garðar's idea of the true tone being a blessed, artistic scourge, his belief that you are only what others think you are and his self-destruction as a consequence of this.

Because Álfgrímur resists the way and the views of Garðar, and because he sets out into the world free from dubious obligations, *Brekkukotsannáll* may be seen as an optimistic novel. There is a lightness and a peace especially about the earlier part. Here are reflections on childhood and the dawning perception of the larger world beyond the gate: 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy! / Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing boy'.<sup>5</sup> But before early childhood is brusquely brought to a close with school, it is as if 'einhverstaðar í óendanlegum fjarska var vorið, að minsta kosti í huga guðs' (BRE, 130) and the Virgin Mary was polishing the stars.

There is a timelessness about Brekkukot, eternity ticking in the clock, time 'að hlusta á kúna bíta' (BRE, 170). Much of the security of the place comes directly from the presence of Björn. The young boy feels safe in his 'grandfather's' company: 'Þessi þegjandi nærvera hans á hverjum lófastórum bletti í Brekkukotspartinum, - það var einsog að liggja við stjóra; sálin

átti í honum það öryggi sem hún girntist' (BRE, 13). Another time he says: 'mér fanst að í návist þessa manns gæti ekki neitt komið fyrir öðruvísi en það átti að vera' (BRE, 131). Álfgrímur lacks all ambition other than to remain with Björn: 'Ég var oft að hugsa um hvað frelsarinn hefði verið góður að senda mig þessum manni til halds og trausts, og ég afréð að vera hjá honum meðan hann lifði og draga grásleppu altaf á útmánuðum. Og ég vonaði að guð gæfi að hann hyrfi ekki frá mér fyren ég væri sjálfur kominn vel á veg að verða eins gamall og hann; þá ætlaði ég að finna einhversstaðar lítinn dreing og láta hann róa með mér tilþvitja um snemma á mornana meðan stjörnurnar enn væru skærar á útmánuðum' (BRE, 131).

This confidence in Björn and the 'grandmother' does not diminish as the boy grows up. Only the insecurity of the outside world with its strange values constitutes a threat. Brekkukot is an asylum and a refuge from the world, and even after it is sold, there is the feeling that there will be refuge with the old pair still.

A complete disregard for money contributes to the peace of Brekkukot. Björn has no modern understanding of fluctuating trade prices. The guests do not pay; they just come. A cheque is suspect and destroyed. Álfgrímur does not know that he is actually poor. In his world it is always the poor that pity the rich, and not the other way around. Björn has little money but he has always been held in high regard. In much the same way small store is set by public opinion. On the other hand the views of individuals are accepted, as are the people themselves. For this reason the house becomes a centre of tolerance. People come there to live just as

much as to die. Life and death are all one. Here there is room, for instance, for 'konur sem þurftu að ala barn eða deya' (BRE, 51). This acceptance of others, this fundamental respect, this absence of financial and ambitious preoccupations, this peace, this timelessness, all make Brekkukot a kind of symbolic hearth for the world.

Erik Sönderholm considers Brekkukot as a paradise:

I baggrunden pusler Bjørn som en anden Vorherre; klokkerne toner i huset og på kirkegården, liv og død udspilles på denne scene, hvor man hviler i ærkeenglen Gabriels favn, inden de store begivenheder indtræffer. "Brattekåd" er en myte om det tabte Paradis, men i modsætning til kristen tanke er der ikke forbundet noget syndefald med uddrivelsen, ej heller går paradiset for evigt tabt; der kræves derfor heller ikke en opstandelsesmyte for at holde livet ud. Den kristne begrebsverden om synd, forløsning og forsoning forbigås i denne myte om paradislivet i Brattekåd . . . "Brattekåd" er en bibelsk myte. "

But if there is no fall, no driving out, no plan of redemption then there is not very much biblical similarity, just an account of a secure youth, which must be left, voluntarily, when the right time comes. Sönderholm goes on: 'men dens indhold er ikke kristen livsforagt'. He seems to allow no possibility of a Christian alternative to 'livsforagt' here. If the so-called Christian contempt for life is absent, then that which is present and which

is good must, he seems to argue, be non-christian in mood. It is true that some of Laxness's characters tend to demonstrate that particular bent in Christianity that inclines towards a negation of life, like St Bernard 'covering his eyes that they may not dwell on the beauty of the lakes', as W.B. Yeats says in his preface to Tagore's *Gitanjali* 7. Laxness quotes from these poems in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*: 'það sem ég sá var óviðjafnanlegt' (VEF, 40), and he shows in his writings that he is in sympathy with those who hold the opposite view of life. This view, demonstrated by other characters who have a wonder for creation, is not necessarily other-than-christian because it is life-affirming. Can it not be that that which is magnanimous, untroubled or sensitive in the book is an echo of Christian teachings which seem to have been less heeded than the theology of sin? 'Let not your hearts be troubled'? 8 'Judge not that ye be not judged'? 9 Sönderholm concludes then that the work is 'taoistisk præget', 10 but he does not expand or say precisely how. The Taoist influence in *Brekkukotsannáll* is not the sole influence, and it does not loom as large as is made out. I suggest that, when examined, much of the spirit of the novel can be seen to be acceptably Christian, and that besides this, there is an Indian air about.

There are only two clear references to Taoism in *Brekkukotsannáll*. The first refers to the closing of 'Alfgrímur's idyllic childhood: 'þessir morgnar . . . altíeinu eru þeir liðnir. Stjörnur þeirra eru fölnaðar: kínversku bókinni þinni lokað' (BRE, 133). The Chinese *Tao Te Ching* has, so-to-speak, enclosed and protected the boy until this point. It is synonymous with peace



and a sense of security. The second reference follows shortly afterwards and has the same symbolic weight: 'Kínamúrinn þar sem ég sjálfur var Sonur himins, hann var brotinn' (BRE, 136). Apart from these there is no direct indication of inspiration from Chinese philosophy. Peter Hallberg has written on Laxness and Taoism but says that he means not Taoism "'í raun og veru" . . . heldur . . . taóismann eins og Halldór virðist hafa skilið þessa eldgömlu kínverska lífskoðun og heimspeki'.<sup>11</sup> He points to the fact that Laxness repeats some of the 'grandmother's' words - 'Ég held nú að þann saung sem við heyrum ekki hér í Brekkukoti sækjum við ekki niðrá Austurvöll, skepnan mín' (BRE, 113) - in his article on Taoism, when it was reprinted in *Gjörningabók* (1959), under the title 'Þessir hlutir - eða tónlist af streingjum'. Hallberg comments: 'Það er sem sagt eingin tilviljun'.<sup>12</sup> When writing the article Laxness probably had in mind that kind of resolution, that is promoted in *Tao Te Ching*, not to lose composure hankering after elusive trivia, but rather to seek quietly and to face that which is within. But although this may be Taoist thought, it is not exclusively so. It is not new to the West, and it is, ironically, almost precisely that which the Desert Fathers recommended, and yet Laxness had reacted so strongly against them earlier: 'Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything';<sup>13</sup> and the teaching of the Celtic Church, quoted by Einar Ól. Sveinsson in his essay 'Papar' in 1945: 'Konunginn . . . sem þú leitar þar að, finnurðu ekki, nema þú komir sjálfur með hann'.<sup>14</sup>

Hallberg says, too, that although Tao is not directly mentioned by Laxness, it can hardly be concealed that he has written of

Brekkukot, 'rammíslenzkt hús . . . í ljósi taóismanns'. <sup>15</sup> I think, rather, that it is written of in a way in which the good spirit of undogmatic Christianity merges with the tolerance of various Eastern religions. Hallberg turns to the 'grandmother' as a support for his argument, because she is said to be 'hjarta hússins', <sup>16</sup> but woman as the heart of the family can scarcely be considered a uniquely Chinese idea. He then points out that she is 'öllum kvikindum góð, og þó án tilfinningasemí'. <sup>17</sup> There is certainly no sentimentality in her treatment of the dog. She has her set prejudices and favourites among the animals; cows are to be blessed and dogs are to be scolded: 'Mér heyrðist einhver vera að blessa hund, sagði hún. Það hefur líklega verið misheyrn. Um hunda er sagt grey garmur og skarn' (BRE, 43). This is scarcely the attitude of a Taoist full of equanimity and impartial benevolence. Then again, her attitude to Álfgrímur's career should be considered in this context. Is it not primarily she, rather than Björn, who wants the boy to train to be a priest, even against his inclination? Björn indeed mentions it first, but 'annar var ennþá nær honum Birni í Brekkukoti en hann Björn í Brekkukoti sjálfur; það var hún amma mín' (BRE, 232). Álfgrímur is amazed. The career is suggested to him not out of respect for his potential, but out of hard-headedness: 'Það sem þeim er ekki borgað í fiski það er þeim borgað í smjöri' (BRE, 231). This is not Taoist behaviour.

Álfgrímur's 'grandmother' is not in the same mould as the Organist or the glacier couple, who are the most usual examples of Laxness's Eastern creations. And to some extent this is also true of Björn. After all, if the idea of Álfgrímur's career in the

Church does not originate from him, at least he is the one who expresses and condones it. He and the 'grandmother' do in fact express and anticipate each other's reactions. So when Álfgrímur and his friends have played at jumping barbed wire, the 'grandmother' sends a conciliatory gift to the neighbours, anticipating Björn's displeasure; but the displeasure she anticipates would surely be a sign of lack of understanding; the boys have overstepped a limit but 'þetta var leikur' (BRE,48). But 'það sem Jóni í Hvammskoti mislíkar, það mislíkar Birni í Brekkukoti' (BRE,48). Björn apparently does not consider the true right or the true wrong of a situation, but is primarily mindful of keeping the neighbours happy. Again this is very human, but hardly, I think, Taoist; it borders on respectability.

Björn is in fact singularly unbending, with a pride inherited from the sagas. Under his influence there is an atmosphere of discretion and reserve in the home. It is all honourable and strict. Curiosity is considered as grave as stealing. There is often a granite-like quality in their speech, 'sá járnagi í tali' (BRE,152). 'Kærleiki' (BRE,65) is never mentioned. Álfgrímur talks of the weather as if it is the most important thing in the world and not the fact that the 'grandmother' 'skyldi vera þarna enn og ég hjá henni' (BRE,211). They are scrupulous in concealing their feelings. Such is Björn's household, where confessed sentiment, romanticism and demonstrative affection are unknown, but where, by contrast, there is love in action.

Björn is nominally Christian in that he is the product of a nominally Christian society, and therefore he reads the relevant

material but without any sign of believing or disbelieving the content:

Mér hefur ekki heldur tekist að hafa uppá neinum er þess minnist að hafa heyrt Björn í Brekkukoti vitna í kenningar um guðfræði, siðfræði ellegar heimspeki eftir postillunni. Mér er hulið hvort afi minn tók mark á öllu sem stóð þarna, eða aungu . . . Ég held ef satt skal segja að hann Björn í Brekkukoti afi minn hefði ekki orðið öðruvísi maður í nokkru því sem skiftir máli þó hann hefði lifað hér á landi í heiðni; ellegar átt heima einhversstaðar þar á jörðunni sem ekki er lesin postilla, heldur trúað á uxann Apís, guðinn Ra ellegar fuglinn Kólibrí. (BRE, 25)

Bible-reading is an observance for him and nothing more. He is not opposed or committed to the Bible or religion or God. He just does not speak of them. The Caretaker regards him as a man who answers all questions for himself 'en hirðir aldrei um þau svör sem hafa verið utbúin fyrir össu og mýslu jafnt' (BRE, 220). So, for example, Björn seems to have explored the question of forgiveness. With him it is total, undogmatic and unconditional and he says to the thief 'guð getur ekki fyrirgefið þér, en mér Birni í Brekkukoti stendur á andskotans sama' (BRE, 21), and in so saying, he manifests his disdain for the restrictedness of the concept of the God of his religious background.

Laxness's own personal attitude seems to be revealed in 'Alfgrímur's reflections at this point: 'Afi minn var rétttrúaður

maður án þess honum dytti þó í hug að biðja guð um að taka sér mennina til fyrirmyndar eftir þeirri einkennilegu bæn faðirvorsins þar sem segir fyrirgef oss, svo sem vér og fyrirgefum' (BRE, 21). Here is Laxness's old facetiousness, the wilful distorting of meaning in order to bring ridicule, a shift of emphasis never intended in the Lord's Prayer. But the idea of a God that might look upon men as models of forgiveness serves to intensify the picture of His unreasonableness and wrathfulness at the same time. This is a God in which Björn obviously puts no trust. Björn himself seems superior to God in compassion and Álfgrímur looks upon his 'grandfather' as the central moral point, the one who is ultimately offended by offence. Álfgrímur has not been brought up to refer back to God in matters of offence or sin. In Brekkukot it is man that is offended against and not God. Hallberg is right when he says that morality here has a human rather than a religious foundation. 'Man is raised up; religious judgements are dispensed with; the supernatural is not appealed to. It is this that leads Sigfús Dabason to write: 'Einkenni sem sameiginlegt er öllum höfuðverkum Halldórs Kiljans Laxness: að virða manninn jafnhátt og ýmsir aðrir hafa virt guð og andskota'. '9

The reluctance of Laxness's characters to make moral or religious definitions becomes more pronounced in this novel. Because of this reluctance Hallberg sees a similarity between Björn and Ugly's father, in *Atómstöðin*, for Falursays: 'Okkar guð er það sem eftir er þegar öll guð hafa verið talin og sagt nei, ekki hann' (ATÓ, 167). What each of the two may believe in is not

to be pinned down and Hallberg connects this reluctance to define with Taoism, for there, 'Hið Eina' is described 'með eintómum neitunum'.<sup>20</sup> While his characters now make no definitions or judgements, thus witnessing to a disregard for systems and codes, so Laxness's own tone in *Brekkukotsannáll* is mollified too. Stringent social criticism has gone and criticism of public figures has disappeared as well. There is instead a mood of humorous nonchalance concerning the attitude to religion in Iceland. There is a general Icelandic opinion, for instance, that any believer is crazy; then Runólfur Jónsson cannot remember the Saviour's name, and God is 'maðurinn sem er fyrir ofan hann Björn í Brekkukoti' (BRE, 56). Jón afi goes to Norway where Bible stories are bigger and better than in Iceland and where Christianity is held in greater honour than at home. The 'grandmother' may mutter psalms but she does not understand their meaning, and she uses the genealogy of Christ as a practical beginner's guide for reading. The Bible itself is the book that people believed 'formeir' (BRE, 24). As for the Pope, the Icelanders have a high regard for him because of his anti-Lutheran, and thus anti-Danish stance in history, but ironically, they respect him in all matters other than the religious. Laxness's tone is flippant. The juxtapositioning of the two ideas of Garðar's singing before the Pope and of the Saviour saving the world confirm this flippancy (BRE, 238). Icelanders were not present at either event so each must be taken as a matter of faith.

The same two ideas are brought together once more by 'Alfgrímur when Guðmundsen's daughter asks if he thinks it is a lie that

Garðar Hólm has sung before the Pope. He replies 'Ég veit það ekki . . . Hver var viðstaddur þegar Jesús frelsaði heiminn' (BRE, 235). It seems that the unlikelihood of the former is associated in his mind with what must seem to him to be the unlikelihood of the latter. What Álfgrímur requires for belief is witnesses and proof. That which is taken on faith is suspect. Laxness has come a long way from his position in *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír*.

Álfgrímur intends to live 'einsog aungvir draugur væru til' (BRE, 275), but Garðar asks him if he would do away with all artistic masterpieces if the Resurrection is proved to be historically unreliable. If proof is demanded for everything, then there can be no dream of beauty to pull one on. But Álfgrímur wants to live without illusion. Illusion can be disastrous. Garðar's own life is evidence enough of this. Sigfús Daðason finds it difficult to determine on which side the writer's sympathies lie. <sup>21</sup> I do not find it so hard. It is the old story of mankind not being able to bear very much reality, but it is not therefore a justification of escapism. Where after all has Garðar's escapism got him? Among those things which Garðar cites as lacking reality is the story of the Virgin Mary. This and certain works of art, he says, may be regarded as symbols of dreams of beauty. In Álfgrímur's eyes it is not they but the necessity of a dream world that is wrong.

Sigfús Daðason thinks that the philosophy of *Brekkukotsannáll* can best be described as a kind of pyrrhonism, that is the scepticism that certainty of knowledge is unattainable; this

uncertainty of values gives the book its pessimism: 'Pyrrhonismi jafnvel þó hann birtist með góðlátlegu brosi, er alltaf hálf í hvoru pessimismi'. <sup>22</sup> The moral message of the book he finds in that spirit of tolerance that streams from it, but this tolerance itself is not the answer to every problem, 'því mæðurótt umburðarlyndi er fögur mannshugsjón, en það hafnar ýmsum enn stærri hugsjónum. Það hafnar, til að mynda, ef vel er gáð, hugsjón réttlætisins'. <sup>23</sup> It is totally unjust that the labourer of the eleventh hour should be paid as much as the full day's worker, and it is unjust that the turf thief should not be punished. But a lack of this kind of justice is not bad if it is supplanted by tolerance. It is perhaps just that the good effects of tolerance are less orderly and take longer to be seen than those of strict deserts. We may look back to the portrayal of the Organist's mother in *Atómstöðin*, and consider whether she, or indeed any of the socially disreputable visitors to the house, would have thrived better under a spirit of justice there. Justice and mercy are awkward mixers and Sigfús Daðason concludes, reflective and optimistic himself: 'Það er óhætt að segja að hið mikla hlutverk sem bíður mannsins sé að sætta umburðarlyndið og hugsjón réttlætisins. En meðan það er ekki orðið má vel vera að umburðarlyndið sé mikilvægara en allt annað'. <sup>24</sup>

The character that best embodies this spirit of tolerance is the Caretaker. His view of life is religious but undogmatic. In practical terms it consists of allowing other people to live as they wish; but it is not an indifferent attitude of laissez-faire, rather one which is founded on a basic respect for the will and



personality of the other and of a recognition of the differences between people: 'Ég álít að það eigi að hjálpa öllum að lifa einsog þeir vilja. Jafnvel þó mús kæmi til mín og segðist ætla að fara fljúgandi yfir sjóinn og assa segðist vera að hugsa um að grafa sér holu oní jörðina, þá mundi ég segja veskú' (BRE, 107). But this tolerance has its limits; it is mindful of the wellbeing of the larger community, not only of the self-expressing individual. Perhaps here is a little of the justice that Sigfús Dabason finds lacking; at least it is compassionate responsibility: 'Það er að minstakosti að leyfa hvurjum einum að lifa einsog hann sjálfur vill meðan hann aftrar ekki öðrum frá að lifa einsog þeir vilja' (BRE, 107).

Another aspect of the Caretaker's view of life is seen in his service to others; it is without any trace of ambition. Ambition is, after all, related to a distinct regard for personal rank and he is no respecter of persons: 'Skrýtið er það . . . að mér hefur einlægt fundist það vera sami maðurinn sem fer í pílgrímsgaungu á hnjánnum, alla leið uppá fjallið og hinn sem býr í gullroðinni höll uppá tindinum . . . Hátt og lágt vinur . . . ég veit ekki hvað það er. Lífið hefur . . . kennt mér að gera ekki mun á hetju og litlum karli; á stórtíðindum og titlíngaskít'. (BRE, 105-06) And as all men are equal before him, so in a way all work is equal for him too. He works and lives not to accumulate prestige, nor with an eye always on the future, but for the present moment. He does what he has to do and he does it carefully: 'Það sem ég get gert fyrir þá er að halda í ístaðið hjá þeim meðan þeir eru að fara á bak. Ég álít að upphaf vellíðunar sé fólgið í því að vera ekki að

skifta sér af hvurt aðrir menn ætla. Mér líður vel að því leyti sem ég tel sjálfsagt að hjálpa hvurjum og einum að komast þágangð sem hann vill' (BRE, 107).

It is as if he sees himself as a link in a chain. He can hold these views because of the breadth and depth of his understanding vision. He does not need immediate returns because he has a different time-perspective: 'Ég veit sosomeg að ég er ekki neinum neitt. En laungutaung er ekki stærri en litilfingur ef maður mælir báða við óendanleikann' (BRE, 106).

There are two ideas that are the principles for his thought; the first is the idea of the number - One, the most incomprehensible number in the world. He says little about it, but perhaps it may be understood as the Ultimate, the Alpha and Omega, the unifying source and force. The second idea is Time, the only supernatural thing he knows of, 'þó það kunni að vera sá veruleikur sem dýpst snertir menska menn . . . Og þegar farið er að hugsa um þennan sérkennilega stað sem ég var að segja þér frá, heiminn sem er aðeins einn, og teingsl hans við það eitt yfirnátturlegt sem við þekkjum, tímann, þá hættir annað að vera herra og lægra en hitt, stærra eða smærra' (BRE, 106).

The Caretaker's conception of One means that there are no set frontiers to his sympathies; he extends them not only to other human beings but opens them to other ways of thought and religions. So he happily accepts a belief in reincarnation, the transmigration of souls and karma. These, he says, are matters of more wide-spread belief throughout the world than, for instance, Christianity. He feels himself at home with Indian thought: 'Mér

finnst ég vera kominn heim til mín, að hitta loksins fólk sem hefur sömu trú og stærstur hópur jarðbúa' (BRE, 219). And in an image he compares Western thought to that of the East: 'Ég er ekki að segja að krummi sé ekki fugl . . . og oft er fróun að heyra í honum krúkið á veturna þegar aðrir fuglar eru á bak og burt . . . En krían er í vissum skilningi hundruð sinnum meiri fugl en hrafninn - samt' (BRE, 219-20). Laxness's admiration for *The Bhagavad Gita* should not be forgotten. <sup>25</sup>

Álfgrímur, looking back later in life, says of the Caretaker: 'Við kölluðum hann aldrei annað en eftirlitsmanninn, og þegar ég var lítill þá hélt ég hann væri einhverskonar eftirlitsmaður yfir bænum, eða jafnvel yfir landinu. Nú þegar aldur færist yfir mig . . . þá finnst mér að þar hafi farið sá maður sem átt hefði að vera eftirlitsmaður yfir heiminum' (BRE, 314). And again, recalling the conversations of the Caretaker that he had been a party to as a boy, Álfgrímur writes: 'Þannig var það ekki fyren mörgum árum síðar að ég Álfgrímur tók eftir því að þar hafði ég eina nótt í æsku orðið áheyrsla þess er vinur manna fullkominn mælti orðum kirkjufæðra og heilagra manna - en reyndar með gagnstæðum forteiknum við þá, því þeir töluðu af fullkomnum viðbjóði á sköpun mannsins: homo inter fæcus et urinam conceptus est' (BRE, 109-10).

Because of this last reflection Hallberg writes that the Caretaker is 'þannig ekki kristinn maður'. <sup>26</sup> But this is not necessarily so. The comments are not the Caretaker's own comments. They are Álfgrímur's, and they reflect his views, and presumably something of Laxness's too. Álfgrímur does, after all, say that the man spoke 'orðum kirkjufæðra og heilagra manna' (BRE, 110), but

without what Laxness regards as their denial of life. This is not to say that the Caretaker is un-Christian. What I suggest is that the Caretaker's life is in fact a pattern for Christian behaviour in its humility, its service, its reluctance to judge, its concentration on the present moment, its feeling for the shortness of time and the length of eternity, its whole untroubled tenor and perspective.

There is one other point on which the Caretaker has been found by Sønderholm to be 'ikke kristeligt', <sup>27</sup> and this is his non-intervention in Garðar's suicide. This is of course a controversial matter but I would not concur with Sønderholm in this view. The Caretaker is not after all taking his own life, and he is not indifferent, but he stands aside in the face of the real determination of suicide. He acts in the spirit of the words 'neither do I condemn thee'. <sup>28</sup> But perhaps this pre-canonical teaching of Christ is 'ikke kristeligt' and therefore Taoist too.

But naturally, from a dogmatic point of view, the Caretaker is not a conventional Christian at all. He is something other as well. While Sønderholm and Hallberg see him as a Taoist, he seems to me to incline towards Hindu thought because of his respect for the belief in reincarnation. I think it is also significant that the cynicism which is characteristic of certain parts of Taoism is completely unknown to him.

The scent of India is enhanced in *Brekkukotsannáll* by the presence of Ebeneser Draummann and his wife. He is a disciple of the East and a typical disciple, with all that that entails. Thus he imitates the masters for effect, going sockless, for

'Meistararnir gánga ekki heldur í sokkum' (BRE, 194), and he speaks unintelligently about 'prana', 'karma', and 'mæa': 'Allir í sokkum en einginn veit hvað prana er' (BRE, 194-95); and concerning his wife: 'Mér leist ekki á hana. Mér líst yfirleitt ekki á neitt. Ég veit vel að alt líf er mæa' (BRE, 195). His wife is suffering from reincarnation and the memory of a former life. 'Hún er af öðrum tíma' (BRE, 195). At first, Ebeneser's sole concern is to attend to and cure her. He leaves almost nothing untried: 'nýar bænir og töfraformúlar af ýmsu tagi, andardráttaræfingar eftir jóga, saltvatnsdrykkju gegnum nef, svo og handauppleggingar og mart fleiri' (BRE, 199). She is primarily soul to him. However, the sick woman speedily recovers, literally under the hands of the adolescent boy, and Ebeneser, blinded by his enthusiasm for the secret teaching, sees nothing untoward in this, but rather hails the boy as a reincarnation of the Hindu god Visnu. When the secret teaching begins to arouse interest in the region, his enthusiasm for attending his wife wanes markedly; he gives all his energy not to practising but to preaching; 'predika' is the word that Laxness employs.

The Ebeneser scenes recall the healing episode in *Heimsljós*. Laxness describes them tongue in cheek, as if to say this is humbug. And yet, for all the satire, E. Draummann's initial devotion is sincere, and this is the couple with whom the Caretaker, the essentially good man, feels at home because he understands their belief in the transmigration of souls.

The influence of Kristína on Álfgrímur should be looked at briefly. She is faithful, full of trust, very simply and quietly

Christian, forbidding the boy to pick the churchyard flowers because 'kirkjugarðurinn heyrir frelsaranum til einum' (BRE, 291.). She is the only one that Garðar can really find a refuge in. She is one of Laxness's elderly people, full of tranquillity and peace: 'Hún sat á hornstólnum sínum alveg blind, og langt til heymarlaus, með þetta hreina fagra yfirbragð, og sólin skein framání hana' (BRE, 313). Yet all the time she is intensely private, so that the boy never really knows how much she understands or what she really believes.

It remains to look more closely at séra Jóhann's view of life. It is important to remember that he exerts a great influence on Álfgrímur both at the beginning and at the end. Reappearances at the end are significant, for they set a seal; they indicate that the philosophy of the character in question is not incidental but intrinsic to the work. Séra Jóhann influences by his gentleness and by his thorough courtesy towards life. He is a priest of the Christian Church. He does not incline to heresy or perversion of faith. It must surely be acknowledged that the influence is Christian and not Taoist here.

Séra Jóhann is a man of indisputable faith but that does not mean that he is doctrinaire. On the contrary. He does not try to shrink God, to squeeze Him into a set of rules and formulas. God's compassion and understanding are limitless for him, so, to extend the meaning of his own words, 'guði þykja nýu lögin alveg eins góð og gömlu lögin' (BRE, 166). This is the God that accepts and the One that is there when no one else is: 'Það eru allir heymarlausir hér í kirkjugarðinum nema Guð' (BRE, 166). Séra Jóhann buries the

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poor more readily than the rich, feeling that with this God they are in safe care: 'Og það helgast af því að þeim mun lítilfjörlegri sem þeir eru því stærri pláss eiga þeir í hjarta frelsarans' (BRE, 166). This is the Good Shepherd. This is a distinctly personal God.

The priest is only seen at funerals; otherwise he is hidden from the public eye. The last time he appears is at the burial of the man that is believed to be Garðar Hólm, and in his old age the priest speaks once more of 'þá menn sem ekki hafa neitt andlit: þá menn sem lausnarinn elskar yfir aðra menn fram' (BRE, 308) - the faceless, that is not only those unrecognisable through death at sea, but also the weak and the failures of life. After the funeral he greets each of the mourners by name and says to Álfgrímur: 'Það er gott og fallegt að sýngja . . . einkum ef maður ætlar sér ekki herra en að sýngja yfir moldum þeirra manna sem höfðu ekkert andlit' (BRE, 309). So now when the tragedy of the singer who has sought fame is complete, in contrast, the old priest humbly and uncritically seems to unite his conception of the tone, both sung and unsung, with the real expression of it in unseen service. One of the questions to be resolved in *Brekkukotsannáll* is how best to use one's powers. Garðar really gives the answer in words when he says 'Töframaðurinn er nefnilega sá sem lætur vinninginn kjuran' (BRE, 242). But he is not able to distance himself from the winnings. To séra Jóhann they are a matter of indifference. It is only unrecognised service that counts.

*Brekkukotsannáll* is a work that contrasts illusion and reality, the public way and the hidden way. Garðar Hólm is seen skidding

and labouring on the former. On the latter are the strong images of Björn finding his own answers, tolerant, but not, as I see it, Taoist. Here too is the strong figure of the Caretaker, purposefully seeking retirement in humble service, Christian in his manner of life, but inclining towards India in his thought and philosophy. There are the quiet figures of the 'grandmother' and Kristína, both strictly uncurious, reserved but full of loyalty and warmth, neither of them seeming to have stepped out of the Orient. And finally the priest séra Jóhann, undogmatic, unscholastic, forgiving, all-embracing, with his image of a forgiving, all-embracing God, and his example of service to the failures of life. Tolerance and service are the two positive values that pervade the book. There seems little doubt which way *Alfgrímur* will follow. Above all it is absence of harsh criticism in Laxness, a mood of composure and forbearance that are noticeable in him now.

1. Sønderholm, p. 73.
2. Hallberg, *Halldór Laxness* (New York), pp. 182f.
3. Sønderholm, p. 284.
4. *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina*, pp. 76-77.
5. Wordsworth, 'Intimations of Immortality', in *Wordsworth's Poetical Works*, p. 460.
6. Sønderholm, p. 285.
7. Yeats, Preface to Tagore's *Gitanjali*, p. xviii.
8. John 14. 1, 27.



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9. Matthew 7. 1.
10. Sønderholm, p. 285.
11. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina og Halldór Laxness', p. 119.
12. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina', p. 23.
13. *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers*, introduced and translated by Sister Benedicta Ward, p. xvi.
14. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Papar', p. 176.
15. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina', p. 123.
16. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina', p. 124.
17. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina', p. 124.
18. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina', p. 126.
19. Daðason, 'Athugasemdir um Brekkukotsannál', p. 171
20. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina', p. 127.
21. Daðason, 'Athugasemdir um Brekkukotsannál', p. 170.
22. Daðason, 'Athugasemdir um Brekkukotsannál', p. 170.
23. Daðason, 'Athugasemdir um Brekkukotsannál', p. 170.
24. Daðason, 'Athugasemdir um Brekkukotsannál', p. 171.
25. Hallberg, *Den store vævaren*, p. 71.
26. Hallberg, 'Litla bókin um sálina', p. 130.
27. Sønderholm, p. 271.
28. John 8. 11.

After *Brekkukotsannáll*, showing the inner and outer collapse of Garðar Hólm, comes *Paradísarheimt* in 1960. To a great extent the message is the same. Lines from Werner Aspenström's poem 'Ikaros och gossen Gråsten' crystallise the meaning of the novel, for what is ultimately praised is not high-flying but 'konsten att stanna / och att äga tyngd'. 'Just as the ideologies of Laxness's own life had disappointed him, so the paradises which he investigates in his new novel are rejected in turn, and the seeking or the claiming of paradise in general is shown to be undertaken in vain. Paradise is not found in any Odyssey, but in the appreciation of the present, in the handling of the material and the fulfilment of the work that is demanded of one. Responsibility takes on a renewed importance; Laxness seems to condemn an underlying and thorough want of responsibility, the place of which is taken by egocentricity.

A certain detachment is evident in Laxness's work in *Íslandsklukkan*, and for a while after it. This is evidently the result of his intensive study of the sagas. Tolerance is admired, but this does not necessarily go hand in hand with personal compassion. Now, in *Paradísarheimt*, Laxness recalls the quality of compassion in *Sjálfstætt fólk*. He is once again openly full of pity for those who suffer, and there is indignation here, even if, at the same time, he is aware of a stupidity in some characters which seems to invite abuse. However, the importance of compassion is seen by its striking absence, rather than its presence: 'Flestir skilja guð, margir féð - að nokkru leyti; einginn hjartað' (PAR, 104). This is the author's comment.

## PARADÍSARHEIMT

*Paradísarheimt* can be regarded as a character study in irresponsibility and self-centredness. It demonstrates some of the difficulties involved in claiming paradise on earth, but many of these problems are particular to Steinar; they are not general. How much less would they not have been, had he, for instance, made suitable preparations for his family in his absence? Though there are clearly great faults in Utah, what the book chiefly shows is not so much the inevitable elusiveness of a paradise-state on earth, as the hopelessness of a search for it, undertaken at the cost of others.

Steinar is a man of contradictions. He is a builder and a craftsman, a practical man whose work merits others' admiration. But this is not enough for him and so he escapes into more beautiful, nobler and yet more unreal worlds; the world of childhood, of the saga and of the Mormons' paradise.

Steinar is shown throughout as a study in self-deception. This comes out in particular in his behaviour with his children. They make up his first world of dreams in which he can find relief from his work and the harsh economic conditions in which the family lives. He loves the children, but only as he imagines them to be, not as they really are; not as they will become. He stunts his family for his own ends; and in this he manifests a basic disregard for them as individuals. There is no need for sentimentality in an appraisal of Steinar's paternal feelings. Tryggvi Gíslason is too kind when he writes:

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Þú paradís sem Steinar bóndi heimti aftur, eftir að hún hafði lengi verið týnd, var . . . ævintýraland barnanna hans . . . Tákn þess er hulduhesturinn Krapí . . . Steinar vil ekki selja ævintýri barnanna sinna . . . Engu að síðar verður hesturinn örlogvaldur þessa friðsama fólks. Eftir fund bóndans og biskupsins er leitinn hafin, og í stað ævintýrisins ætlaði hann að kaupa þeim kóngsríki fyrir hross . . . Meðvitundarleysi þessara barna, þar sem þau sofa, er mynd hinnar fögru sælu, og honum þykir hálfsyrgilegt till þess að hugsa, að þau skyldu eiga eftir að vakna af þessum draumi sínum . . . Víða í Paradísarheimt kemur fram minningin um horfna barnskutíð. <sup>2</sup>

The children's story-world recurs whenever Steinar comes across a good tale, like the Mormon tabernacle, to take back home; but neither this world, nor the children themselves have any real hold on him. In effect they are real to him only in his imagination. Outside this they do not have any independent existence as far as he is concerned. We are back to E.M. Forster's philosophical question 'Is the cow there?'. <sup>3</sup> Do things have a continuing life when we are no longer there witnessing them? If so, then this must necessarily impose certain obligations. Steinar's answer to the question must be 'No'. What he does not witness has no independent life; he is free from obligation towards it. As far as he is concerned, his family continue in a beautiful sleep while he is absent. In reality, of course, it is in his absence that his daughter is seduced and gives birth, that the Viking, nurtured on the sagas, is found to be ignorant in husbandry and therefore

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incapable of maintaining the farm, and that his wife, guarding the honourable promise of her husband, sanctions the rape of their land, as honourable payment for a bit of mahogany. Steinar is directly responsible for the ignorance and stupidity in his home. It is the out-dated and false values that he has subscribed to which make possible the various disasters which devastate the family while he is away. He is also indirectly responsible for their lack of provision and protection.

Steinar has a beautiful fantasy of his children but when it suits him he shuts himself away from them, arousing their resentment, and spends hours carving his secret chest, a gift for the king; and then again, he parts with their horse, only later admitting, 'í rauninni var það hesturinn barna minna' (PAR, 139). Because of his pride he refuses payment, and so he has nothing to show in return. Thus, when he requires it, the dream world of his children can give way to another dream world, that of the saga, in which he pictures himself as the friend of kings. It is this second world of imaginary heroes that provides him with only a packet of needles. The saga world, as he imagined it, does not exist.

It is tempting to compare Steinar's journey to the Danish court with his gift for the king, with Auðun and his similar journey with his bear in *Auðunar þáttur*. But there is a radical difference in Auðun's tale, for whatever the hard-headed economic reasons for his venture, Auðun first makes responsible provision for his mother before setting off, and when the three years provision is estimated to have run out, he renounces life at court: "Eigi má

ek þat vita, herra" segir hann, "at ek hafa hér mikinn sóma með yðr, en móðir min troði stafkarls stig út á Íslandi". <sup>4</sup> While the world of the sagas has vanished in late nineteenth-century Scandinavia, the adherer to the old ideology, Steinar, differs from an actual saga model; he is degenerate, not up to standard himself.

At the same time, however, Steinar is always charming and courteous and does not give the appearance of being a shallow respecter of persons. On the contrary, with characteristic saga self-assurance he speaks to a chieftain 'einsog bróður eða kanski öllu heldur einsog niðursetning sem maður ann ekki svo mjög sakir verðleika hans, heldur af því maður sér í honum guðdómlega persónu' (PAR, 16-17). But this is literally only a manner of speaking, and in any case, it is easy for him to be courteous to these people, since he has no commitment to them. Steinar does not, in fact, see the divine person in other people at all, let alone enter into relationship with them. In Utah the following conversation with Borgi takes place:

Ef satt skal segja, þá verður mér einna starsýnast á múlasnana, því þeim er ég óvanur, sagði Stanford. Það eru yfirtak höfðinglegar skepnur.

Fyrirgefðu, sagði konan. Ég er því miður ekki múlasni . . .

Þó skömm sé frá að segja, sagði Stanford, þá þekki ég nú ekki leingur sjálfan mig, fremur en þú . . .

Það er ekki von þú þekkir sjálfan þig, sagði konan, og var ekki

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leingur hlátur í hug. Sá sem þekkir ekki aðra þekkir ekki sjálfan sig. (PAR, 176)

Borgi assesses his character accurately. He is afraid of personal encounter and full of self-deception. This self-deception makes it necessary to balance what he says with what he actually does. His fear of encounter is part of his want of responsibility, because personal relationships entail commitment, and this is precisely what Steinar is running away from.

Firstly, of course, Steinar fails to notice Borgi. This is not a good start. She is something of an outcast, not being a Mormon, but he does not help her realistically. He repays her for her coffee by delivering bricks to her home, but he fails to put them to use there. It is significant that he gives bricks and not attention or affection, which is what the woman obviously wants. Then he hears of Borgi's and her daughter's increasing hardship after the birth of the baby, but he does nothing to relieve it. Then he breaks his promises, though finally he does marry the two of them. Erik Sønderholm is generous when he says: 'Da Stener endelig efterkommer mormonernes krav om at gifte sig, sker det først, efter at hans kone er død, og han gør det, fordi han ønsker at hjælpe en mor og hendes datter, som på grund af mormonernes ideologi er landet i nød. Dagen efter rejser Stener bort for aldrig mere at komme tilbage til sine nye "koner"'.<sup>5</sup> Arnas Arnæus also travelled away from Rome 'daginn eftir' (ÍSL, 244). The two are similar in this respect. Escape is the solution for them when their comfortable non-commitment is suddenly under threat. There

is really very little altruism in Steinar's action. He marries out of a certain kindness, but chiefly because it will cost him nothing. He speaks of his first wife in loving terms, but he can hardly be considered faithful to her, unless fidelity is purely negative, meaning absence of adultery. He does after all abandon her to destitution. She is another dream to him, the reality of which has no tie on him. He is not interested in women, perhaps only in Woman as an ideal. As he avoids encounter, so he shuns embrace. He is sexually neutral. People, when they are not dreams, are an encumbrance to him. As he sees it, polygamy is a state to be pitied for its increased load: 'Ég vorkendi ævinlega Abrámi sæla sem guð þraungvaði til að eiga tvær konur, að ég nefni nú ekki Salómon kallinn sem guð strafaði með þremur' (PAR, 167). It stands to reason then, that divorce, the freeing from the responsibilities of marriage, is the one sacrament that God forgot about. This is important. Steinar does not actually want a divorce himself, because he needs his dream, but in a wide sense, a sacrament of divorce would be a blessing on the sort of flight that he resorts to.

Steinar also admits to his own fear of encountering his children. He writes of it to the bishop, partly in the third person: 'Börn hans, er sofið höfðu fegurst barna, hvers voru þau ekki makleg? Als nema þess sem hann var maður til að veita þeim. Þegar þau voru komin á það rek að vakna til veraldar sem ekki er framar ævintýrabók gerðist mér návist þeirra smámsaman óbærileg sakir lítilmensku minna að duga þeim' (PAR, 189). The words reveal an exaggeration on his part, self-pity and an attempt at self-



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justification, as well as some admission of failure. The children are now separated from their father by a chasm. When the family is reunited in Utah the daughter looks at her father 'úr þeim fjarska sem dag nokkurn verður milli tveggja hjartna' (PAR, 276), and Steinar does not have the courage to look boldly at the altered situation. All that concerns him about his wife's death is whether or not the stars shone when she was committed to the sea, and the question of the paternity of his grandson does not seem to disturb him at all.

Critics have pointed to Laxness's own words about the necessity of personal experience in writing of the search for the promised land <sup>6</sup>, and Peter Hallberg in particular suggests that Steinar 'skulle alltså på sitt sätt vara en bild av författaren'. <sup>7</sup> I do not suppose that Laxness would be very delighted at this thought, at least not according to my interpretation of Steinar's character. Of course there is a framework of a search for paradise in *Paradísarheimt* and within it there is much that is both moving and cynical, but Steinar appears, primarily, as an escapist, an unsettled wanderer, rather than as a man with a genuine quest.

The third world of dreams and promises that Steinar explores is the Mormon community in Utah. Steinar is not a deep thinker, but neither, in a sense, is he irreligious, though the religion that he has seems rather a superficial embellishment than a profound principle of life. However, where religious practice and non-practice are concerned, his reactions seem honest and free from hypocrisy. He alone, for instance, shows courtesy towards the Mormon preacher at their first encounter, and at their second

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encounter he speaks with indignation on Þjóðrekur's behalf, when the latter is bound up outside the church: 'Og þetta eiga að heita kristnir menn'. Þjóðrekur replies, 'Hvenær hafa þeir kristnu hagar sér öðruvísi en si-sona . . . Þeir byrjuðu að falla í Stóruvillu strax uppúr frumkristni' (PAR,51). The religious climate in Iceland is thus portrayed as intolerant and Steinar is shown as standing quietly and rather inconspicuously alone in his freedom from prejudice. There is nothing dramatic or heroic in his actions. 'It is the plain, fair man in him that dislikes what he sees, and this is, arguably, why he looks elsewhere.

Þjóðrekur's words 'þeir byrjuðu að falla í Stóruvillu strax uppúr frumkristni' have perhaps a double significance here. On one level, the Great Heresy is simply the faith held by Non-Mormons, but, on another level, it might be read as that perversion of Christian teaching, the persecution and use of violence as a holy weapon, that has continued through the ages, and that has obviously angered Laxness a long while.

However, though there might be good cause to seek for a paradise free from religious intolerance, this does not seem to enter into Steinar's actual motives when he leaves Denmark. He is displeased by incidents in Iceland, but they pass. On the other hand, he is impressed by Þjóðrekur. But his real motivation is not spiritual or idealistic but solidly material. His reasoning is facile. Just as he forgets Danish/Icelandic history and suddenly considers Denmark as great, because it has good spring water, so, in the same way, he reasons: 'Jósep smiður hefur réttari kenningu en danakonungur . . . ef þar í landi fá menn nauðsynjar sínar til

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lífs og sálar' (PAR, 143). He wishes to take his children to this heaven, but he forgets that they are probably near to starving now at home.

In this promised land Steinar sees much to fascinate him, but it is largely material. He resists the real religious movement. After a while, however, he falls under a part of its influence; he rises in this world, begins to work for money, a new thing for him, and he becomes a man of substance. Yet even as a nominal Mormon, there seems no enlivening conviction within him, not even as a missionary in Iceland. Is it too hard to say that his missionary work is a means of getting him away from the reality that is starting to overwhelm him in the New World — wives, responsibilities, obligations, the past catching up with him?

As a missionary, Steinar returns to his former home. He describes himself as 'sá maður sem heimti aftur Paradís eftir að hún hafði leingi verið týnd, og gaf hana börnum sínum' (PAR, 300), and, one might add, who washed his hands of it and them. By this time of course persecution has ceased in Iceland, so much of the stimulating challenge of the former kind of missionary work has disappeared.

Steinar now turns his attention, the attention of the practical man, to the rebuilding of the walls, the handling of the stones that he gets his name from. This is not paradise; it is not to be found for him, and that which he called his children to is unreal. He settles down to work where he left off, exactly the same, save that behind him lies a trail of disaster for which he is personally responsible. Here the words of the grandmother in

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Brekkukot come to mind: 'Þann saung sem við heyrum ekki hér í Brekkukoti sækjum við ekki niðri Austurvöll' (BRE, 113).

Steinar's homecoming does not signify that paradise lies in cultivating our gardens, even our Icelandic gardens. Many of Laxness's characters, beginning with Randver in *Barn náttúrunnar*, return home to their native soil, wiser for their experience abroad, but intending not to wander again. Homecoming is an important strand in Laxness's writing. But Steinar's homecoming is different; it is not a purely national or agricultural homecoming. It signifies, as in *Brekkukotsannáll*, that paradise is found within, and not in wanderings or experiments. Steinar does not find his paradise precisely because he has not discovered that it is an inner and not an outer state.

Intolerance is an important theme in *Paradísarheimt*, as it was in *Brekkukotsannáll*. We see it first in the persecution of the Mormon preacher by the Lutherans in Iceland. Ironically it is also rife in the Promised Land, where the Lutherans are repaid. Steinar, the plain man, is again offended by it. Erik Sønderholm sees his tolerance as being his saving strength: 'Steners manglende trosfanatisme, dvs. hans tolerance, er den kraft, der til sidst frigør ham fra ideologien'.<sup>28</sup> But his tolerance is to be distinguished from that of the Caretaker, and it is less praiseworthy. Steinar does not have a proviso behind him to save him from laissez-faire and self-indulgence. His behaviour, doing what he wants, has the effect of hurting others. But it is true, as Sønderholm says, that Steinar is free from fanaticism and ideology. He is indeed too non-committal to be capable of adhering

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to any ideology, and, of course, keeping himself always a little apart, he tends to observe rather than become absorbed. In Utah, for instance, he observes the intolerance of those with 'correct thinking', the Latter Day Saints. In an interview Laxness has stated that he 'used the Mormon religion as *pars pro toto* for Christendom'.<sup>9</sup> Its intolerance is a model for intolerance on the widest scale, and it is easy to see from it how a new, young religion almost inevitably slips into the errors and heresies of those that it is opposed to. Mormon society in *Paradísarheimt* is an exclusive club that reserves charity and understanding exclusively for its own. There are interesting similarities between Selma Lagerlöf's *Jerusalem* and *Paradísarheimt*, both being in part studies of certain unchristian attitudes of Christian sects.

Those that are made outcasts or that are cold-shouldered are Borgi, the Josephite, her drunken, Lutheran lover, and the one-time Lutheran priest Ronki. Borgi actually lives in some kind of house, but most surviving Lutherans exist in dugouts. Even the cross on the Lutheran church bears testimony to their wrong-thinking, 'því hann var brotinn af' (PAR, 163). Ronki is accustomed to boarding up the Lutherans' windows against Mormon attack, and fails to get promotion in the Mormon Church, because of his dubious views. They all suffer from Mormon discrimination. The Lutheran lover complains: 'Ég hef vonda kenningu . . . þarabauki get ég ekki sannað mína kenningu. Sá hefur besta kenningu sem getur sýnt frammá að hann hafi mest að éta; og góða skó. Ég hef hvorugt og ligg í döggaði' (PAR, 191). Ronki replies: 'Ef einhver

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er svo duglaus að hafa hvorki kjötsúpu né stígvél, né manndáð til að hefjast úr döggi, hann er ekki líklegur til að hafa andann né eilífðina heldur' (PAR, 191). Nothing succeeds like success here. As Steinar surmises earlier on, the correct religion seems to be the one that feeds you best, and you need your wits about you in order to keep in with the community.

The Lutherans are not the only sector that is victimised; so also are the Mormons themselves, by the state, for reason of their 'immorality', their custom of polygamy. Laxness handles polygamy ambiguously, as might be expected. There is much satire, but the lasting impression he gives is one of respect, though of course only one family is portrayed. The overall feeling that pervades the Bishop's household is one of warmth and welcome. Bishop Þjóðrekur has three wives to start with, all of whom he has married for reasons of compassion. However, his fourth marriage to Steinar's daughter is not without a certain cynical humour, but it must be underlined that his treatment of the girl is respectful and protective throughout.

Holy Polygamy is contrasted with the sanctioned immorality of the influential classes in Iceland, in particular of Björn. Þjóðrekur's own defence of polygamy is the result of his experience in life in this respect: 'Ég var talinn prestssonur. Það var síður embættismanna sem höfðu miklar yfirreiðir að þeir lágu með þeim kvenmönnum sem þeir vildu, giftum sem ógiftum. Móðir mín flæktist nauðug úti Vestmanneyar og dó þar útaf sakir fyrirliðningar annarra manna' (PAR, 35).

The overshadowing example of this kind of debauchery is Björn's

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seduction of Steinbjörg. It is not perhaps without its comical side - much tragedy has its humour - but this should not be permitted to conceal the fact that it is an instance of the crude exploitation of the weak, by those that are physically and socially powerful. Björn cannot be acquitted of irresponsibility, by arguing that the girl acquiesces.

The horror of the trick played upon her by the three men on the boat is in another class. Somehow or other the girl is unaware of the identity of the second and the third men, so her acquiescence is unwitting and their action amounts to rape. The realisation of this, afterwards, virtually destroys her: 'Ég þekki mig ekki sjálfa. Ég veit ekki hver ég er. Er ég manneskja? . . . Að vakna við að maður hefur mist allt og veit að maður á ekki leingur neitt, er það að vera manneskja? . . . Ó hvar er hesturinn okkar góði sem við áttum einusinni öll?' (PAR, 260). These incidents imply a strong condemnation of the environment and the kind of upbringing that fosters naivety, leaving the defenceless open to every abuse. As in his portrayal of Ásta Sóllilja and Aldinblóð, Laxness is at his most compassionate here.

This abusive treatment of women by Non-Mormons is brought out again in Utah. There the drunken Lutheran complains that women are the death of him, and Steinar, the observer, gives the following reply: 'Þar skilur milli helgra manna af næstum dögum og ykkar lúterstrúarmanna. Spámaðurinn og Bríkamur vilja gefa konunni part af þeirri tign og virðingu sem maðurinn hefur öðlast fyrir guði. Konan er hvorki tóbak né brennivín. Hún vill vera kona í húsi' (PAR, 182).

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The ultimate dereliction of the lecher is exemplified in Björn, burnt out and alone: 'Ef þú vilt heyra um einhvern sem er dauður, þá skal ég segja þér hver hann er: það er ég. Það er ég sem er sokkinn í þessu kviksindi. Hvað hef ég haft uppúr því að ríða jökulvötn á nótt sem degi til að færa mönnum gull? Ekki meiren það á milli okkar liggur, nema giktina . . . Hann Steinar okkar í Hlíðum er ekki dauður. Ég er viss um að hann á að minsta kosti sjö konur hjá mormónum' (PAR, 216).

Holy Polygamy is not universally admired or envied, particularly by decent American society, which has made it illegal. But the problem is more complicated for the Mormon community. It is not merely a question of civil disobedience, but a choice between civil or godly disobedience. It is the difficulty of applying a moral teaching that is believed to be given by God, and which is at variance with that of the state. So Laxness comments in *Paradísarheimt*: 'Það eru ævinlega þung spor fyrir kirkju að leggja niður kenningu sem henni hefur verið falin af guddóminum; á þetta ekki síst við um siðakenningur sem rísa á sjálfafneitun einstaklingsins og félagslegum guðmóði safnaðarins svo sem verið hafði um heilagt fjölkvæni með mormónum' (PAR, 262).

Laxness's treatment of relationship between the sexes in *Paradísarheimt* seems to underline the necessity for great respect and responsibility and the fact that the price for abuse is high.

If the chief flaw of Mormon society is intolerance, the second flaw can be said to be its preoccupation with ownership and comfort. This seems to reflect the materialism of much of Christianity, that, together with its intolerance and violence,



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Laxness is often at pains to expose. In Utah possessions are a sign of success and of belonging, and the church is the greatest possessor of all. Among other things it owns the land, the right to expand into the desert, the right to graze sheep on the mountain, the water on the land, and it is even beginning to set up in competition against the heathen for the right to mine below. On a smaller scale, the marvels of the pram and the sewing-machine testify to the blessings of correct-thinking.

When Þjóðrekur makes his first address in Iceland, a god-fearing Icelander cries out 'Vor Frelsari er vor Frelsari . . . einsog til þess að stæla móti þessari miklu saubæign' (PAR, 34). It sounds like a cry against possessions, a cry in favour of spiritual values. Laxness has always been suspicious of the virtue of poverty set against a background of material hardship. It is clear in his articles from the 1920s: 'Primum vivere, deinde philosophare', <sup>10</sup> and especially in *Salka Valka* and *Ílandsklukkan*. Now, in Utah, his characters are at last cosy and well-fed but their philosophy seems to have stuck at the well-fed level. So, after all, material comfort is not the solution that Laxness believed it to be earlier. This must be another reason why the detached Steinar decides to leave, for comfort is not important to him; he never lives in his new house. Steinar's search for the Promised Land was always material rather than religious, but the material heaven of the Mormons does not give him lasting satisfaction. This satisfaction must then lie in yet another, undiscovered place.

Among all the characters it is Þjóðrekur who is remarkable for

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his integrity. It is he, rather than Steinar, who embodies the spirit and the courage of the true seeker, and primarily because he understands sacrifice and is not solely out for what he can get: 'Þjóðrekur biskup var einn þeirra frumkvöðla af Íslandi er keypt höfðu fyrirheitna landið gjaldi sem það var vert' (PAR, 154). His words in praise of being a Mormon are in the same vein as Bunyan's 'To be a Pilgrim'. 'There is passion and conviction there. For a Mormon neither desert nor death can 'daunt his spirit'. But Þjóðrekur is one of the old pioneers and the spirit of the Mormons seems to have softened considerably after they have attained the Promised Land. Trials seem to have brought out the best in the early Mormons, but by the time the Bishop returns to Iceland with his tracts, persecution has ceased and he is well received, so that he is led to reflect: 'Er það framför eða afturför?' (PAR, 271). Steinar recalls the same reflection in his turn. The answer to the question, from a religious point of view, must be 'afturför'.

Þjóðrekur's way of life in most respects deserves admiration. He is long-suffering, respectful, protective, responsible and he does not compel people to believe, neither does he complain or judge. He has an unshakable faith in God, but his experience of life has not allowed him to see God through rose-coloured spectacles. Life has not been easy and therefore he says 'Guð er að vísu nokkuð dýrseldur kaupmaður, en hann svíkur aungvan' (PAR, 142). Because of his experiences Þjóðrekur is reluctant to tolerate unnecessary misery here on earth, in the expectation of the Kingdom of God only in the world to come. During his first

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meeting with Steinar's daughter the following conversation takes place:

Það tjóa ekki leingur nein látalæti við mig, sagði hún.

Heldurðu að ég viti ekki orðið að himinn og jörð er tvent?

Til komi þitt ríki, svo á jörðu sem á himni, sagði mormóninn.

Kanski þetta sé einhver kerski hjá lausnaranum?

Ég skil ekki bifflumál, sagði stúlkan. Ekki núorðið.

Ríki guðs stendur í Júta sem er áfast við himnaríki og ekkert bil þar á milli, sagði biskupinn. (PAR, 204-05)

Þjóðrekur thus differentiates between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. The former is attainable here on earth, more precisely in the land of the Mormons; the latter is not the same but is very close at hand.

Yet, for all his virtues, the Bishop still has some of the markings of a zealot. Thus his religious enthusiasm acts as a powerful influence and a support for Steinar's irresponsibility. Þjóðrekur uses what he sees as divine inspiration as an excuse and pardon for all behaviour: 'Það sem guð inblæs þér þarftu hvorki að utskýra né afbiðja fyrir mönnum' (PAR, 143).

In much the same way he is quick to equate Steinbjörg's plight in Iceland with his own early sufferings and those of many others: 'Þetta er sagan okkur allra' (PAR, 204). But this is not honest. There are indeed material similarities, but what is important is that the girl's suffering has been brought about by the mindlessness of her father, under the special guidance and

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approval of the Bishop himself. Þjóðrekur shows himself to be most excellent and careful in the service of those he sees and knows, but his zeal allows him to be thoughtless of them before they actually meet. Thus his compassion is, in a sense, selective.

It is the words that Þjóðrekur says at the site of his upbringing in Iceland that could be regarded as containing the central message of the book: 'Þessir rústir eru til vitnis um það, að sérhver byggð hlýtur að eyðast ef fólkid hefur rángar skóðanir' (PAR, 235-36). In the final chapter there is the image of Steinar with his wasted life behind him, standing in the ruins of his wasted farm. He has been a tolerant dreamer, with no deep convictions; he has had much fantasy but little heart. His emptiness can be compared with Þjóðrekur's solidity and with old María's warmth. His vapid dreams stand shabbily beside her memories of the people in the Westman Islands, people like herself for whom paradise is not unattainable, who have not had to seek outside themselves for it, but who have found it within; as she says: 'Það fólk sem ég ólst upp hjá í Vestmanneyum hafði afturámóti himnaríki í sjálfu sér. Hvar sem það var statt, jafnvel þó það hængi niðrá sextugu að síga fyrir fugl, þá var það heima hjá sér í guðsborg Síon' (PAR, 277).

1. Aspenström, 'Ikaros och gossen Gråsten', from *Dikter under Träden* (1956), in the selection *Dikter* (Mån-pocket, 1986).
2. Tryggvi Gíslason, 'Paradís í Paradísarheimt', pp. 51-52.
3. E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey*. These are the opening words.

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4. 'Auðunar þáttur vestfirzka', in *Íslensk fórnrit*, Volume VI, p. 366.
5. Sønderholm, p. 294.
6. Keel, *Restauration und Innovation*, p. 86;  
Tryggvi Gíslason, 'Paradís í Paradísarheimt', p. 48.  
Hallberg, 'Laxness vid skiljovägen', p. 313-15.
7. Hallberg, 'Laxness vid skiljovägen', p. 315.
8. Sønderholm, p. 292.
9. Laxness, 'Interesting Characters Need No Writer', *Iceland Review*, 1 (1985), p. 71.
10. 'Raflýsing sveitanna', *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 March 1927.
11. John Bunyan, 'To be a Pilgrim', *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, No. 676.

Laxness's next collection of stories, *Sjóstafakverið*, was published in 1964, the year after *Skáldatími*, in which he showed a new political position, now standing back from the Soviet Union. It begins with a reflective story, 'Tryggur staður', which draws together, in one character, portraits of elderly Icelandic women previously described in Laxness's writings. Here, for instance, is the grandmother from *Sjálfstætt fólk* with her greeting to anyone in foreign parts who might resemble her: 'ef þú hittir einhversstaðar kellingartöttur sem er jafn lítilfjörleg og ég, þá bið ég að heilsa henni' (SSK, 13). Here also is the 'grandmother' from *Brekkukotsannáll* with her respect for cows and thorough dislike of dogs, and her unsentimental yet fair treatment of them. The story illustrates the security that radiates from such tranquil and unworldly people, faithful and full of their own brand of belief. So the household dog, habitually forbidden the house, finds that in moments of great fear the prohibition on entering the house is lifted and that the one safe place for him is beneath the old woman's bed. Laxness wonders at the old woman bearing up under the stream of tribulations sent her by 'sá drottinn sem gefur og tekur en er einlægt jafnstór' (SSK, 10). All her children have been taken from her and then her husband. But her faith is actually cautious, so she tells the little boy, 'O það er nú ekki allt satt sem í henni stendur biflínunni þeirri arna' (SSK, 11). The boy and the writer then begin to question: Is the Bible untrue? Is God untrue? Has the old woman in the past actually trusted God too much? And there is an almost angry question: 'Leit hún svo á að almættið hefði tekið ofaní við hana

fyrir þá synd að trúa of miklu þegar hún eignaðist guðrúnarnar þrjár í þeirri von að kanski mundi ein fá að lifa?' (SSK, 12). It seems as if the reader is asked to make a connection between the constancy of the old woman, and the fearlessness shown by the dog. 'Hversvegna var þessi staður einn tryggur hræddu kvikindi hér á jörðinni?' (SSK, 21).

'Dúfnaveislan' is reminiscent of Pär Lagerkvist's story *Det eviga leendet*, in which the ranks of dead souls join forces to approach God, to voice their indignation at the preposterousness of life and death, and to demand the meaning for it all. God turns out to be a small, old carpenter who only meant that men should never be satisfied and who loved children. In Laxness's story all the people in the telephone book are invited to a reception, and they try to discover their host and the purpose for the feast. The host is hidden from the guests all the time; he has to be sought out. When he is found, he is not a carpenter, but a little old man pressing trousers, doing his best to retreat from the enormous wealth that has accumulated, willy-nilly, around him. There is an echo of Eastern tales here, not in the details, but in the outline: the elderly recluse, living in extreme simplicity, sought after for his wisdom by a seeker from the outside world. But the answer the trouser-presser gives is not entirely optimistic; it is like Chinese cynicism and not entirely helpful: 'Ég hef lært að veröldin hefur einn kost . . . og hann er sá að hún gerir aungan mann vitrari en hann var í gær' (SSK, 49). The same goes for his general forecast for the future, when he remembers his upbringing in the orphanage: 'En ég er hræddur um að

Önnur eins tíð eigi ekki aftir að koma yfir heiminn' (SSK, 54).

The trouser-presser and his wife are like the glacier couple from *Heimsljós*, moved down into the city. They are untouched by city-life and uncontaminated by their money. They want to give it away, but do not know how best to do so. Suggestions are made for ways of distributing the money but the trouser-presser is too humble to offer his wealth to people who are above him. Only another orphanage is an acceptable idea, on the proviso that 'ídjótar sem ælust upp þar gætu ekki eignast peninga' (SSK, 53).

The wife punctuates the conversation with simple and devout words: 'Guð er mikill' (SSK, 47), 'sem betur fer, alvaldið er miskunnsamt' (SSK, 51) and 'Guð er alltaf jafnstór' (SSK, 49). These are almost precisely the same words the old woman uses in 'Tryggur staður': 'sá drottinn . . . sem er einlægt jafnstór' (SSK, 10).

There seems to have been a certain doubt about the meaning of 'Dúfnaveislan'. As Sigfús Dabason says: 'sumir lesendur hafa látið í ljós þá skoðun að sú saga sé ekki annað en háð um cocktailpartí "sem slík" . . . Þessi neikvæða niðurstaða ein leiðir til þeirrar getgátu að sagan sé dæmi upp á eitthvað annað. Upp á hvað dæmið hljóðar er hinsvegar torvelt að greina. Þó manni detti kanski í hug einhver líkning kann hún að reynast svo mjóslegin að hún sé ekki umhugsunar né umtals verð'. ' It often seems clumsy to attempt to interpret symbolic writing precisely. An open quality is lost. However, the little man in the state apartment may easily be interpreted as God - He comes 'from up there' (SSK, 47). He is humble and at peace, but he has a problem with his fortune, which is beyond his control. He is afraid to bestow it lightly,



for he sees the destructive power of wealth in the world. Like Lagerkvist's old carpenter, he loves children and fears that they will be damaged too. It is in many ways a despondent story with the masses of people in noisy ignorance on one side and on the other the calm, retiring couple at peace, but with small hope for the world outside.

The trouser-presser foreshadows Jón Prímus in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. Like him he does not see the world as being abandoned. He has the priest's simplicity and geniality. Jón mends primus stoves. The host of the reception says 'ég geri við buxur fyrir fólk . . . Á ég kanski að pressa fyrir þig?' (SSK, 46). Erik Sønderholm also recognises a similarity between Björn from *Brekkukotsannáll* and the foster father of the orphanage. <sup>2</sup> Of him the trouser-presser says: 'Hann var okkur sannur guð í mannsmynd' (SSK, 54).

In 'Kórvilla á Vestfjörðum' a woman goes astray in a mist in high summer for an indefinite number of hours, possibly days. Coming out of the mist she finds herself in a new area and finds shelter, which becomes permanent, at the farm of a couple with an unmanageable lunatic son. Here she stays, at great personal loss, perceiving the hand of God in all that has happened.

The story begins directly with the word 'Bæn', and this gives the key which is maintained throughout the whole narrative. There is a quotation after the title: ('Si me vis esse in tenebris - '), which Hallberg has traced back to *The Imitation of Christ*. <sup>3</sup> It comes from Book Three, Chapter Seventeen, where it reads: 'If You will that darkness be my lot, blessed be Your Name; if it be

light, again blessed be Your Name. If You stoop to comfort me, blessed be Your Name; and if You wish to try me, ever blessed be Your Name'. 4

The woman is possibly the most impressive of Laxness's simple, elderly Icelandic types. She differs from the character in 'Tryggur staður' for she is without cynicism, although she too has suffered. Her suffering has not been bereavement but deprivation of parents, of motherhood and finally of the children 'sem mér þótti vænna um en þó ég hefði átt þau sjálf' (SSK, 124). She seems to have only humility and compassion within her. In her initial prayer she refers to herself as 'sál sem þú guð í þinni náð hefur útvalið með stærri villu en aðra menn hér á Vestfjörðum' (SSK, 101). Typically her own orphaned state allows her empathy with others who are vulnerable, but it is not her own love that she mentions but God's: 'þar . . . skilst hví guð elskar einkum þá sem ekki eru hans börn' (SSK, 104). At the height of her disorientation she has a vision of a foreign army and again she can only feel pity: 'blessaðir mennirnir, matvandir einsog krakkar' (SSK, 119). The culminating illustration of her compassion is embodied in the sacrifice of her former life, in which there was happiness and fulfilment, in order to serve the crazed and dangerous Guðvaleníus. It is not simply service, the performing of useful actions and tasks. It is kenosis, self-emptying. She feels she is impoverished inwardly and yet she must leave everything and give even this uselessness away.

It is only in her going astray that she sees any purpose in her having been born; the outcome is the justification of her

existence. In this, as in everything, she sees a special providence: 'Einginn maður fær borist svo afvega að hann villist útúr höndum forsjónarinnar' (SSK, 116), and in nothing is there any complaint or anxiety: 'Í villu skilst að hver sú landtaka sem forsjónin ræður er góð og alt undir því komi að þræuka og segja með sálmaskáldinu, einkum þá komið er í algjört myrkur, sál mín bið þú' (SSK, 116). In her lost state she is not in fact lost: 'Ég fann . . . ekkert nema þig sem hefur skapað myrkur sálar minnar þar sem ég hvíli örugg af því það ert þú að eilífu amen' (SSK, 102). And she has only praise for God: 'Lofaður sé sá sem leiðir oss í villu' (SSK, 112). She says the Lord's Prayer 'í þakklætisskyni fyrir daglegt brauð og fyrir að hafa ekki verið leidd í freistni' (SSK, 119), and then the prayer in the spirit of Job, in which there is the essence of the introductory quotation: 'Takk fyrir öll þau kvöld sem ég fór að háttu þreytt og hallaði mér að koddanum mínum heima og sofnaði án þess að vera slitin af erni. Og takk fyrir kvöldið í kvöld sem ég halla mér uppað vörðu á fjalli og fer að sofa í þokunni og verð slitin af erni' (SSK, 121). At first the woman thinks that her life with Guðvaleníus is a punishment for her sins, 'drýgðar sem ódrýgðar', but even this attitude is turned to praise in time: 'Seinna skildi ég að það var náðin' (SSK, 124).

The allegory is not difficult to understand: when one is lost time ceases to exist, the world seems upside down, all ways are wrong. Even if your visions are not those that are expected, even if there seems to be war everywhere, not only in foreign lands but even around you in unknown places, keep your patience and your

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sense of gratitude. 'Það er best að halda áfram þó einginn viti leingur hvert sé verið að fara' (SSK, 115) Everything works out and has a meaning. 'Kórvilla á Vestfjörðum' is a work of great spiritual maturity.

'Jón í Brauðhúsum' is a short allegorical story which treats the disillusion and disappointment experienced after a lost cause. It can be understood on a political level, since it was written at the time when Laxness's mind was full of his disillusion with the Soviet Union. Peter Hallberg has explored this possibility in his article 'Laxness vid skiljovägen'. The Jón í Brauðhúsum of the story can be seen to stand for any towering leader of a movement: Jesus, Stalin, Hitler or perhaps even Joseph Smith. Hallberg and Sønderholm have between them also treated another aspect of the story, <sup>5</sup> namely the debate that arose as a result of Laxness's article on Erlendur Guðmundsson, 'Sonur Guðmundar heitins í apótekinu og aðrir menn', published in *Skáldatími*. <sup>65</sup> Þórbergur Þórðarson took up Laxness on a number of points, accusing him of forgetting the exact facts relating to Erlendur and his philosophy. Because of this controversy Laxness patches together a contradictory and shifting memory of Jón í Brauðhúsum and shows how easily facts can get distorted and lost for ever. The final aspect of the story, the one under review here, is the religious one.

The characters are fairly clearly but loosely modelled on Jesus of Nazareth and the apostles Andrew and Philip, with Peter and Paul somewhere in the background. The name Jón í Brauðhúsum comes from the Icelandic philologist Gísli Magnússon who, in the

nineteenth century made translations of biblical names as literal as possible. Thus Nazareth was translated as Bread Houses and Jesus was equated with an ordinary common name. 7

The disciples of the leader meet first ten years after the death of the great man. During the intervening years they have undergone not only material trials but something much more difficult to bear, the sense of loss and failure in contrast to the sense of purpose known before, in the shadow of the leader. Life can never be the same again. These disciples awaited a new kingdom, 'en það kom ekki' (SSK, 164); 'Áður var alt aukaatriði nema eitt. Nú er einhvernvegin alt einskisvert, nema ef hægt væri að gleyma - því sem ekki kom' (SSK, 162).

After the realisation of the loss of the kingdom comes the desire to perpetuate the memory of the leader and his teaching, and herein is the beginning of confusion. A community in his memory is to be founded somewhere. Andris and Filpus show the ease with which disagreement can spring up even between two witnesses and, as Filpus says: 'meiri tröllasögur kynnu að verða skrifaðar um hann en nokkurn annan mann' (SSK, 167). He also remonstrates that the leader himself would have had no time for such matters: 'hann trúði hvorki á bækur né félag' (SSK, 167). This is an important detail, for it seems to indicate that Laxness returns to the original and pure intentions of the founder of Christianity, who, he implies, would not have approved of the way that the established Church has developed.

Yet in spite of the failure of these men either to establish an incontrovertible picture of the man who was their inspiration, or

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to effect a way of life, political or spiritual, according to his precepts, never-the-less they still feel set apart, entrusted with something almost of holiness, of fire. 'Samt vorum við einu mennirnir undir sólinni sem höfðum þekt hann og vissum hver hann var . . . Aldrei hefur nokkrum mönnum verið trúað fyrir öðru eins' (SSK, 170). Laxness makes use of the sort of situation that could have arisen in the days of the early Church, and widens the implications. It has long been apparent in his work that he mistrusts ideals and ideologies, but it is shown here that what he suspects is the dubious growth coming from a good root and not the root itself, that is, in this case, the dubious, unreliable growth of Christianity and not the integrity of Jesus of Nazareth himself. The dissent and the disillusion of the disciples does not eliminate their underlying wonder.

'Fugl á garðstaurnum' is the final tale in *Sjöstafakverið*. It tells of an old man Knútur who has cut himself off from the world in an isolated district, with one old housekeeper, a dog and some sheep. He is visited by three representatives from the local parish, so that he can make his final will. His will is that his croft be burned to the ground as his remains are carried out, that his land be counted as unowned, and that his dog be cared for. Knútur is a misanthrope of the first order: 'Ég flutti hingað bakvið ásonu til að verða laus við fólk' (SSK, 176); 'mig lángaði altaf að vera útilegumaður' (SSK, 177). He has severed human ties and family relationships, and he does not believe in love: 'Ég vil vera einn' (SSK, 178). But his time spent alone has not been wasted from his own point of view: 'Ég tel mig hafa verið í himnaríki

þessi fáu ár sem ég hef lafað hér' (SSK, 179). He has been listening to the river that speaks no words.

It is especially words and doctrines that Knútur has been escaping from: 'Mér er eingin launúng á því að ég tel mannamál til leiðinda í veröldinni . . . það var mikið slys hjá mannskepnunni þegar hún fór að mynda orð; - í staðinn fyrir að sýngja. Þegar mannskepnan sagði fyrsta orðið einhverntíma í fyrndinni, þá byrjaði lygin' (SSK, 178). Concerning doctrines he says: 'Ég hef trúað sjö kenningum. Staðreyndirnar drápu þær allar í sömu röð og ég aðhylltist þær . . . Staðreyndir afsanna allar kenningar' (SSK, 181).

The river that he listens to is not, I think, just a feature of the landscape, but like the river in Hesse's *Siddhartha*<sup>9</sup> it is more the flow of life. It teaches peace and speaks to the soul more profoundly than words or reasons: 'Sá sem heyrir ána renna hefur lítið uppúr að hlusta á ykkur' (SSK, 180). The singing of the birds is important as well. The bird that sits on the fence post 'segir mér nóg . . . hann veit allt sem þörf er á um heiminum' (SSK, 179). It is song rather than speech that Knútur is drawn by, and after bird-song has ceased, then it is not the movement of the bird but its still listening that he is taken by. When the spring song is over then the bird spends the rest of the year listening to the echo, and the old man is led to wonder if resonance and reverberation, the listening and waiting for meaning, are not in fact truer than the initial sounds.

Knútur accepts the world but not its teachings 'og hananú' (SSK, 182) and he has found a way for himself which is the direct

opposite of the way of the world. It is one of watching and waiting in silence.

He is another forerunner of Jón Þrímur. One listens to the river, the other looks at the glacier. The two of them prefer to abandon words. They both prefer bird-song to reasons and formulated doctrines, and finally Knútur rejoices in the day when he will be 'laus við fuglana og himininn, guð og alla einglana' (SSK, 179-80), in much the same way as the pastor longs to renounce his weighty vocation and die, entering into the glacier. But although Knútur's peace is in some respects like Jón Þrímur's, it is not entirely admirable. He remains a cantankerous old hermit.

But there is a larger framework than the hut: whatever the life and the opinions of the old man and the three district officials may be, the river of life flows on, the listening and the mystery of song and echo continue: 'Áin heldur áfram að renna niður með túninu. Þegar þeir riðu útúr túnhliðinu sat fuglinn enn á garðstaurnum að hlusta á bergmálið af því sem hann kvakaði í vor' (SSK, 189).

Between these five stories are two others, 'Veititur í óbyggðum' and 'Corda Atlantica', that do not have relevance for Laxness's religious thought. In these five though there seems to be a drawing together, a gathering of his beliefs: doubt about the truth of scripture, about the value of money, about the integrity of ideologies that forget or lose their good roots; but to balance this - an admiration for a serenity that inspires trust and for an unworldliness and a self-emptying humility which demonstrate complete service to other people; and finally there is a feeling



of security and of timelessness in the presence of a supreme power governing all. The way is laid for Laxness's final novel, *Kristnihald undir Jökli*, a work of great religious significance.

1. Sigfús Daðason, 'Það sem ekki kom', p. 212.
2. Sønderholm, p. 300.
3. Hallberg, 'Laxness vid skiljovägen', p. 325.
4. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book III, Chapter 17, p. 115.
5. Sønderholm, p. 303.  
Hallberg, 'Laxness vid skiljovägen', p. 318.
6. 'Sonur Guðmundar heitins í apótekinu og aðrir menn', in *Skáldatími*, pp. 168-81.
7. Sønderholm, p. 303.
8. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, pp. 81-82 and pp. 100-01.

*Kristnihald undir Jökli* (1968) can be seen as Laxness's ultimate seal on his repudiation of doctrinaire religion. It poses something of a problem as a novel. Hallberg confesses his own bewilderment: 'Ég hef stundum gripið mig í að skynja K.u.J. eins og 'hljómandi málm og hvellandi bjalli' - þótt hljómurinn sé afburða fagur og listfengur . . . Stafar þetta einungis af því að mig vantar eyra og hljómbotn til að nema hina dýpstu tóna skáldverkens?'. ' It is easy to feel sympathy with Hallberg. It is an absurdist novel in many ways, and yet one of great seriousness too. Many questions are asked, but finally, instead of solutions or answers, there is silence, or, if there are any answers, they are to be sifted out from the main body of the text.

There are four centres of interest in the book. The first is Umbi, the representative of the Bishop of Iceland. He is sent to the controversial parish below Snæfellsjökull, where séra Jón Prímus is the unconventional incumbent. Superficially, Umbi is prosaic, but latent within him are a sensitivity, a sense of mystery and the holy; for example, he shies away from killing blow-flies when he is a guest, as this implies personal criticism and aggressiveness rather than graciousness. At heart, Umbi has the nature of a disciple. He acknowledges séra Jón to be a man 'ofar mér að aldri og virðingu' (KRI, 84), and says he reminds him of 'hamingjusamur persónur úr helgimynda-list - þær sem brosa meðan verið er að brytja þær í smátt' (KRI, 107). But first he must learn to shed the skin of sheer reason, for this is superimposed upon his sensitivity, and it is now secured there by his duty of impersonal investigation. Part of the interest of the book lies in

Umbi's personal encounters and the way in which he finally yields, allowing these encounters to overcome his objective detachment and touch his heart. So one question that is posed is: Is one to live and experience life fully, at first hand, or to remain coldly on the outside? The report that Umbi has to make can, on one level, be interpreted as a safety precaution against real life. It stands like railings, through which one can observe but which protect the observer from participation. Umbi says: 'Hver mun velta fyrir oss steininum frá grafarmunnum, var eittsinn spurt. Hver mun frelsa oss af skýrslu?' (KRI, 318). For those in the garden the stone at Christ's tomb is the obstacle between lifelessness and life. For Umbi, the report, with its mentality of routine detachment, is the obstacle that rises between him and another kind of living. On another level the content of the report seems to close around him, so that it seems that he cannot avoid becoming personally involved in it. Complete objectivity is almost impossible. Umbi brings the world of officialdom and correctness to the glacier retreat, though it is only fair to give the Bishop his due; he sends Umbi out to see whether Jón Prímus 'sé vitlaus eða ekki' but he also implies, with a certain amount of vision and humour, that the priest may be 'gáfaðri en allir við hinir' (KRI, 11-12).

Umbi's chief task is to examine Jón Prímus, both in the execution of his office and in his relation to his absent wife Úa. But he finds that it is another of his tasks to interview the visiting Dr Sýngmann and his three disciples. This incongruous party forms the second area of interest.

The world of Dr Sýngmann is that of high technology, wealth

and war. It is a great collage of contradiction and discordance, with all the superficiality of those who dabble in pseudo-spirituality and religious trends. This cacophony and nonsense are brought to the silence and the timelessness of the glacier and are set against it.

Dr Sýngmann comes from the other side of the glacier, so a fundamental otherness in him is to be expected. He is Jón Prímus's student friend of thirty-five years back, who ran off with the young priest's wife on their wedding night. Here is the tempter again. He seduces with the promise of wealth and is the servant of destruction. He makes his money from the manufacturing of weapons, with a side-line in brothels. He concentrates on the outer life. He avoids real encounter and personal discovery. He is afraid of life, and therefore, necessarily, of sickness, age and death. Sýngmann hangs on to what he can of life by means of a wig and pills and he strives to beat death by perpetuating life after death, through his own scientific-religious system. Erik Sønderholm suggests that his researches represent an attack on the Tree of Knowledge by insubordinate man. <sup>2</sup> He also points out the significance of Godman Sýngmann's name: "'God-man" indicerer, at han er et menneske underkasted de menneskelige vilkår, som han - i modsætning til pastor Jon - ikke vil acceptere, hvilket fremgår af sammensætningens første led: God; han vil være en gud; han vil nyde gudernes privilegium, udødeligheden'. <sup>3</sup>

The scientific-religious system that Dr Sýngmann stands for is called 'epagogik'. According to a letter from Laxness to Peter Hallberg, it is taken from the researches of the geologist and

occultist Helgi Péturs (1872-1949) and from Einar Benediktsson, 'báðir stórgáfaðir menn, en meira en lítið rutlaðir'. ^ A lot of complicated terminology is used by Sýngmann and his followers. It serves to represent the jargon of ideology that is incomprehensible to the uninitiated and probably nonsense anyway. Jón Prímus's response to Sýngmann's explanation of his experiments in the transplanting of souls and the resurrection of dead creatures is, 'Ja mikið lýgurðu Mundi' (KRI, 171), and a little later, 'Fyrirgefðu Mundi um hvað ertu að tala?' (KRI, 174).

Dr Sýngmann's problem is that he cannot come to terms with life: 'Ég tek það ekki gilt' (KRI, 175). Jón Prímus, on the other hand, can. To some extent he manages to re-establish himself psychologically after Úa has left him. He adapts himself to the universe according to the shifts in his circumstances. He accepts the natural world and the Creator. He is at one with all. The two men do indeed have the glacier between them. The priest finds the answer in the stillness of the glacier itself, whereas Sýngmann seeks solutions in unfathomable theories:

Dr Sýngmann: Ísland gæti ráðið borgarabragnum á þessu sviði.

Séra Jón: Já það hefur ósköp góð áhrif á mann að sitja til að mynda hérna norðanvið túnhólinn þar sem ég hef skúrinn minn og horfa á jökulinn í góðu veðri.

Dr Sýngmann: . . . Hér í jöklinum er ein merkilegust sjálfgerð aflstöð í þessu sólkerfi; ein af íleiðslustöðvum

Alhyðarinnar. Með stillulögmálinu er hægt að virkja þetta

afl. (KRI, 174)

## KRISTNIHALD UNDIR JÖKLI

More than once séra Jón seems to evade answering the scientist directly, but his replies contain a wonder at creation and this is the answer itself, though Sýngmann cannot perceive it. He is blind to this beauty and aware only of the opportunities of exploiting the natural world. He lives in a vicious circle, raping, seizing, destroying the world. Everything has a negative value. Love, for example, is solely equated with sex, and it is catastrophic at that, and love of God is impossible: 'hvurnin er hægt að elska guð? Og hvaða ástæða er til þess?' (KRI, 181).

Sýngmann's is the tragedy of the consumer and exploiter; the tragedy of the restlessness of the man without faith or philosophy, who will not grow up and who hankers for the apples of eternal youth. But while, in his fear of death, he fantasises about the eternal life that he and his followers will bring about, at the same time, he sees the other solution to the meaninglessness of life as lying in its total destruction. His arguments are dark, but they come from the outside world of the 1960s, where there is moral chaos and a perpetuating of strife:

Gef oss í dag vort daglegt stríð, er bæn þeirra sem ráða löndum. Drepum, drepum, sagði Skuggasveinn. "Das Leben ist Etwas das besser nicht waere," segir annar skuggasveinn, einn af jesúsum Þýskalands; og þá gellur við Ketill skrækur skósveinn hans og vill ekki vera síðri: "Der Mensch ist Etwas das überwunden werden muss!" Eftir þessari formúlu var kjarnorku-spreingjan mynduð . . . og vegna þess hef ég ævilángt

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unnið að því að endurbæta morðvopn; og af því ég veit af reynslu að morðvopn er sá einn hlutur sem mark er tekið á hér á jörðu. (KRI, 179)

Sýngmann reasons that his collaboration in the production of weapons is the result of a world madness and his own disgust and despair, and he turns to God accusingly: 'Ég spyr, hvurnin geturðu látið þér detta í hug að afhenda djöflum jörðina? Sú ein hugsjón sem djöflar geta einast um, það er að hafa stríð' (KRI, 183). And he asks how He can accept the praise of these devils as if He were their God, and what sort of a victory would it be anyway, when they have wiped out all life from the earth? Then, finally, he asks what right God has, having once created him, Sýngmann, to allow him to be wiped out with the rest? And he demands personal resurrection.

Because of his willing collaboration in the evil of war, Dr Sýngmann's complaints against God cannot be compared to those of its innocent victims, or to the more general argument that a God who permits war cannot exist. In a way, Dr Sýngmann is Everyman here, voluntarily and yet involuntarily implicated in evil and always throwing the blame elsewhere. More immediately, Dr Sýngmann is just a rich, embarrassed collaborator, an insecure opportunist, seeking to justify himself before the man he has wronged, the priest who has found harmony, 'einn af þeim fáu mönnum í heiminum sem eru svo ríkir að þeir hafa efni á að vera fátækir' (KRI, 302). His underlying insecurity and self-doubt are revealed when he finally asks séra Jón to pray with him.

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Dr Sýngmann's three disciples are Sagnússem II, Epimenides and Dropinn. They are supposed to be reincarnations of those whose names they bear: Ární Sagnússem, the Icelandic alchemist who inspires Jules Verne's novel *Voyage au Centre de la Terre*; Epimenides, the Cretan priest and poet; Dropinn, an Inca Indian.

The chaos of the 1960s world is reinforced beneath Snæfellsjökull by the appearance of these three hippies. They are pseudo-seekers and they are obviously rather lost. Fascinated by Eastern religions, as was the fashion, they claim to regard Dr Sýngmann as a Bodhisattva, that is a future Buddha, one who postpones entry into Nirvana in order to help others. One of them sits in the lotus position in supposed meditation, garlanded in flowers, the symbols of peace, but on his face is 'hið dauða bros' (KRI, 144). And the flower-power and the meditation do not lead to peacefulness but to the pointless killing of a bird. When Umbi asks why they want to kill birds, they explain 'Af því við elskum þá Sir' (KRI, 147). Their chosen God is Siva, the third God of the Hindu triad, the destroyer and reproducer, the Lord of the Dance. The dance of Siva is the dance of the erotic and the dance of death. Death and love are inextricably intertwined. The hippies claim that men destroy what they love. This reasoning becomes the justification for killings on a larger scale, as in war, and they maintain 'Ef einhver skilur ekki, þá er það af því hann skilur ekki Siva' (KRI, 147). Out of the creation myths of a religion that unquestioningly reveres peace and life, the hippies, by a grotesque perversion of reason and will, have taken to themselves a right to destroy life, and the more defenceless the victim the



better. This is the world of the absurd, the more absurd and jarring because it purports to have Buddhist and Hindu thought behind it. Once again Laxness exposes the discordancy of any justification of violence which, erroneously, is rooted in religion. The hippies are Westerners. They are neither men of peace nor men at peace. They are exploiters desecrating the religious thought of the East.

Against this absurd world, and against the pseudo-scientific strivings of Sýngmann, is set the world-outlook of Jón Prímus on the one hand, and of Úa on the other, the two outlooks complementing each other to form a whole.

Jón Prímus is the chief centre of interest. His unconventionality as a priest lies in his total neglect of his pastoral duties. His church is nailed up. No services are celebrated; no instruction, no baptisms, no funerals carried out. On the other hand, he is dearly loved by his parishioners. He attends to all their practical needs, shoes their horses, mends their machinery and is held high in their esteem and affection. He is referred to as a 'gull maður' (KRI, 15). As an effective priest of the Icelandic Lutheran church he is clearly hopeless, but as he relinquishes his duties, so he ignores his salary. He is not representative of Lutheran priests, rather he is eccentric. The problem he raises for the Church authorities is: 'Hvar eru glæpirnir, þá er það!' (KRI, 12). Apart from his unorthodoxy, is the pastor guilty of anything? Is he heretical? If one shears away those formal developments of Christianity that have so often been allowed to become a top-heavy convention, obliterating vision, is

there anything in séra Jón's way of life or view of life that actually contradicts the spirit or the teaching of Christ?

On reflection, Umbi feels that some of Jón Primus's ideas could be accommodated within Christianity. Perhaps, he says, the outlook which best reflects the priest's is the Franciscan way, 'sarpíningarGuðfræði 12tu aldar' (KRI, 130); and at another time he says, 'Gaddhestarnir og snjótitlingarnir mættu best vita hvern mann hann séra Jón hefur að geyma. Enda elta þessi kvikindi hann í flokkum. Meira að segja hrafnarnir slást í för með honum ef þeir sjá hann á víðaváangi' (KRI, 59).

In his comparative isolation beneath the glacier, Jón Primus has achieved a harmony with the natural world. It combines a joy in the freedom of the horses, the birds, the lilies of the field, the open air, the changes in the day and the seasons. It is a harmony that comes from stillness, inner silence and contemplation. Séra Jón likes to sit and look at the glacier. The church may be closed but 'jökullinn stendur opinn' (KRI, 81).

Jón Primus's inner harmony manifests itself in his replies to others. So Umbi quotes to him from the *Hávamál*:

Umbi: Deyr fé deya frændur.

Séra Jón: Það gerir ekkert til.

Umbi: Deyr sjálfur íð sama.

Séra Jón: Allah er Allah. (KRI, 83)

The priest is not perturbed. He sees beyond. Or again, when Dr Sýngmann probes him on the vicissitudes of life, he replies: 'Blóm

vallarins er hjá mér einsog sálmaskáldið kvað. Ég á það að vísu ekki, en það býr hérna; í vetur býr það í hug mínum þangaðtil það rís upp aftur' (KRI, 175).

Silence is important - inner steadiness. Words seem to get in the way with him. Either he replies in veiled terms or ascribes important words to others: 'Elska skaltu drottin guð þinn af öllu hjarta og svo framvegis sagði séra Jens heitinn' (KRI, 181). 'Orð eru villandi. Ég er einlægt að bera mig að gleyma orðum. Þessvegna skoða ég akursins liljugröðs en þó einkum og sérílagi jökulinn. Ef horft er á jökulinn nógu leingi hætta orð að merkja nokkra guðs grein' (KRI, 106). And again: 'Ég held bara að orð orð orð og sköpun heimsins sé tvent ólíkt; tveir ósamrímalegir hlutir' (KRI, 107).

Confusion and the outside world are thus equated with words, while the created or natural world is equated with silence, and that which is beyond words is inexpressible anyway. So Umbi is surprised that there is no church service even at Christmas, but séra Jón replies: 'Það sem er orðum efra þegir einnegin á jólum góði minn. En jökullinn er þarna sumsé' (KRI, 81). The priest has even abandoned praying, that is, the recitation of standard prayer formulas. Like Thomas Merton he could say: 'What I do is live./ How I pray is breathe'.<sup>5</sup>

Aldo Keel recognises that bird-song is more relevant to Jón Prímus. He notices that the church is in poor repair but that the birds around it are in good throttle and that at Sýngmann's funeral the church door is left open so that the birds can be seen and heard. Bird-song may be unintelligible, Keel says, but unlike

the voice of the church, it is not dogmatic, not ideological and it does not claim to be the truth: 'það er gaman að hlusta á fuglana kvaka. En það væri annað en gaman ef fuglarnir væru einlægt að kvaka satt' (KRI, 296). The likeness, in this respect, between the priest and Knútur in 'Fugl á garðstaurnum' has already been pointed out in the preceding chapter. The mysterious voice of nature is shown as wiser than the voice of man.

In *Kristnihald undir Jökli* Laxness brings together references to and from *The Bhagavad Gita* as well as St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. These are among the great mystical influences of the East and West. All speak of shedding outside distraction and descending into the depths of one's Self to find harmony and love.<sup>7</sup> It seems not unreasonable then to presume that séra Jón is not merely smiling at nature, but that he is acquainted with mystical or contemplative experience. He has shed shoes, worldly trappings, and shed Úa, human ties. He has stillness in their place.

Séra Jón: . . . Einusinni átti ég fallega skó. Og stúlku.

Umbi: En núna?

Séra Jón: Ég hef jökulinn; og náttúrlega akursins liljugrös:

þau eru hjá mér, ég er hjá þeim, en umfram allt jökullinn.

(KRI, 87)

The glacier replaces the man-made place of worship for séra Jón, as well as material possessions and human ties. But it is not to be seen simply as the consolation of the natural world, a

quiet place or a compensation for another kind of life that is gone. It represents a kind of Nirvana, a spiritual eternity that is more than an unending extension of time; the ultimate, on the other side of speech or expression. It is Mystery, breathing 'aldrei', yet perhaps meaning 'einlægt' (KRI, 193). It speaks of death, but not of a death of corruption, but one in which the body, substance, fades, leaving only the soul, shrouded in air, and it beckons and attracts irresistibly, so that Umbi, as well as séra Jón, acknowledges its spell: 'Kom dauðans blær' (KRI, 193). And the priest himself, as he gets older, begins to look forward to dying and relinquishing 'þessu ábyrgðarmikla kalli' (KRI, 87), which is either, ironically, his priesthood, or simply life, and he speaks of going into the glacier itself. It may be remembered that fru Svala in *Heiman eg fór* had similar feelings, longing to be absorbed mystically, rather than annihilated (HEF, 129).

It need not be concluded that séra Jón is a worshipper of creation rather than the Creator, as Sønderholm suggests <sup>20</sup>. He has a much wider and deeper vision of God than is usually found. He accepts that God is not to be contained in a concept, that what we call God is incomprehensible and according to an Old High German definition God is 'það sem dýrkað er, das angebetene; það tilbeðna' (KRI, 112). But as he understands it, the Germanic people, that is of course his own people, have failed to grasp the essentials about God, that is that God is to be *worshipped*, and he speaks of God not in the masculine but the neuter gender, underlining his reluctance to slip into readily available formulas and images. He dispenses with the conventional obligations of the

worshipper towards the worshipped. In his view we are free to locate It - God in that place and in that form which we choose. Jón says to Umbi: 'Mundu þér eftir að bóka að okkur sé frjálst gagnvart almættinu að láta það hvar sem okkur líst og kalla það hvað sem við viljum?' (KRI, 113, ). And God is not a fear-inspiring, thundering power for him; quite the contrary. God is a 'still, small voice', <sup>9</sup> with all the frailty yet indomitableness of a snow-bunting, to which he likens Him: 'Hann beitir þessu veikbygða höfði mót veðrinu, með gogginn við jörð . . . jafnvel í verstu hrinunum bifast fuglinn ekki. Hann er staddur í logni. Það hreyfist ekki einusinni á honum fjöður' (KRI, 112-13).

For the pastor God is everywhere, in everything that exists, that is to say, even in a nail. This is not nail-worship but a reverence for the Creator behind the created thing. If a man worships a stone then a stone is his God; if a mountain then the mountain is his God, and in this, it is not an idol but God, beyond, that is worshipped. Séra Jón quotes from *The Bhagavad Gita*, 'mestu bók heimsins nokkrum öldum áður en Platón fæddist' (KRI, 110), as follows: 'yður er frjálst að gera bæn yðar til hvaða guðs sem er; en sá sem svarar bænunum, ég er hann' (KRI, 129). This way of thinking of séra Jón shows the same spirit as Simone Weil, the French philosopher and mystic, when she wrote: 'Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms'. <sup>10</sup> Séra Jón has made the same discovery as the abbé that Kazantzakis meets at the ancient Cretan temple, who expresses himself in this way: 'Every

race and age gives God its own mask. Behind all the masks . . . is always the never-changing God . . . I push aside the ephemeral symbols and discern the same God behind the cross and the double-edged axe, discern Him and do obeisance'. '1 Jón Prímus has the same largeness of spirit. His is a lone voice, a revolutionary voice, in *his* world, but it is the voice of all true visionaries, who perceive the oneness uniting the various, and 'the eternal, immutable face of God behind all religious symbol'. '12 An understanding of this is central to the understanding of the novel.

The priest's is not an image of a wrathful Jehovah, but a vision of the Supreme that sees into the intention of the worshipper, accepting him within his personal context and limitations. It is the largeness of this vision of God that enables séra Jón to speak of God within the veil, of Allah, Krishna and Christ, of all with like equanimity; and it is the same largeness of vision that perplexes Umbi, whose prosaic limitation prevents him from understanding that all the differing concepts of God may ultimately be one:

Þegar Krishna segist vera sá einn guð sem svarar bænum, þá er þar í rauninni aðeins kominn sá réttrúaði guð okkar úr kverinu, hann sem segir: ég er drottinn guð þinn, þú skalt eigi aðra guði hafa. Séra Jón segir afturámóti: þú skalt alla guði hafa aðra en drottin guð þinn. Hverju á þá að svara? (KRI, 130)

Umbi manages to equate Krishna with the God of the Old Testament and of the Commandments, but he falls miserably short of grasping the idea that the gods held 'before' Him are not always necessarily held in preference to Him, but are often, in sincerity, held in ignorance of Him, 'until' Him, and that, moreover, Jehovah, God, Krishna finds this acceptable. As it says in the *Gita*: 'In any way that men love me, in that same way they find my love', <sup>13</sup> and later: 'Even those who in faith worship other gods, because of their love, they worship me'. <sup>14</sup>

Juan Mascaró's introductions to Eastern scriptures illustrate the way in which the mystical traditions of the poets and the great religions support one another. He points to St Teresa who is as undogmatic as Jón, and who says much the same as he does: 'There is no reason why we should want everyone else to follow our own path'. <sup>15</sup>

Séra Jón's harmony with the world is displayed more fully in his attitude to his work, which is humble and practical work undertaken for the service of others; the mending of primus stoves, locks and machinery. It is work undertaken almost impersonally, that is to say, the burden of the work itself becomes obliterated, so that there is service of the object. The priest does not differentiate between the objects of his attention, so that it makes no difference to him whether the lock that he repairs safeguards rye flour or the National Bank. It is the work of the moment, the service in itself and not the profit on the other side of it, that counts. This is an attitude that finds much support in oriental thought as well, of course, as in



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Christian spirituality. In the *Gíta* it says: 'Set thy heart upon thy work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward; but never cease to do thy work'; <sup>16</sup> and 'In liberty from the bonds of attachment, do thou therefore the work to be done: for the man whose work is pure attains indeed the Supreme'; <sup>17</sup> and again 'Even as the unwise work selfishly in the bondage of selfish works, let the wise man work unselfishly for the good of all the world'. <sup>18</sup> It is an attitude that is set against the more general business approach of Dr Sýngmann or even Umbi, and it redresses the imbalance of values that the rule of money insists upon. With it, the object under consideration becomes the subject, and acquires a dignity in its own right. The commercial outlook of the outside world seems to be not only unworthy, in séra Jón's eyes, but even a shame. There is much that is missed, not understood: 'ef þú gerir aðeins við vélar í hraðfrystihúsum sem bera sig, þá ertu ekki öfundsverður af þínu hlutskifti' (KRI,297).

Matthías Johannessen has noted that *Barn náttúrunnar* contains ideas which re-emerge in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. <sup>19</sup> One of these is the dignity of human labour. Over the years the nature of the work that Laxness praises has changed. It can be seen now that it is less purely physical, but more reflective instead.

Another way to séra Jón's harmony within life and within most of his relationships is to forge an agreement to disagree. This is the way of peace, based on a solid respect for the opinions of his would-be opponents, and he refuses to be dislodged from it. It is agreement that matters above all: 'við verðum að koma okkur saman um að lifa; annars verður stríð' (KRI,295). After there is

agreement to live, then it matters little exactly what action is undertaken so long as it is done in the spirit of the life-affirming agreement. But this guiding principle in some instances serves to shield him from commitment and confrontation. He refuses to talk to Úa on her return, because he has made an agreement to repair a freezing plant. Umbi protests, 'Ja ég er nú að tala vegna manneskju séra Jón minn: vegna sálar' (KRI, 295). Jón's principle is not entirely without weakness. It is in his relationship to Úa that this shows through.

The harmonious relations between the different species in nature, in the whole of life, is best summed up for séra Jón in the story of the honey bee: 'Þegar fífill kallar með ilmi á flugu að gefa henni hunáng; og flugan ber frjóin úr blóminu burt með sér í leiðinni og sáir þeim í fjarlægum stað, - það kalla ég mikið samband' (KRI, 189). Here there is attraction of beauty, colour and perfume, there is purpose and work, and there is distribution of seed, pollination, to effect fruitfulness in another place. This super-communication is brought about without pain or damage in any quarter. The passage is reminiscent of lines from another Eastern spiritual source, *The Dhammapada*: 'As the bee takes the essence of a flower and flies away without destroying its beauty and perfume, so let the sage wander in this life'.<sup>20</sup> The wonder of this communication and co-operation suffices for séra Jón. Understanding it, he does not, like Dr Sýngmann, need to push or torture science in order to feel amazement or to effect security. Dr Sýngmann accuses him of being ridiculously lyrical and Umbi implies the same: 'Á þá bara að hafa skáldlegt hugarflug

í staðinn fyrir réttlæti?' (KRI, 297), but the priest is insistent: 'Sá sem ekki lifir í skáldskap lifir ekki af hér á jörðinni' (KRI, 298). Here again is an echo from *Barn náttúrunnar*: 'Dáið er allt án drauma / og dapur heimurinn' (BAR, 94), and again it can be seen that a quality has been added to what was previously fantasy or romanticism; now imagination has deepened, so that poetry is synonymous with spiritual vision.

Umbi demands a reality of social justice and Dr Sýngmann exists in a world of weapons and real, hard cash, but Jón Primus, in being their opposite in these respects, is not therefore an escapist. The 'skáldskapur' that he speaks of must be read as 'vision', 'awareness', 'appreciation', 'awe'. It witnesses to a heightened sensitivity and to an inner life; 'The kingdom of God is within you'. <sup>21</sup> This is why he speaks of living and not-living. 'Skáldskapur' is that inner dimension which makes the difference between non-life and life itself, it is perhaps the true tone of *Brekkukotsannáll*.

It could be asked: In a mystical sense, is not this poetry and vision, this awareness of harmony and participation in the universal consciousness a stronger solidarity than social justice, the awareness being 'what is found in the Christian doctrine of the mystical Body of Christ', as Bede Griffiths says writing of the common ground between East and West? <sup>22</sup> And the answer should be, 'yes', because through harmony one becomes open to unlimited relationship in compassion, and this unlimited relationship is the starting point for social justice. In nearly all respects Jón

Prímus is a man who has this kind of harmony. However he has shortcomings in human terms.

There is a coldness and a reserve somewhere within Jón. He still retains the scars of the catastrophe that he suffered at Úa's hands. He preserves only a rarefied image of Úa as Woman, not as a real human being. As a real human being, that is someone who can give love and equally pain, it seems that to him, she is someone to be avoided. When she returns he displays an almost austere lack of interest that recalls Steinn Elliði. Is she going to be allowed to undo all the wisdom, the tranquillity, the patient truces that he has achieved? His transcendence is under threat. For all his riches, he does not seem to have that defenceless compassion and willing vulnerability that is praised in Laxness's earlier works. To use Jung's terminology, there is full measure of 'animus' in him.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore interesting to contrast his reaction to Úa's return with Solveig's reaction to the return of her prodigal lover Peer Gynt. Solveig is realistic and patient; she waits and she accepts Peer in all his brokenness. Here is the feminine response, even if it is somewhat idealised, whereas Jón Prímus shows an absoluteness that admits of no compromise. He is a non-monastic Steinn. Human warmth represents danger to him. For all his peace, he has not managed to transcend or integrate his experience of rejection. Peter Hallberg is right: 'Stundum getur blátt áfram virzt sem séra Jón snúi baki við mönnum'.<sup>24</sup> Jón Prímus is a contemplative, but it seems that his contemplativeness is somewhat impersonal, by-passing humanity.

Séra Jón's formula for living is pronounced at Dr Sýngmann's

funeral service, when the priest is obliged to be more articulate than he likes. He picks on verses from St Paul: Romans 14.7,8: 'Því að einginn vor lifir sjálfum sér og einginn deyr sér sjálfum. Því ef vér lifum, þá lifum vér drotni; deyjum vér, þá deyjum vér drotni. Þarfyrr, hvort sem vér lifum eða deyjum þá erum vér drottins' (KRI,227). It is a text that illustrates his understanding of a unifying purpose and spirit in everything. Séra Jón may be unorthodox in his religious attitudes and practices, but the centre of his faith is sure. Whether we live or die we are the Lord's. He cannot get away from the formula. He bungles on in embarrassment: 'Því að einginn lifir sjálfum sér og svo framvegis; og hvort vér lifum eða deyjum, þá og svo framvegis' (KRI,228).

The Lord behind Creation has not, he feels, given us up, which is what Dr Sýngmann earlier infers. The priest says to the congregation of mourners: 'Eitt er víst, vér þurfum aungvu að kvíða', and the reason for his confidence is that the Lord is the non-partisan, all-embracing Lord of all creeds and all men in whatever desert, real or metaphorical, they may seem to be. There is no place in séra Jón's world-view for small-minded exclusiveness: 'hvort vér lifum eða deyjum þá vill svo til að við höfum sama guð og múhameðsmenn í eyðimörkinni, en um hann sagði séra Jens heitinn á Sétbergi: Allah er stór' (KRI,64).

The memory of séra Jens is constantly in the background. He is a benign, unassuming influence, from whom the younger priest has learned his breadth of vision and his unconventionality. It cannot be without significance that, although absent, séra Jens is, in a way, present; he is an unseen, faith-ful force that informs.

There are now no bogymen of God in Laxness's world view.

Úa herself is the fourth centre of interest in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. For Jón Prímus and Dr Sýngmann she is the embodiment of the feminine and of life itself, living, seemingly, spontaneously and without effort: 'Afneitaði hún nokkru? Mótmælti hún nokkru? Það var sigur skaparans í eitt skifti fyrir öll' (KRI, 186). She returns to Snæfellsjökull bringing an experience which is essentially feminine, knowing both birth and death, having insight, being compassionate, unambitious, attentive to detail, maternal, illogical, forgiving, sensual, essentially a mystery. Úa brings to the glacier an air of the underworld, the brothel; the Third World, Peru; not the air of the oppressors but the oppressed; not that of the wicked, but of the everyday, the weak. She brings the resilient, practical heart. And from the religious point of view she brings Catholicism.

On one level Úa's religion means the mysticism of St Teresa and St John of the Cross. On another it means a fairly frank working agreement with the formal Catholicism of the Papacy. She has no time for the imposed morality of the Vatican, whose overall commandment for legitimate sexual behaviour is 'getið börn eða farið til helvítis' (KRI, 309), but which otherwise denies the sexual nature. So she sees the brothel as 'hín hliðin á kaþólskunni' (KRI, 308), the natural outcome of a morality laid down 'av geltum karlmönnum ellegar náttúrulausum öldúngum' (KRI, 308-09). Úa does not judge. She is indulgent. People are as children to her; if you restrict them, they break out, possibly in brothels or clubs: 'Alt fjaska náttúrlegt' (KRI, 308); if

authorities repress them, they seek consolation in the image of the Redeemer on a cord round the neck.

Some of her outlook seems to have grown out of the experience of the deaths of her children. The circumstances are vague, but it appears, at any rate, that she has seen them to their graves and this has not embittered her. She questions the word 'slys', accident, uttered by Umbi. 'Verður nokkur tíma slys hjá guði?' (KRI, 265). God has a plan for us; there is no such thing as Chance, and, moreover, one is enabled through accidents to acquire a deeper knowledge: 'Guði sé lof fyrir að það verða slys. Þá fyrst kynnist maður guði' (KRI, 266). Here again is something of the ultimate trust in God shown by the woman in 'Kórvilla á Vestfjörðum' in *Sjöstafakverid*. But Úa's suffering, if not in itself embittering, yet brings about a fundamental change in her. 'Nei börnin mín dóu ekki. Það var bara ég sem dó og flutti í annað hús - hitt húsið' (KRI, 266). She does not expand further. She remains a mystery throughout.

Úa both acknowledges and rejects dogmatic Catholic morality, but she is open to another influence of the Catholic Church, that of the Spanish mystics. The poetry of St John of the Cross is known, loved and underlined by her, and she is in no doubt that it refers to the soul seeking God. However, here, under *Snæfellsjökull*, it is not the poetry alone that concerns her, but the reproducing of the spiritual relationship between St Teresa and St John, in a rather more fleshly way. She points out and plays upon the similarity in the age gap between the two saints and between herself and Umbi, greeting the young man 'San Juan de

la Cruz!' (KRI, 300). It is in the discussion which follows that many differing facets of her personality are shown. She gives him the book of mystical poems and sits with him, scantily dressed in silk stockings and a dressing gown, instructing him in the essence of mystical love poetry. Úa is both spiritual and sensual at the same time. She is intent on seducing the boy, but this does not cancel out her spirituality. The saints take human love as a model in their expression, and she, in turn, takes mystical love as her pattern, marking with red the line 'Amada en el Amado transformada' (KRI, 303). She seeks fusion and union in love. Umbi, by contrast, is not spiritual in this respect, only physical. He does not grasp her point of view:

Konan: Er þetta kanski ekki fallegt kvæði?

Umbi: Já og nei. (KRI, 304)

He refuses to believe that such verse is more than concealed human passion. He does not understand that 'the symbolism of human love can be turned to use and made to describe what are the effects of mystical union' and that 'the clichés of love . . . are no more than pointer readings; they are copper coins acting as currency for silver'. <sup>25</sup> Úa looks up to a higher plane while operating steadily on the lower. Umbi sticks solidly on the lower one alone. Here again is the contrast between the reasoning of the head and of the heart, but Úa's heart is hard for the purely moral head to understand. Uninhibited by moral theory, she initiates the young man, twenty-seven years her junior, into the rites of love -



'abbadísín góða heilög Teresa af Spáni í leit að nýum jóni helga af krossi' (KRI, 321).

Úa's dual understanding of human love and of mystical love, the love between God and man, is summed up in her formula 'elska skaltu drottin guð þinn af öllu hjarta þínu allri sálu þinni og öllum líkama þínum, og náúnga þinn einsog sjálfan þig' (KRI, 282). Her version of the commandment brings in the body rather than the mind. Each part of the commandment is important: the mystical union, the understanding of God acquired through experiencing misfortunes in life, love manifested in work for the benefit of others however irrelevant this may seem in economic terms, straightforward, uncomplicated sexual love, free from judgement. The essence of this love is going beyond oneself. This is the communion that she speaks of, which Dr Sýngmann lacked. It is of prime importance to her. She stresses it three times. 'Hann hafði ekki samband' (KRI, 281).

Úa does indeed come to the glacier from the outside world but she belongs there, though, equally, she belongs everywhere. Her outlook and way of living complement the priest's. If the reader is looking for a comprehensive religious formula here, I do not think it is to be found satisfactorily in the one or in the other alone, but rather in a blending of the two, in Jón Prímus with his masculinity, and in Úa with her femininity. As Wilhelm Friese says, it is a man and a woman who give the answers. <sup>26</sup> Úa's warmth and spontaneity complement the priest's ascetic contemplativeness, and her perception of what is needed in human terms, namely the commandment of love, completes the whole: 'Vér erum drottins'

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(KRI, 227) he says, but she adds 'elska skaltu . . . náunga þinn' (KRI, 282). Both reject dogma and form and return to the essentials. Contemplation is joined to action.

Nevertheless although there is much that is within the reader's grasp, there is much that eludes it also. Umbi succumbs to the influence and attraction of both the pastor and Úa. He is ready to follow Úa but she disappears into the darkness as mysteriously as she first appeared, deserting him, leaving him with no explanation, only with laughter in the dark and this laughter seems to throw him out, unprotected, into the big world. He may be saved from officialdom, but this is only a start: he is alone. Now he must, so to speak, find out and live it by himself. *Kristnihald undir Jökli* seems to say that on a spiritual Odyssey one has to be entirely on one's own. There does indeed seem to be little companionship in the book, either for the future of Umbi, or for séra Jón or Úa. Although their recipes for life merge and make one, they themselves remain disunited. It is a work of much lyricism and beauty but there is a glacial chill present as well. Úa's warmth and welcome snap in the irony of the final laugh.

Beth Juncker and Bent Søndergård make a fair assessment of the novel when they say: 'Folkið í sögunni safnast saman úr öllum heimshornum og hefur í farangri sínum trú og heimspeki heimsins, kaþólsku, búddisma, múhamedstrú, mótmælendatrú, taóisma, Nietzsche osfr. Aðferðin er í stuttu máli að safna heiminum saman undir Jókul sem í sögunni verður í raun miðpunktur jarðar og heims'. 27

The variety of influences that emerges is indeed extensive and the most obvious one is, naturally, Christianity, since the book's

characters are, with a greater or lesser degree of faith, living within a Christian culture. But the strands of Christianity that are finally validated are solely those which find their counterparts in the other great religions of the world. Laxness is looking for the highest common denominator.

Although I have quoted rather widely from *The Bhagavad Gita* and even from *The Dhammapada*, I have done so in order to support the attention that Laxness gives to Hinduism and sometimes Buddhism, which is in danger of being overlooked, and not because I consider that he looks exclusively in that direction. There is also the spirit of Tao here. Erik Sønderholm recognises it in Jón Þrímur's disrespect for politics, and senses it again in his simple way of life: 'Jon praktiserer sin lære og bliver derved en Kristi efterfølger, men det bør understreges, at Bjergprædikenen hos Laxness underfundigt er kombineret med taoismens lære om verdensgangen'. <sup>28</sup> Sønderholm does not expand on this. Nor does he connect the priest's only theory, 'að vatn sé gott' (KRI, 185), with Taoism. It is not important, but it might have been expected. He speaks of Jón's ability to adapt himself to the vicissitudes of life, but does not see in this an instance of Tao practice. Cannot the water that Jón Þrímur values be an image of passive resolution?: 'In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it'. <sup>29</sup>

But Sønderholm makes an interesting point when he ranks séra Jón as a follower of Christ. He writes that after Úa's desertion

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Pastor Jon . . . accepterer, at livet også er lidelse, og hans fremtidige liv bliver derfor en reel Kristi efterfølgelse, en *Imitatio Christi*, hvor Kristi lære identificeres med Bjergprædikenen; hans liv imellem katastrofen og rapportens begyndelse har været en praktisering af en ægte Kristendom, et forsøg på at virkeliggøre Kristi lære i livet. <sup>30</sup>

I feel that this is perhaps an exaggeration. There is not much evidence in Laxness's work that the historical Christ, or Christ as the Son of God, God-Man, means very much to him. On a number of occasions he has expressed doubt as to Christ's actual existence, as for instance in *Alþýðubókin*: 'Það er mjög óvíst hvort hann hefur nokkur tíma verið til', <sup>31</sup> though, as has been said, he never denigrates the Christ of the Gospels. Early on in the report, Umbi wonders if séra Jón is a Unitarian (KRI, 129). I think it is likely that Laxness himself is actually a Unitarian, and that he presents his unorthodox priest as a Unitarian as well. The virtues that Jón practises are Christian, but as with his author, there is little sign that Christ Himself as a person plays any part at all in his life. There can be no doubt, however, that the content of the Sermon on the Mount is central to Laxness's religious thought, and also to that of the glacier priest.

Some likenesses between Laxness's first and last novel have been touched upon. There is also some religious similarity between *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. Both Steinn Elliði and Jón Prímus retreat from the outside world, each in his way. The young man Steinn retreats, seeking God through chastity

and outer and inner discipline in the formal religion and practice of the Catholic Church. The older man retreats from the world, that is the competitive, industrial world of technology, and seeks God, not in an enforced and rigorous discipline, or under any ecclesiastical authority, but in harmony, stillness, simplicity, the natural world and work. In both, the desire for the same end is there, the knowledge of God in human life, but over the years, Laxness's appreciation of the means towards this end has softened and matured.

Another similarity between the first and the last works is indicated by Ólafur Jónsson. The early novel ends with words from the Lord's Prayer, which he cites:

Gef oss í dag vort daglegt brauð. Og fyrirgef oss vorar skuldir. Rómantísk lífskoðun bókarinnar er með öðrum orðum íofin sáluhjálplegum kristilegum boðskap. Um langt skeið virtist fátt fjær Halldóri Laxness en kristileg skoðun eða boðun. En það er ekki lengra síðan en í Kristnihaldi undir Jökli að aftur kom biblíustaður upp í miðþyngdarstað verks: Elska skaltu drottin guð þinn . . . og náunga eins og sjálfan þig.<sup>32</sup>

A fuller study of Laxness's handling of the Lord's prayer throws light on his entire spiritual development. This is considered in the Conclusion that follows.

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1. Hallberg, 'Kristnihald undir Jökli', p. 103
2. Sönderholm, p. 332.
3. Sönderholm, p. 322.
4. Letter from Laxness to Hallberg quoted in 'Kristnihald undir Jökli', pp. 87-88.
5. Merton, Quoted by Thich Nhat Hanh in *Be Still and Know . . . Meditation for Peacemakers*, p. 13.
6. Keel, *Restauration und Innovation*, p. 109.
7. Mascaró, introductions to *The Bhagavad Gita, The Upanishads, The Dhammapada*.
8. Sönderholm, p. 317.
9. I Kings 19.12.
10. Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 36.
11. Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, p. 150.
12. Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, p. 150.
13. *The Bhagavad Gita*, 4. 11, p. 62.
14. *The Bhagavad Gita*, 9. 23, p. 82.
15. Mascaró, Introduction to *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 27.
16. *The Bhagavad Gita*, 2. 47, p. 52.
17. *The Bhagavad Gita*, 3. 19, p. 57.
18. *The Bhagavad Gita*, 3. 25, p. 58.
19. Matthías Johannessen and Halldór Laxness, *Skeggræður gegnum tíðina* p. 8.
20. *The Dhammapada*, 4. 49. p. 42.
21. Luke 17. 21.
22. Griffiths, *The Marriage of East and West*, p. 93.
23. Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, pp. 77-100.

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24. Hallberg, 'Kristnihald undir Jökli', p. 91.
25. D'Arcy. S.J., Introduction to *Poems of St John of the Cross*, p. 7.
26. Friese, 'The Quintessence of the Novels of Halldór Laxness', p. 83.
27. Juncker and Søndergård, 'Tilraun til draumráðningar. Um Kristnihald undir Jökli', pp. 136-37.
28. Sønderholm, p. 318.
29. Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, LXXVIII, p. 140.
30. Sønderholm, p. 313.
31. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p. 200; see also 'Vandamál skáldskapar á vorum dögum', in *Dagur í senn*, p. 206.
32. Ólafur Jónsson, 'Í heimi sagnamanns', p. 70.

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In this examination of Halldór Laxness's religious development I have observed the young man's early interest in the soul in *Barn náttúrunnar* (1919). In this, his first novel, I have also noted his distaste for Lutheranism, the religion of the Icelandic people since the Reformation. It is a distaste that pervades most of his later work. *Nokkrar sögur* (1923) shows the first signs of the writer's interest in the unfortunate victims of society, and this concern is strongly Christian, that is bound to the teaching and the person of Christ. As a reaction against Lutheranism, in 1923 Laxness was received into the Catholic Church, which he considered and continues to consider as being responsible for Icelandic culture. The move was also made in order to discover the religion held by the nation prior to the Reformation and to find some kind of universality, order and meaning in a world shattered by the First World War. The move heralds Laxness's Catholic period and it is represented by three novels: *Heiman eg fór* (first published 1952), *Undir Helgahnúk* (1924) and *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* (1927). *Heiman eg fór* seems to me to be the work of a young man being spiritually prepared for conversion and even for the monastic life with its vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but at the same time it shows the writer as having had Unitarian tendencies. *Undir Helgahnúk* does not betray any particular Catholic influence, but an important statement is made in it, namely that religion is not a matter of the head but of the heart. However, the heart must not be sentimental but face up the sorrows of life. The main aim of *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* is to present the Catholic view-point. I have shown that although the



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Catholicism of the novel seems to offer holiness, peace and order, it is not the final answer for Laxness. The conversion of the heart at the end of the book still only fits Steinn for the monastery and not the larger world. Yet, even if Laxness left the monastery himself and laid his Catholicism aside, many of the spiritual riches of the ancient Church still seem to be prized by him. <sup>2</sup>

The literary output of Laxness's next period is stamped by Socialism. For a while the young man endeavoured to marry his Christianity to his Socialism, but increasingly the Christian point-of-view became weaker. There was a lapse of six years before his next fictional work eventually appeared, *Fótatak manna* (1933). It is proof of his change of direction. I have argued that the collection is the first indication of Laxness's extraordinary compassion, but that there are also hints of class-antipathy, which disappear in his later work, when his indulgence and understanding deepen. A new tone is also set now, a new scale of values becomes evident in that man is now put firmly on the altar in the place of God, and man stays there for many decades to come. *Salka Valka* (1931-32) goes further and evinces a disillusion and a definite indignation towards God, ascribing practically all the blame for human misery to Him.

Laxness made two visits to the Soviet Union in the 1930s and warmed towards Communism, although he never actually became a member of the Communist Party. *Sjálfstætt fólk* (1934-35) has echoes of Marxism, but this does not seem to have affected what I consider to be his essentially religious nature. What is striking

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is not any political message in *Sjálfstætt fólk* but the quality of the human compassion that he makes a plea for. It seems to be a thoroughly Christian compassion in spite of his conflicting opinions. Man continues to be the focus of his attention, but now Laxness blames man, and not only God for the the inequalities of life. *Heimsljós* (1937-40) considers the poet's relationship to suffering and society. Ólafur Káráson almost makes a religion out of suffering, but his attitude does not go unchallenged, and I believe that Laxness, as in *Undir Helgahnúk*, recommends a firm, unsentimental approach - total commitment in action as well as in feeling.

In 1935 and 1936 Laxness wrote his first stories that show signs of his interest in the East, though he had been impressed by Eastern religious writings already in his early twenties. The stories were collected with others, including 'Temúdsjin snýr heim', in one volume - *Sjö tölfrámennt* - in 1942. My views concerning Laxness's Taoism differ from those of other critics in that I see his Taoism as substantially Christian. I think the problem is that Laxness's critics do not see stillness and simplicity as being essentially Christian, whereas I do. There is nothing in Laxness's Taoism that does not fit into a Christian way of thought - his admiration for meekness and peace, his evaluation of the One Supreme Being, his aversion to theological definitions, all are contained in, and are central to Christianity. I believe Laxness was attracted to Taoism because it has in essence the same attitudes as those that he had been reared among; they are those of his grandmother. Besides, Taoism is not disfigured by the

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wrong excrescences that Christianity has suffered from and that Laxness has reacted so passionately against. I have noted that there are certain aspects of Taoism, its political attitudes for instance, that Laxness does not adopt.

There followed a period of national and political engagement as a result of the occupation of Iceland by foreign forces during the Second World War, the establishment of the American base soon after it, and the Cold War. This is illustrated by *Íslandsklukkan* (1943-46), *Atómstöðin* (1948) and *Gerpla* (1952). This seems to have been a time for distancing himself in many ways. The strong, impersonal influence of the sagas can be felt, and there is a mood of fatalism and pessimism. Laxness comes out boldly as a seeker for justice, an enemy of oppressors, particularly an enemy of the Church in so far as it takes up arms and causes bloodshed. *Atómstöðin*, though, shows him as a thorough-going pacifist - void of anger and with a faith in the resurgence of good after evil.

The final phase is one of reflection. As Laxness matures the ideologies of his youth and of his middle years, Catholicism, Socialism, Communism fade away and give place to the idea of inner serenity. His position as a Nobel prize winner after 1955 also seems to have caused him to take a more moderate stance than before. He had, in some measure, to be a cultural ambassador for his country. This does not prevent him from speaking out boldly when he feels the need, but his former criticism of NATO and the United States is absent. There is a definite distancing from political matters on his part now. *Brekkukotsannáll* (1957) looks at outer and inner values. Again I argue that the influence is not

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specifically Taoist, as is usually maintained with regard to this work. I believe that Laxness's early admiration for Hindu scriptures plays a great part, together of course with his Christian background. The work is a recommendation for stillness and for satisfaction with simplicity. *Paradísarheimt* (1960) rejects the idea of restless search, especially at the expense of others. Paradise is to be found within. It seems to me that this work lays special emphasis on human relations and on vulnerability and responsibility. Responsibility becomes increasingly important in Laxness's work, which shows characters escaping from realities and relationships into religion, politics, work, scholarship or poetry. Responsibility and sobriety are shown to be the antidote, and the only feasible weights for balancing a life that is to avoid inflicting pain.

The feeling of a unifying force in life seems to emerge in Laxness's last collection of short stories, *Sjöstafakverid* (1964). Strong Christian figures appear again, as they did at the start of his writing. Now they understand that everything has its purpose. Here the river of life flows on and there is a timelessness behind and beyond all. The elderly misanthrope in the isolation of nature is happy, but this sheer absorption and contemplation have the dangers of complete detachment from and disdain for people. This is corrected in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*. Here all thought and philosophies are gathered together at one geographical and philosophical point, and séra Jón unites all the contradictions of differing religious superstructures with the words 'Allah er stór' (KRI, 64). However, this mystical position needs balancing too, and

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it is balanced by a woman, Úa, for, apart from the priest's mystical world the real world is also there. As in *Undir Helgahnúk* and *Heimsljós* suffering is seen to be real in the world. It is not the Hindu 'māa'; it is not an illusion. Úa accepts it, not indignantly, not passionately, but with composure and solidarity, knitting socks for the Third World, and keeping 'all these things in her heart'. <sup>3</sup> Thus a stage is reached in Laxness's work where contemplation is wedded to action, love of God to love of neighbour and Mary and Martha go hand in hand. And there is no more anger.

The Christianity of Laxness's later years is typified by the simplicity of the lilies of the field that are always with séra Jón, and, increasingly, by the idea of looking inwards for God, for 'the Kingdom of God is within'. <sup>4</sup> This idea is repeated as Laxness's own belief in *Úngur ég var*, when he asks incredulously: 'Býr þá guð einhverstaðar úti ystumyrkrum og ekki í instum djúpum mannhugarins?'. <sup>5</sup>

Laxness's religious development may be looked upon as something of a struggle. The tension is between the monastery and the market place, between the true inner being and the world accosting it. In nearly all the novels and short stories it is the contemplative elements that are the strongest. The central, social novels would appear to be the exceptions, but they, too, are really works about how to *be* rather than how to *behave*.

In his work contemplation may be given a broad meaning of compassion and responsibility, but also of the search for wisdom and of mystical experience, or if this sounds too esoteric, simply

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worship. Compassion is typified in Nonni (*Sjálfstætt fólk*), responsibility in Salka Valka, wisdom and serenity in the Organist, and ecstasy in the young narrator of *Heiman eg fór*. All these qualities are united in Úa and séra Jón in *Kristnihald undir Jökli*.

The Lord's Prayer is never far from Laxness's work. His spiritual progress can be marked in the use he makes of it. From the monastery he writes: 'Lykillinn að sannri tilbeiðslu, hinni einu sönnu tilbeiðslu er feinginn þegar menn hafa komist til viðurkenningar um takmarkalausá dýpt og mikilleik þessa orðs: verði þinn vilji'.<sup>6</sup> From the elementary, selfish demands in *Barn náttúrunnar*, 'Gef oss í dag vor daglegt brauð! . . . Og fyrirgef oss vorar skuldir!' (BAR, 204), demands which know solely material needs and are as yet unaware of the responsibility and necessity of forgiving others, Laxness ascends through most of the remaining clauses of the prayer, experiencing them in a different order. In *Sjálfstætt fólk* there is the movingly pathetic prayer of the farmers, 'en láttu okkur um fram alt ekki freistast til að eiga góða daga' (SJÁ, 148), expressing the pitiful degradation of their lives, in its poignancy being almost a challenge to the Almighty. In *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* and *Brekkukotsannáll* there is facetiousness and misinterpretation of the forgiveness clause, another challenge to the Heavens. But in *Paradísarheimt* Bishop Þjóðrekur reflects, 'Til komi þitt ríki, svo á jörðu sem á himni . . . Kanski þetta sé einhver kerski hjá lausnaranum?' (PAR, 204). Are we not then to take the words seriously, he seems to say. A strong image of faith is depicted in the woman in

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'Kórvilla á Vestfjörðum' (1964) who thanks God for 'daglegt brauð og fyrir að hafa ekki verið leidd í freistni' (SSK, 119), but this is now thanksgiving and not plain request, this is maturity. Moreover, the old woman expresses the clause 'Thy will be done!' come what may. And so Laxness moves upwards. But there is no clause 'Hallowed be thy name!' It was omitted in the prayer of the farmers and it is the logical next step now. In *Kristnihald undir Jökli* no such clause is to be found. I believe the essence of the clause is there and is to be sought in séra Jón's explanation of the etymology of the word 'God': 'Það er hluttaksorð þátíðar af sögn sem þýðir adorare . . . guð er það sem dýrkað er, das angebetene; "það tilbeðna"' (KRI, II(-12)). Since the priest finds that words confuse, he cannot bring himself to pronounce the words of worship themselves, but it would seem that they are implied here in his perception of God as being the One that is Adored.

Laxness's final message concerning prayer, worship and religion on the whole seems to be very much that of Tolstoy's three old men in the story of the same name that had impressed Steinn Elliði (VEF, 299). The three shining elders are so remote from the distractions of the world that they have forgotten the actual words of the Lord's Prayer and utter gibberish instead; yet their sanctity causes them to walk on the water towards the Bishop, the master of words and yet their spiritual inferior. In no part of Laxness's work is it the logic of the head, or the clarity of the speech, but the purity of the heart's intention that counts.

So Laxness can be followed through the stages of petition, frustration and derision, culminating finally in unifying but

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unarticulated worship, and with mindful action at the side.

Arriving at the point of worship, Laxness still has no place for the trappings of religion, its doctrine, ceremonies or practices. He has not had time for them for many decades. The saying of the Persian mystic Rumi, might almost be applied to him: 'For the man who loves God there is no religion, there is only God alone'.<sup>7</sup>

There can be no doubt that Laxness is a believer, but there are still problems concerning his religious position. I have argued that what people claim is his Taoism is in fact Christianity in a different guise, but is Laxness in fact a Christian? Does he believe in Christ? And if so does he believe that He is the Son of God? He has actually often expressed doubt as to the existence of Christ. This doubt is first expressed by Steinn Elliði and is shortly after confirmed as Laxness's own in *Alþýðubókin*: 'Það er mjög óvíst hvort hann hefur nokkurntíma verið til'.<sup>8</sup> In his essays<sup>9</sup> and in particular *Í túninu heima* in 1975, the view is repeated: 'hafi hann verið til'.<sup>10</sup> This was a scepticism that was fashionable in the 1920s under Soviet influence. The Soviet encyclopaedias of the time claimed that Christ was an invented figure. That Laxness continues in the scepticism of his youth, in the face of documentary evidence, Tacitus and Josephus,<sup>11</sup> whom the Soviets are now prepared to cite, seems strange, particularly since he is willing to stand up as a Catholic and address a Northern congress of Catholics in Reykjavík in 1982.<sup>12</sup> How can one stand as a Catholic and be doubtful of the existence of Christ? Perhaps something of the regret of 'Jón í Brauðhúsum' can be sensed regarding Laxness's own apparent lack of faith in this



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somewhat central matter: testimony cannot be relied on; memories are confused and embroidered; and it may be remembered that the straying woman in the Western firths is surprised that Jesus does not appear to her although she has always been a true believer (cf. pp. 350ff); there is a sense of loss. The person of Christ seems admirable to Laxness; it is not disparaged, but it is not real; it seems to be only a holy dream.

Another problem is that Laxness does not actually seem to outgrow the superstructures of religion. It does not seem as if it is they that have served him or led him to the unifying point where he can see One in all and all in One, and then lay them aside. Rather he turned his back on all superstructures a long time ago, fighting against them, and it is interesting that this fighting spirit, this derision stays with him into his seniority. The Virgin Birth, for instance, has often been the butt of his cynicism. In the novels this comes over in the voice of Snæfríður (ÍSL, 384). In *Alþýðubókin* he attempts to see some kind of universal, though God-denigrating allegory behind the traditional belief; he likens God to Man, Christ to Life, and Mary to Earth, therefore Earth gives birth to Life. <sup>13</sup> This is his only early attempt at an alternative, broad understanding. In *Í túnina heima* he goes further in his flippancy, playing with the etymology of Christ: 'Orðið "kristur" er gríska, úr trúarsíðamáli, og skírskotar til smyrsla úr olíu og feiti'. <sup>14</sup> Everything is rationalised. It is almost as if he is at pains to debase. Nor of course is he at ease with the Bible. He seems to discount scripture as Jewish folk-tale. Rarely does he look for, or

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acknowledge any underlying spiritual truth. If he disbelieves much of Christianity, he does not do so with grace. This is disconcerting, since it does not tally with the composure of what would seem to be his blessing as a poet on Jón Prímus's and Úa's ultimate obeisance before the Supreme Being.

But if Laxness does not accept the historical Christ, he accepts His teaching. In *Úngur ég var* in 1977, he writes that he turned away from Catholicism in his twenties, 'þó án þess að afneita grundvallarhugmynd kirkjunnar'.<sup>15</sup> This fundamental idea or vision of the Church he evidently finds in the practical teachings of Christ relating to this world, rather than in a vision of salvation in the next (though he does not give the impression that he believes that death is the final point). It is the spirit of the Beatitudes that he is moved by in his work; by those who are pure of heart, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.<sup>16</sup> He is not advocating servility, and he does not offer substitute dreams for suffering, but he sees that in the oppressed there is something which is lovable and deserving of the deepest compassion, and which, at the same time, demands our practical concern. His writing is a call to feel for Sigurlína, Salka Valka, Ásta Sóllilja, Jón Hreggviðsson, to mention but a few from the long gallery of society's victims. It is also a call to alleviate hardship, redress the wrong, the injustice, the imbalance in the world, to fight for peace.

Compassion is the hallmark of his work and it is a compassion

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that is indisputably Christian in its composition. It starts with the individual and moves outwards from there. There may have been a time when he believed that 'sacrifices have to be made' during his second trip to the Soviet Union <sup>17</sup> but this kind of Marxist 'compassion' was afterwards admitted to be delusion and it was of brief duration. <sup>18</sup> His compassion is a willing undertaking of and participating in the suffering of the other; as he says in *Sjálfstætt fólk*: 'Samliðunin er uppspretta hins æðsta saungs. Samliðunin með Ástu Sóllilju á jörðinni' (SJÁ, 389). Ólafur Káráson confirms this thinking: 'Heilt hjarta, hálf líf' (HEI, II, 145). Laxness's compassion is of the kind that the Russian theologian and philosopher Berdyaev calls 'an experience of the God-forsakenness of creation'. Berdyaev believes that this experience of God-forsakenness 'contains a great truth in itself, for even Christ Himself lived through the experience of being forsaken by God'. He sees the danger that lies in it however, the danger of the denial of God, but also sees that at the same time 'compassion is the most powerful proof of the fact that man belongs to another world'. <sup>19</sup> Laxness shows himself working through the stage of denial, of anger against God, anger on behalf of man. All the way through his writing there is a rare quality about his compassion that lifts it above mere humanism.

We do not know where Laxness really stands in faith. We can only guess or surmise. I do not know that we have the right to do more. Laxness is a very private man, which is, I believe, why he chooses to confuse and shock when he is interviewed about his religious position, or when he writes his *essay-romans*. It is his way of

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protecting his soul from vulgar scrutiny. What he says in order to confuse or shock should not be taken at face value, though sometimes it may serve as a pointer. It is in poetry and fictional prose that a writer speaks his soul for those who are willing to hear it, sometimes writing in half-hidden symbols when the matter is too personal to bare. And it is here that Laxness speaks of a reverence; first for man and for created things, but finally, and with serenity, of a reverence for the Creator Himself. As he used the words of Tagore in his early work (VEF, 40):

When I go hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable . . .

so words from the same prose-poem could be used for Laxness at the end:

In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play and here have I caught sight of him that is formless. <sup>20</sup>

1. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, pp. 42-47.
2. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 173 and *Sjömeistarasagan*, p. 93.
3. Luke 2.51.
4. Luke 17.21.
5. *Úngur ég var*, p. 88.
6. *Dagar hjá múnkum*, p. 26.
7. *Rumí: Poet and Mystic*, p. 42.

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8. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p. 200.
9. 'Vandamál skáldskapar á vorum dögum', in *Dagur í senn*, p. 206.
10. *Í túninu heima*, p. 140.
11. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, Book XV. Chapter 44.  
Josephus, *The Jewish Wars*, 'The Slavonic Additions', pp. 396-98.
12. Address to Northern Congress of Catholics, *Morgunblaðið*, 8 August 1982.
13. 'Trú', in *Alþýðubókin*, p. 198.
14. *Í túninu heima*, p. 140.
15. *Úngur ég var*, p. 200.
16. Matthew 5. 3-10.
17. Hallberg, *Hús skáldsins*, Volume I, p. 270.
18. *Skáldatími*, pp. 299-303.
19. Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, p. 154.
20. Tagore, *Gitanjali*, 96, p. 88.

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