

Wednesday February 19, 2014

Faith in invisible beings

By Jim Taylor

After several fairly heavy columns, it's probably time for something lighter. So I have to wonder, sometimes, if Icelanders reason the same way as the rest of us.

After all, no one else lives on top of the most geologically active spot on earth, the mid-Atlantic Ridge, where the ocean floor splits apart and pushes two halves of the earth's crust in opposite directions.

America bailed out its corrupt bankers, and gave them bonuses; Iceland jailed its bankers.

The European Union pulled strings and made Greece, Italy, Spain, and Ireland dance to its tune; Iceland told the EU to, umm, well, go away.

If that's not enough to indicate that Icelanders dance to a different drummer, Icelanders believe in elves.

Terry Gunnell, folklore professor at the University of Iceland, suggests that belief in elves might be related to Iceland's unique geography, where things you can't see can profoundly affect your life. Earthquakes, for example, can level your house. The wind can knock you off your feet. The smell of sulphur in tap water "tells you there's invisible fire not far below your feet. And northern lights make the sky the biggest television screen in the world."

According to an Associated Press report, Iceland's elf advocates joined forces with environmentalists to pressure the Icelandic Road and Coastal Commission and local authorities to abandon a highway building project. They had intended to build a direct route from the Alftanes Peninsula, where Iceland's president has a home, to the capital of Reykjavik. The protesters feared the new highway will disturb elf habitat; they claim the area is particularly important because it contains an elf church.

That's right – elves have churches.

Taking entities seriously

Issues about "Huldufolk," (Icelandic for "hidden folk") have affected planning decisions so often that the Road and Coastal Commission has developed a standard response for elf protests. It involves "delaying the construction project [until] the elves living there have moved on."

Not everyone believes in elves, even in Iceland. Still, in a 2007 survey, the University of Iceland found that 62 per cent thought it was at least possible that elves existed.

Which comes close to the percentage of Canadians who believe that God exists, according to a 2012 Postmedia poll.

Icelandic environmentalist Andri Snaer Magnusson told AP that he personally was not sure elves existed. However, he added, "I got married in a church with a God just as invisible as the elves, so what might seem irrational is really quite common..."

Magnusson makes a good point. Many otherwise intelligent people firmly believe in hidden things, such as the "invisible hand of the market." Large numbers believe that the hallucinations of a monk on the island of Patmos provide a blueprint for events 20 centuries later. Almost everyone believes that money has real value. And Environics Research found that 32 per cent of Canadians aged between 45 and 64 believe a winning lottery ticket will provide funds for their retirement.

By comparison, belief in elves seems almost rational.

A Danish prince once remarked, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

At the time, Denmark ruled Iceland. I wonder if Hamlet knew about the elves.

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YOUR TURN

Only two people wrote to me about last week's column on the criticisms Ayaan Hirsi Ali levels at Islam in her book *Infidel*. I'd love to know why. Were you afraid that anything you might write could be considered prejudiced against Islam? That you didn't know enough about Islam to feel able to comment? That the whole subject repulsed you?

Isabel Gibson sent the first letter: "I feel your pain. I, too, don't want to write off an entire religion, but neither do I want to discount someone's inside experience. After all, I don't much appreciate it when someone does that to me.

"But on the broader point, how sad a comment on our human condition that hatred seems easier to foment than love."

Neighbour Sonja McCrimmon sent the other letter. Like me, she had read *Infidel* and found it disturbing. But, she wrote, "I think that Hirsi Ali is right to criticize Islam. If no-one speaks up, change will not happen. My friend Penny nursed in obstetrics in Riyadh for a year and saw more than one case of genital mutilation. I didn't ask her how many but it wasn't uncommon.

"I think I have a right to criticize the Roman Catholic church for lots of reasons — the protection of pedophiles for one. I recently went to see 'Philomena' and felt sorry for the Mother Superior even while I condemned her actions. I have known nuns who entered the convent as fervent teenagers, underwent massive indoctrination and never managed to think things through. I imagine the same things happen to Muslim teenagers. I heartily condemn all the radicals who foment hatred. I just don't know what you can do about them. Happily, I don't think I know any, and I try to treat others with tolerance even if I don't understand them."

PSALM PARAPHRASES

Okay, another reading from Psalm 119 this time verses 33-40. I think this is what the passage is saying, even if I don't endorse it myself.

33 Give me your rules, your guides, your regulations,

And I will follow them all my life.

34 Teach me your principles, so that I can understand your ways.

35 I long for clear instructions;

I need each "i" dotted and each "t" crossed.

36 So point me in the right direction.

Put my life in order.

37 Don't let me be distracted by irrelevant details

or drawn aside by passing fancies;

Train my feet to follow in your footsteps.

38 For you promised that those who follow you faithfully would never sink into chaos.

39 Do not treat me with contempt;

I cannot stand it, when I have pursued your policies without question.

40 I don't believe in ad-libbing my way through life;

I want a straight and narrow path that I can follow.

For paraphrases of most of the psalms used by the RCL, you can order my book *Everyday Psalms* from Wood Lake Publications, info@woodlake.com.

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
