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*Christophe Pons*

## THE PROBLEM WITH ISLANDS: COMPARING MYSTICISMS IN ICELAND AND FAROE ISLANDS

### *Abstract*

Through the analysis of spiritualist and christian mysticisms, this paper is bringing to comparison the two opposite religious orientations that have been distinctively accepted, followed and diffused in Iceland (modern esotericism) and Faroe Islands (Protestant asceticism). Historical circumstances and external interactions give some clues for the understanding of these orientations. But the question is also to wonder in which way those orientations might be «culturally based», that is to say referring to some long term features on the one hand, participating to a process that agents have acknowledged and/or created consciously on the other? Taking into account that the two types of mysticisms (Spiritualist/Christian) are usually referring to different modes of social organisation (free individual users on a network / communitarian within the sect), the author aims to reverse the magnifying glass effect of islands case studies into a heuristic tool in understanding modern esotericism and Christian asceticism within the Nordic world.<sup>1</sup>

Key words: Iceland, Faroe Islands, Spiritualism, Asceticism, Mysticism, Gemeinschaft, Gesellschaft, individualism

### Introduction

Apart from the main Scandinavian countries, the religious fields in the little insular societies were, and partly still are, considered as «variations» within the Nordic world. It is obviously the case in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Nevertheless, islands are sometimes more extreme and interesting because they are shaped with the complex and ambivalent features of insularity: isolation and persistence of crystallized singularities on the one hand, open-spaces crossed by ideas and diffuse influences on the other hand. Because of these features, in a paper dedicated to Sahlins, Eriksen underlined that the concept of «island» is fruitful in social anthropology. Both in the literal and the metaphorical sense, it obliges us to think of «culture» without rejection or essentialization. Arguing that no society is entirely isolated and that cultural boundaries are not absolute, but also that the idea of societies, groups and culture as entities can be meaning-

fully isolated for analytical purposes, Eriksen suggested considering those aspects of insularity which the agents acknowledge and/or create consciously as «cultural island phenomena» (1993:135). In this perspective, I argue that Icelandic and Faroese religious fields are particularly *bons à penser* because they are like metaphoric islands within literal islands. Indeed, among the Nordic countries, these little insular societies have become samples of the two extreme configurations that one can find among Scandinavian Lutheran Protestantism. Since the turn of the 20th century and almost until now, Iceland and Faroe have strongly acknowledged the marginal religious orientations of modern esotericism (Iceland) and Christian asceticism (Faroe). Today, those orientations are sufficiently significant for shaping two distinctive religious fields, as if metaphoric islands had taken shape in literal islands.

The aim of this paper is to question the great difference between those marginal religious orientations in marginalized numerical populations (300,000 inhabitants in Iceland, 50,000 in Faroe). How to explain why Christian asceticism is so strong in Faroe while it constitutes only a small percentage in Iceland? And why did Iceland turn to modern esotericism whereas one would not find any of its representatives (medium, healer or *channeler*) in Faroe?

In Iceland, modern esotericism arose at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century through a set of movements like spiritualism, theosophy, freemasons, and others. Among them, Spiritualism (*spiritismi*) had a strong influence. It was of Britannic influence rather than American and the founders of the Spiritist societies were fervent readers of James and Doyle. Several Spiritist societies were locally created and quickly supported by an increasing number of native mediums and healers. The deep influence of modern esotericism on Icelandic religious field is often underestimated because it is claimed that it functionally expressed the national revivalism against the Danish kingdom (see Pétursson 1983, 1984, 1986), and then vanished little by little between sovereignty (1918) and independence (1944). Although modern esotericism has lost its political and nationalist role after independence, it has not disappeared afterwards. Contemporary ethnography shows a renewal in the 1960's and a strong revival in the 1980's and hereafter, particularly visible through New Age and post-New Age influences (see Anderson 2005; Pons 2005, 2007). Therefore, this underestimation is mostly due to institutional and statistical invisibility since modern esotericism has never been structured as churches but has spread through locally organized events, and never against the Lutheran faith. According to official data, more than 90% of the Icelanders belong to the Lutheran State Church, but those data are muted concerning sympathy to modern esotericism.

The Faroe Islands give evidence of a Christian asceticism with an unusually high rate of adhesion to Protestant sects in the archipelago. The *Plymouth Brethren*, locally called the Assembly of brothers (*brøðrasamkoma*), and the Church Society for the Inner Mission (*heimamissión*), have the greatest influence since the 1940's. The former counts around thirty-two assemblies (*Ebenezer, Hebron, Betesda, Lívín...*) and the second is ramified in sectarian congregations (called *missiónshús*) inside the Lutheran State Church. Altogether, the estimation of membership is around 25% of the whole population. Beside these two main sects the Pentecostal are about 5%. But the data

does not consider the many free Pentecostals believers who have no denomination and attend private religious services at home. In addition, around ten Charismatic and Evangelist churches gained in popularity since the 1980's. Thus, it is rather more than 5% who attend to the Pentecostal (*Filadelfia, Evangelihúsið, Hvítasunnukirkja...*) and the charismatic (*Emmanuel, Oasan, Keldan, Getsemane, Lívsins Orð, Soli Deo Gloria...*) churches. Therefore, the *ethos* of Christian asceticism is deeply embedded in this society where the figures of elder, pastor, preacher, and missionary are highly considered and numerously produced. Here again, statistical data give a very imprecise picture of the religious field. Even if 87% of the Faroese people officially belong to the Lutheran Church, many of them are recorded since birth and are actually members of a sect. Moreover, this percentage does not make any distinction between people having a secularized behaviour and those actively engaged in a society for the Inner Mission (*heimamissión*).

At first, I will search for historical circumstances and external interactions that could give clues to the understanding of these orientations. In the meantime, I will argue that Iceland and Faroe distinctively illustrate the two wings of Scandinavian Enlightenment (Norse origin and Nordic Christianity), and that their religious orientations have been locally decided and acknowledged because of that. But beside these historical circumstances which underline how the religious orientations are somehow «intentionally» decided and acknowledged – in other words, a matter of «metaphoric island creation» –, the question is also to understand how the «decisions» were adapted to the specificities of each insular society. Then, I will base the reflection on the concept of *mysticism* understood as «a strong impulse towards the directness, presence, inwardness of the religious experience, towards a direct contact with the divine, a contact which transcends or supplements traditions, cults, and institutions» (Troeltsch, quoted by Daiber 2002:332). Mysticism presents interesting ambivalent features and can be helpful for understanding the two religious orientations observed in Iceland and Faroe. My argument is that mysticism within modern esotericism and Christian asceticism enhances an important distinction in the mode of social organisations (free individual users on a network / communitarian within the sect), and that those social organisations were significant long term social features distinctively attested in Iceland and Faroe. Therefore, «metaphoric island creations» join hands with «literal island facts», as if «modern religious changes» were adapted to «local and social features of *longue durée*».

Observations and reflections in this paper are based on several researches and fieldworks conducted both in the two countries; in the western fjords of Iceland (from 1996 to 1999) for a PhD on the ordinary relationships between the living and the dead in everyday life; in Reykjavík after 2003 for another research on mediumship and personal identity construction by spiritual mediums. Second fieldworks started in 2005 in the Faroe and still are in progress through regular journeys in Tórshavn and neighboured villages.

## Historical circumstances and external interactions

Lately settled (8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries) by the Norsemen, Iceland and Faroe share a long history of isolation and local economies of subsistence. After being converted to Christianity in the year 1000 they were both reformed from afar and remained for a long time distant from continental influences. Until recently in the islands, Lutheran orthodoxy, along with popular beliefs, formed the basis of spiritual life and faith. Joensen recalled this situation for the Faroese: «their place in cosmos was seen in relation to a remote king, to the past and to all kinds of supernatural beings who populated and animated the natural environment. Besides, there was the relationship to God and the Hereafter» (1989:15). Somehow, this «everyday life religion» explained their fierce reaction against the first missionaries who reached the islands from the South. In a book in memory of the Scottish William Gibson Sloan (1838–1914), the first missionary at the origin of the *Plymouth Brethren* in the North, it is stated that if Shetlands permitted a little success, they were almost impossible in Iceland and extremely arduous in Faroe. During his first missions, the preacher was suspiciously considered and was fiercely rejected when he tried to baptise people (Kelling 1993:139–148). So the *Plymouth Brethren*, settled in Faroe since 1865, had reached no more than 0.2% of the whole population in 1900. The situation was more or less the same for other sects, in both countries.

Taking into account their situation from marginalization to periphery (Stoklund 1992), it was suggested that the excess of zeal in the later religious orientations of the islands could be explained as a «response to unfortunate social conditions» (Wylie 1987:129). The problem with such analysis is not only its single causal frame – considering emotional and passionate forms of devotion as the specificity of oppressed populations (Lewis 1971) – but also that doing so, societies are isolated as non-significant exceptions, that is to say a curiosity within Protestantism. However, beyond their history of isolation, Iceland and Faroe inherit from a Nordic religious matrix. They have followed its main evolutions, each island giving evidence of one the two wings of Scandinavian Enlightenment: on the one hand the reinvention of the Norse origin, on the other hand the vision of a Nordic Christianity.

As other late colonies of Denmark, Iceland and Faroe belong to the group of Lutheran countries where church order has been an important part of legislation, with a political aim. Similarly to other Scandinavian countries, before the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Icelandic and Faroese peoples were not allowed to leave the territorial churches of the Danish kingdom in order to found free churches. Despite this conformity to the main Nordic pattern, a great difference was the absence in Iceland and Faroe of the religious movements that promoted, during 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, an intense religious *ricorso* that laid down personal relationship with the divine as a principle. For the most part, these pietistic movements were the front line of the churches' contestation. Their first expressions were formations practicing mysticism, such as Haugianism in Norway, religious awakening in Sweden and Finland, and ecstatic groups in Denmark since the 1790's (Thorkildsen 1997:145). But in this context, where the clerical power was the main tool of the State's control, such a spiritual crisis was also a temporal revolution nourishing the process of Nordic Enlightenment. Historians (see Tägil 1995;

Sørensen and Stråth 1997) pointed out that the distinctiveness of this Scandinavian pattern of Enlightenment was rooted inside a Christian *ethos* and led to a progressive loss of clericals' control, thus resulting in gradual freedom of religion, first in Norway and Denmark in the 1840's, then in 1849 in Iceland and Faroe. On the whole, looking at the contemporary religious configurations of Scandinavian countries, it seems at first sight that this religious freedom was not operating very much since most of the population still belongs to the State churches today. However, as scholars have stated, Scandinavia has inherited these religious historical process which have been active through an internal modification of State church, rather than through separation of Church and State (except Sweden). Most of the Pietistic movements were integrated into the official Lutheran church, resulting in free churches within the boundaries of a State church. More importantly is that this development implied an end to the religious unity of the state and opened the Scandinavian societies to modern pluralism. In this way religious revivalism curiously made an important contribution to the secularization of the Nordic nations.

### *The transitory period*

The end of the 19th century, between 1880 and 1910, was a crucial transitory period for Iceland and Faroe. The end of the Danish monopoly, the new economic perspectives for the future, important changes in rural society, the discovery of new free lands for Icelanders, were all factors which contributed to nourish a desire for independence. Since nationalisms were mainly expressed against what represented Danish interference in the islands, the religious question was specifically but distinctively concerned.

In Iceland, where for a long time the territorial church was ruled by a local clergy that spoke Icelandic during the offices, the opposition to the Danish was mainly directed against the orthodoxy of the Lutheran doctrine. In Faroe, where a Danish clergy spoke Danish during the offices, the opposition was rather against the territorial church. More widely, the presence of indigenous clergy in Iceland also demonstrates the gap that had always distinguished the two islands. For the Danish crown and beyond for the whole Nordic world, Iceland was credited with a high legitimacy (which was later helpful to assert itself as independent), whereas the Faroese had to contest more strongly in order to gain some legitimacy. This gap was at its widest during the period of national reconstructions in the Nordic world. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nordic development (*sonderweg*) of Scandinavian countries rested on two foundations. One was a Christian *ethos* that was on the way since the pietistic movements, and the other was a cultural construction of *Nordicity* (*Norden*) as a supreme reality able to bring together all the northern countries into one single joint origin, distinctive from the rest of Europe. This second reference to the Old Norse collective identity became an intense dimension, and Iceland was reified as the original country of the Viking's past. Because of the literature of the Sagas, Icelandic isolation was supposed to have preserved the original tongue and culture of all the *Norsemen*. Consequently, independence movements clearly based their claims on such legitimacy. They easily promoted these ethnic references by raking up precious traces of the Viking past. At the time,

national romanticism in Iceland clearly was turned towards the Viking Spirit which was also proclaimed in Denmark (*vikingeånd*) as the way to justify a common Nordic identity (Østergård 1997:34). Modern esotericism explicitly fulfilled this goal, reinventing the continuity between ancient and contemporary times.

### *The Icelandic creation of Norse origin*

In fact, since 1880, the Icelandic religious field has been shaped by three trends: a conservative movement related to the territorial church, a liberal theology supported by the Evangelical Lutheran Free-Church, and a modern esotericism with a set of esoteric movements and societies. Even if they do not overlap, modern esotericism and liberal theology were tied by a common fight against the orthodoxy of conservative movement. At the head of the protest, the Lutheran Free-Church (*Fríikirkja*) was founded in 1899 to face Danish authority (Pétursson 1983:132–136). New generations of clerics were actively engaged. Some of them nourished a positivist and progressive theology, according to which religious faith should be in harmony with scientific conceptions (Swatos 1990). Through this idea, the gap was bridged between religion and modern esotericism, specifically with the Spiritualism that had a great influence. It is obvious that in most Reformed countries, including Denmark (Tybjerg 1994), this movement was extremely popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet in Iceland, it takes on a special dimension because it helps the *process* of national reconstruction by giving the possibility of a «new religion» that, while remaining Christian, would distinguish itself from colonial Christianity. The Spiritualism made it possible to conjure up ancestors and rely on them to create this new religion. It stands to reason that all Icelanders did not become Spiritists. On the contrary, after the foundation of the first experimental society (*tilraunafélagið*) in 1904, the sometimes violent stands taken against what was called pejoratively the association of ghosts (*draugafélagið*) demonstrate opposite feelings (Swatos and Gíssurarson 1997:107–108). But, at the same time, after local government was recognized in 1904, the Spiritists pronounced a solemn declaration of national independence by presenting, on the ancient place of the Parliament *Bingvellir*, a very young and popular medium astride a fiery white stallion, mimicking as such the revived image of *Óðin*, the shaman-god of the Viking age, on his mythical mount *Sleipnir*. During the same period, another young medium was giving voice to illustrious ancestors, among whom was the famous Sagas' writer Snorri Sturluson (13th century), by drafting poems through automatic writing (Guðnarsson and Ásgeirsson 1996:73–82). On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1918, Iceland finally became a sovereign state and, eighteen days later, one of the first associations to be created was the *Sálarransóknarfélags Íslands*, the Spiritist society of Iceland. One of the reasons to explain why Spiritualism never really collapsed in Iceland is that, while the movement had never been institutionalized as a free religion, there has always been some support for Spiritualism within the Lutheran Free-Church, even if the church as a whole has never officially supported Spiritualism. Until recently, being a Spiritist was not a polemic issue in Iceland and, at the time of the nationalist realm, the possibility of communicating with the dead was easily accepted by a population that quickly made great

use of it without questioning its doctrinal arguments. As Hastrup (1990:194) stated, «while ‘other peoples’ invent traditions to match a new historical situation, the Icelanders reproduced the celebrated images of another epoch to invent themselves».

### *The Faroese creation of Nordic Christianity*

Compared to Icelanders, the Faroese might have been these ‘other peoples’. Without any ancient literature, they could not pretend to be the representatives of the Vikings from whom they were nonetheless heirs. In short, Faroese society suffered from the exact opposite representation of Iceland: illegitimacy. Far from having preserved the original culture, Faroese islandness (smallness and dependency) was seen to have let it degenerate. An illustration of such illegitimacy was the vernacular language that did not gain official recognition as the national language until home rule legislation was passed in 1948. But as Nauerby stated (1996), beyond the question of language recognition, the supposed illegitimacy affected the Faroese capacity to claim self-determination. Commenting on Debes (1982), Wåhlin underlined that the problem with the nationalist movement that occurred in 1888 was pusillanimity because «both the nationalist leaders and the majority of the people, in spite of daily complaints, generally respected the efficiency, honesty and benevolence of Danish rule [...] The worst enemies of the Faroese were and still are the Faroese - not the Danes in power in Copenhagen» (1989:22, 30). As a result there never occurred strong and radical rupture in the Faroe Islands. After a referendum on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1946 on secession, the Faroese remained in the Danish Realm. Since 1948 they have been recognised as a self-governing community within the Kingdom of Denmark, with their own parliament, constitution, language, flag, money, and football team. But their cultural self-affirmation, rather than proceeding through the Viking reference, followed the second path of the Nordic *Sonderweg*, that which was founded on a Christian vision as the spiritual unit of *Norden*.

Analyzing the influence of this Christian conception in the process of Enlightenment, Witoszeck argued that it was a «founding tradition» of Scandinavian cultures, based on the «powerful, modifying presence of Christianity» (1997:73). One of the great figures was the Danish theologian Nicolai F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), known as the founder of the Nordic folk high schools (*folkehøjskolen*) which became the cradle of nationalism and Nordic patriotism, first in Denmark in the early 1800s and after in other Scandinavian countries. A follower of 18<sup>th</sup> century pietism, Grundtvig claimed that the fate of Christianity was to be decided in the North: «There was an inner unity between the spirit of God and the Nordic spirit, and he saw the Nordic nation in terms of ‘a new Jerusalem’» (Thorkildsen 1997:152). Though Grundtvig also supported the reference to Old Norse identity, his conception of «Nordic spirit» was more rooted in nature imagery, small agrarian societies and idealized values of the individualist but egalitarian free peasant community. With some delay compared to other Scandinavian countries, Grundtvigianism gained some influence in the islands where it had been introduced by Faroese students who had founded, after returning from Copenhagen, a nationalist movement in 1889. Later, a Grundtvigian folk high school



was founded in 1899, which was also the result of the struggle for linguistic and cultural legitimacy. Among the foreigners who supported the Faroese claims, a Danish linguist and folklorist incidentally played an important role: Svend H. Grundtvig (1824–1883), the son of Nicolai F.S. Grundtvig (Nauerby 1996). Hansen (1986) suggested that religious revivalisms achieved little influence during the transitory period (1880–1920) because at that time the cultural and nationalist movement was too strong, both in the villages and in people's minds, to give voice to something else (Hansen, quoted by Wählin 1986). However, the movement was inspired by Grundtvig, that is to say embedded in a re-invention of identity that was projected onto Christianity. This reference nurtures later appearances of religious congregations in the villages, mostly the Churches Societies for the Inner Mission (*Missiónshús*), but also non Lutheran like the Plymouth Brethren (*Brøðrasamkoma*). Based on many of the same dissatisfactions as those experienced by the early Grundtvigian movement, these many indigenous congregations sought to rescue the population from an indifference to religion, and stressed the importance of «being a community», of experiencing a cathartic and emotional conversion to Christianity. Afterward, others sects settled with fierce energy in the villages (Wylie 1982). For Wylie, this increase of indigenous fundamentalist religious sects reflected a changing moral order that was not specifically Faroese, and remained «visible without being understandable» (1983:42). However, this «changing moral order» was the local answer for seeking distance from a territorial church which was perceived as too Danish. The reinvention of Faroese culture was then proceeding through the ideal of local Nordic peasantry and universal Christianity.

## Comparing mysticisms

As suggested in the introduction, a common feature of the two religious orientations (modern esotericism and Christian asceticism) is concentrated into the Troeltschian concept of mysticism. Between the Church and Sect distinction as organizational types of Christianity, Troeltsch pointed at a third type he called mysticism. In a wider sense, Troeltschian mysticism is more a «disposition» than an institutionalized category and can be found in many diverse religious experiences, as far as they are subjective and deeply individualized. It is a process that authorizes the intimacy of spiritual introspection, allowing to experiment with the deep side of the inner self in order to meet the divine or a world of the super natural's imago. However, Troeltsch gave a specific role to mysticism within modern Protestantism (1991). According to him, it is a driving force, recently acknowledged and partly responsible for religious modernity. Contrary to lonely legitimate virtuoso or wild heretics – sometimes later recognized by clerics – that were the practitioners in early Christianity, mysticism could be now considered as a referential experience within modern Protestantism, both accepted and encouraged. By «Christian mysticism» Troeltsch pointed to the phenomena of collective faith strongly developed by the Protestant sect, and with the term «spiritualist mysticism» he referred to a radical individualism, a personal experience of the supernatural «which has no external organization, and which has a very independent attitude, with widely

differing views of the central truths of Christianity» (1992:381). Spiritualist mysticism according to Troeltsch does not only refer to the Spiritualism. It widely includes many movements of the modern esotericism such as Theosophy, Transcendentalists, New Era Swedenborgians, Channeling and so on. Interestingly the spiritualist mysticism gives reality to a religious category (the third) that Troeltsch discovered reading the William James' *Varieties* (1985). This category was later identified as the «modern esotericism» of northern European origins, and lastly labelled as *New Age* (see Faivre 1986; Hanegraaff 1996). For a long time this category was not recognized as a single type because it was almost impossible to capture it as an institution (see Weber 1996; Wilson 1974). It was rather associated with concepts of cult, gnostic, cultic-milieu, nebula, and often described as a milieu or network of associated customers. This characteristic of sporadic individual participation differentiates this religious organization from that of the Christian sect that emphasises the belonging to a sacred community that establishes communal living arrangements (Beckford 2006). But beside these organizational differences, by focusing on the individual, the concept of mysticism avoids the danger of being fully cloistered inside an ideal type, because it both defines the third religious category (modern esotericism) and also refers to practices of the second category (Christian asceticism of Protestant sects). Thus, mysticism is fruitful for a comparison of religious orientations because it distinguishes between the formal characteristics of social organizations, and underlines similarities of process and conditions of emergence/development.

Considering this last point, historians have stated that many diverse groups in both categories have insisted, during 19<sup>th</sup> century America, on the personal and private side of introspection – so-called «diving in spiritland» – as the way of «independence of every individual from the spiritual tyranny imposed by established churches and ministers» (Carroll 1997:35). But these reactions were newly enabled by modernization, industrialisation and dramatic changes in production, dwelling and moving. New forms of religion were then nurtured by new social forms in livelihood. Now in the Nordic world, including Faroe and Iceland, these historical and social changes about entering modernization are well stated (see Pétursson 1986; Riis 1987; Joensen 1989; Buckser 1996; Arnason 2004) and it is not the point to challenge them as facts, but rather to question how radical the changes were. Generally, sociology inherits a well-established conception that religious changes like Christian asceticism or modern esotericism follow great ruptures within traditional patterns of living and relationship, historically described as the transition from community (*Gemeinschaft*) to society (*Gesellschaft*). Nevertheless, these statements are precisely what enable to question the Nordic peripheral cases.

### *Living together in the Faroese archipelago*

In the Faroe Islands, it is worth noting that Christian asceticism has transformed the religious field by creating subdivisions in communities' memberships. After the transitory period, the sects of *Brøðrasamkoma* and *Heimamissión* were numerously created in the islands and often divided the peasants of the villages into diverse con-

gregations. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Charismatic and Pentecostal sects reinforced the same subdivision's process within the community, even if they gave more importance to the individual than *Brøðrasamkoma* and *Heimamission* did. Thus, for one century, the many diverse sects have sketched a new religious landscape that, far from the former unity of the territorial church, looked like a mosaic. However, this new religious landscape recalled the traditional form of living within distinctive villages as unities (*bygdir*) that one observes in the archipelago since the original settlement. Indeed, from the Vikings' time to the contemporary period, Faroese society has always been a collection of independent villages (Stoklund 1980). The traditional territorial division had followed the boundaries of village borders, according to agricultural common grazing lands and collective fishing activity. The one hundred villages (*bygdir*) composed the «indigenous construction of communities», based on the mutualization of sheep farming and boat sharing (Hansen 1986:310). It was not until the industrial development of fisheries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that municipalities were divided into 51 municipalities reached in 1967, which was the maximum. Except for the very isolated villages that were deserted, and the two economic municipalities of Tórshavn in the South and Klaksvík in the North, the modernization of the society progressed during 20<sup>th</sup> century in continuity with the traditional pattern of settlement and livelihood, and the increasing number of sects was somehow responding to the rise of the Faroese population. As stated by many scholars, this continuity of pattern and a «strong sense of place» were not without negative effects on the whole country. On nationalism first, following Joensen, it could be suggested that many «Faroese used to belong more to their village than to the nation, which is also a sign for the incomplete production of the Faroese as a societal political entity» (Joensen, quoted by Bærenholdt 2006: 8–9). Secondly, on the economic level, with a policy of village or locality development (*bygdamenning*), «people from one village were reluctant to pay taxes to a municipality that also, or primarily, made investments in other villages» (Hovgaard et al. 2004:15). Somehow, traditional rural lifestyles were then curiously sustained: «The traditional way to build a business on the Faroe has been through single industry companies, which typically are predominantly locally based, without any regional division of labour or networking» (Hovgaard 2002:20). Networking, communicating means (bridges, tunnels...) and transition from a «village policy» (*bygdamenning*) to a «regional development» (*økismenning*) became a necessity after the crisis in the 1990's: «The industrial, the financial and the public sectors were characterised by a simple logic of 'destructive competition' (...). This race continued until around 1989–1990, but did not prevent the collapse of the Faroese economy in late 1992» (Hovgaard 2002:15).

Religious configuration was and remains quite similar. Recent researches have notably asserted that the sect membership is still structured as a communitarian village within the village, that is to say overlapping with familial, political and business bonds (Bærenholdt 2006:11). Therefore, contiguities between the process of the emergence of sects and development, the original pattern of settlement in the islands, and the persistence of a village policy, are neither fortuitous nor metaphoric. They state the evidence of continuity in history, and bear witness to the fact that Faroe Islands were a

fertile ground for the communitarian social organization of the second religious category (Christian asceticism of the Protestant sects). Most sociological studies on the Faroe Islands underline this perpetuity of social relations that are as thick as centred on thin spatiality. Thus, on such a territorial bonding (often described as *Gemeinschaft*) the Protestant sects (referred to as *Gesellschaft*) took place without inducing a severe break from traditional social life.

### *Iceland; One fjord one farm*

The way of living together was curiously very different in Iceland. Archaeology and archives show that the island was differently settled, with lineage unities (*bú*) spread all over the country according to the principle of «one fjord one lineage». This sparse habitation remained the norm until recently. It was not before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and the development of the first trading places around the fish industry – that people really started to inhabit the same places. Then, contrary to the Faroese «Iceland was not a village but a farm society» (Swatos 1984:35) and the basic cell was not the village (*bygd*) but the lineage (*bú*). Consequently, the question of traditional social relationship (*Gemeinschaft*) was less considered in terms of community than consanguinity, and the exchanges between lineages were analyzed according to the great anthropological tradition, as mentioned by Tylor when he wrote that «humanity had to choose very early on between marrying outside the group and being killed outside the group» (1889:267). This extra focus on kinship was particularly enhanced with what was referred to as «Pinson's thesis» (Rich 1980). Indeed, Pinson stated that «friendship is virtually non-existent in Iceland» because of the importance of «blood ties defined by principles of patrilinearity» (1979:191). For a long time this conception of *Gemeinschaft*, defined by the traditional territorial bonding of the *bú*, hid others scopes of sociability and relationships; the focus mostly remained on lineages, genealogies, transmissions and terminologies. Now, in Iceland as elsewhere, later anthropology finally discovered the importance of friendship and its many diverse expressions (Durenberger and Pálsson 1999; Gullestad 1992, 2001).

Returning to the question of religious orientation, it is worth noting that social anthropology usually approaches the third category (modern esotericism) as a historical break, resulting from dramatic changes in urbanization, secularization, socialization, and individualization. In Iceland like in many others western countries, the classic scholarly discourse about New Age is to presume a discontinuity with traditional social forms (Anderson 2005). In a recent essay, Wood interestingly refuted this widely accepted statement: «The New Age is seen as a religion – or, more usually, a spirituality – in which people choose what to do, and how to do it, on the basis of their own authority, rather than being directed by authorities external to them» (2007:2). I also suggest that in Iceland, the social organization of modern esotericism – from spiritualism to New Age – is adapted to the frame of pre-existing patterns of social relations. Indeed, aspects of the traditional Icelandic cosmology involving a heedful partnership between the dead and the living were based on sociability that precisely operates through networking (Pons 2005). Among ordinary people who do not even belong to

esoteric movements, the historical analysis of the use of popular narratives (*Þjóðsögur*) and the contemporary ethnography of current relationships between the dead and the living, show that «getting in contact with the dead» was and still is performed through a network of acquaintances, often outside kinship. Moreover, it is precisely because the dead are able to connect non-relatives that those symbolic exchanges gain strength and vitality. It is a common occurrence that a living person dreams of the dead delivering a message, not for himself but directed to someone else. The dreamer must then identify who is concerned in order to deliver the message he has received (Pons 2002). Thus, although Spiritualism initially emerged in the cities (Reykjavík, Akureyri), it was afterwards easily appropriated by local populations who gave a social status and function to mediumship which became a way for expressing solidarity outside kinship, as a collective *ethos* or a specific way of «being between us», and «being friends». It is therefore on the basis of such networking that the third religious category was popularly spread in Icelandic society, and quickly looked like a milieu where people go mostly at the events of friends and relatives' deaths and births. In this context, the diverse spirit societies are not officially religious but associative structures, and play the role of relays that Icelanders reach according to circumstance and necessity (Pons 2007b).

This focus on the social organization of Spiritualism and New Age in Iceland asserts that the religious orientation of modern esotericism was curiously expressed within the frame of a pre-existing mode of social relation. Referring to my previous research on socialization through the relationships between dead and living, I argue that the patterns of milieu and network – that are specific to the third type category – were already active in traditional Icelandic society, and therefore cannot be solely considered as a result of secularization and modernised individualization. Consequently, although Christian asceticism in Faroe and modern esotericism in Iceland were historical ruptures with regard to territorial churches, they nevertheless followed some continuity with the local modes of living, dwelling, socializing, and networking.

### *Individualisms and societies*

By referring to the concept of mysticism, I wish to draw attention to the emotional experience of the supernatural that, despite a mutual rejection, Christian asceticism and modern Spiritualism have in common. A great illustration of this is the couple *Pentecostal / New Age*. Many studies have sought their systematic similarities that Albanese (1992), for instance, listed in nine points: personal transformation, healing, direct spiritual experience, continuing revelation, religious materialism, democratized spirituality, visions of the millennium. But another common feature of these categories is certainly the arduous and sometimes impossible displacements between them. Mysticism is impervious to each other. However, within their own territory, mysticisms show a great mobility of ideas and people, mostly through the internationalization of religious goods and services. In Iceland, modern esotericism grows with every kind of symbolic good picked up everywhere among the many diverse influences of New Age and *Rebirth*' sphere. For instance, today the biographies of mediums give evidence to

the complexity of their paths. Contemporary mediums no longer follow a predictable fate and path as it was often said by their ancestors, clairvoyants and seers of the old days. Now they are definitely the selves' builders of their own biographies and they make great use of creative imagination to invent unexpected personal identities (Pons 2006, 2007). Similarly, the Faroese Protestant sects are internationally linked and take part in globalized *Born Again*'s networks. Here, individuals themselves are nomadic. Often Faroese young people try out and slip into other sects during a stay abroad, for instance at a foreign university. Yet this mobility operates within the same frame whereas transits between *Born Again* and *Rebirth*'s categories almost never happen. During my fieldwork, I did not encounter such displacement in Faroe and only two in Iceland, both from Christian asceticism to modern esotericism. This direction of transit between the two categories is generally more diffuse, as also stated in other contexts (see Macklin 1977; Brown 1997). Such difficulty of displacement indicates an essential opposition that meddles with the question of individualism.

Troeltsch again stated that mysticism lies at the heart of religious individualism within modernity. As mentioned before, the religious modernity of Protestantism gives individuals credit for experiencing by themselves an encounter with God or a world of supernatural imago. In another way, Taylor pointed to a similar conception when looking at the formation of modern self identity. In *Sources of the Self* (1989) he argued that modernity opens unexpected ways of dynamic introspection based on the myth of a singular interiority; individual identity appears to be rooted in the deep nature of the self, that is to say some resources hidden into a «real self» that would exist since the origin, and which would be different from anyone else's, and which should be searched for. Now, in Iceland and the Faroe, these two types of mysticism and introspection have mixed and fulfilled distinctive patterns of individualism; an individualism of «conformity» in Faroese Christian mysticism (the principle of exemplarity) and of «differentiation» in Icelandic Spiritualist mysticism (the principle of originality). The analysis of the self-identity construction of Faroese preachers and Icelandic mediums enhances this contrast between these patterns of individualism.

In Faroe, inside the sect, everyone encourages on everyone else to experience the same type of encounter with God, and to nourish it through a personal and exemplary relation, but similar to everyone. Therefore the supernatural relation is developed in «conformity» to everyone else, with a single entity. The *Brøðrasamkoma* and *Heimamissión* for instance have notably developed this modality of individualism, whereas the recent Pentecostal and Charismatic slowly introduce a shift towards individualism less exemplary and more autonomous. It also explains why these new congregations mostly attract young generations. However, the ideal type of an «individualism of conformity» still remains dominant in Faroe where, even among the Pentecostal and Charismatic, the image and discourse of personal success and the self-made man are not as wide spread as they are in other contexts (Coleman 2004; Robbins 2004).

Among mediums and healers, introspection opens up the ability of creative imagination and the possibilities of encounters with many supernatural entities. These beings are numerous, potentially endless, and dependants on the will of each medium, but all refer to main shared categories (dead ancestors, spirit doctors, helpers, protectors...).

They combine plural cosmologies, which are privately outlined, and through which people sketch their own identities. Indeed, each medium shapes his personal character by referring to former lives, by discovering his helpers, protectors and spiritual partners with whom he performs healing and channelling in his own way. Thus the supernatural relations are developed in «differentiation» to anyone else, with multiple entities that each medium and healer identifies one by one, even though these distinctive entities mostly play the same role within cosmologies.

These distinctive patterns of individualism, and of spiritual relationships with the hereafter, are of course ideal types and, as such, inevitably reduce empirical reality. Nevertheless these blueprints are significant in every insular context. They reassert the affinities between the formal characteristics of the religious orientations, and those of the societies that have significantly followed those orientations.

In Iceland where an «individualism of differentiation» flourishes, the classic discourse argues that the society is fully modernized, secularized and that individuals are now free from coercive religious belongings. In this way, they may easily choose and follow the paths they want to within the third religious category of modern esotericism. However, I have tried to look at it differently, suggesting that this individual autonomy is also an Icelandic feature of *longue durée*, already mentioned in ancient history. Scholars paid special attention to the modernity of the heroes in the ancient literature of Icelandic Sagas, stressing that individuals were more important than facts (Durrenberger 1996). In this past society, where the basic social structure was a network of lineages (*bú*) settled all over the territory, the great values were already independence and self-rule, that is to say those of «big men societies» according to Byock (2007:89). Today, it is sometimes argued that Iceland shows strong evidence of a deep American influence as it is a very liberal society, with a very high standard of individual success and where state socialism is weaker than in Scandinavia. It is surely true. But there is also some coincidence between these images that Icelandic society claims for itself today, and those of autonomy, independence and free competition that are mentioned about the Vikings in the Sagas. Nowadays personal successes are never hidden and it is fully recognized to show financial profit, especially with conspicuous consumption of cars and houses. But here again, such a display of personal success resonates with the way in the past, farmers claimed power through a great number of horses and sheep.

In contrast to these private enterprises, the ideal of Faroese community finds its more remarkable expression in the practice of whaling (*grindadráp*). The hunting of pilot whales (*Globicepala melaena*) has long been a crucial subsistence and culturally meaningful practice. Whole schools of whales are sighted offshore and then driven into bays by small fishing boats where they are slaughtered. The whole process requires great organization and division of labour. Spoils are equally distributed to all participants, even to villagers who do not participate. There is no commercial profit to these hunts and the general share of meat and blubber includes old people and those with disabilities. There is nothing similar to this in Iceland though stranded whales played an important role in the past economy. But it is stressed in *Jónsbók* that stranded whales belonged to the shore's owner. Far from the general Faroese distributive system, disputes over stranding were common in court, since access to such ownership was valu-

able and often claimed (Hastrup 1990:74). Gaffin argued that the generalized exchange of *grindadráp* bears witness to the whole Faroese mechanism, whereby the communal institution helps to maintain social order. The same process is found with sheepherding, which is also partly communal. The shepherds elect one person, a «sheepman», the primary caretaker of the sheep and of fencing for their area. But «leadership rotates, in typically Faroese unauthoritarian, egalitarian style» (Gaffin 1996:51). Gaffin, who has specifically observed those aspects of the village (*bygd*) organization, argued that common property institutions make for high demands on conformity and austerity, and little competition for prestige within the predominantly egalitarian order (1995). As a general consideration he stated that «there is little differentiation in economic standing among people of the same age. (...) every house and car resembles others in size and quality, and no man or family stands out as wealthier or poorer than the next» (1996:28).

## Conclusion: the problem with islands

As J. Peacock pointed out, comparison in anthropology is often caught between two approaches; comparison emphasizing the logic and integrity of a pattern, and a globalized approach emphasizing not such logic of patterning but rather continuous interaction of elements in the world (2002). In this article, I have tried to hold both approaches at the same time when questioning the marginal religious orientations that Iceland and Faroe Islands have distinctively but significantly acknowledged and diffused since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, I referred to some historical circumstances and external interactions. I argued that the relationships with the Kingdom of Denmark, and the status of these islands as «imagined communities» (Andersson 1991) within the realm of Scandinavian Enlightenment, are of high importance for the understanding of the great different changes that occurred in recent past history. In such a perspective, the religious orientations can be considered as historical productions that the agents have «consciously» acknowledged as distinctive cultural features. But on the other hand, I also tried to consider that those productions could refer to some long term social features, distinctively attested in each context as cultural facts of *longue durée*. In this second perspective, modern esotericism in Iceland and Christian asceticism in Faroe depend on favourable ground that allowed – or not – the possibility of their development. I have tried to suggest that those insular cases' studies present some significant arguments in this perspective, and then surely address relevant questions to comparative anthropology.

This comparative exercise in macro anthropology, based on the concept of mysticism and individualism as ideal types, needs to be carefully considered since it necessitates abstraction and simplification. Indeed, beside the ideal types stated for each context – and those are socially significant – one must also consider that in the last decades things are changing and, for instance, unexpected new virtuoso appear in Faroese society. Often talkative and with unusual charisma, supported by new networks that are more and more developed with the outside world, these recent figures



assume a new position of small entrepreneur within the congregation they found. In Iceland too, a timid shift shows that things are not fixed for ever. More institutionalized Spiritualist societies give signs of probable future changes in the third religious category of modern esotericism. Consequently, ideal types are indicators rather than proofs. Nevertheless, as far as mysticism is concerned, the concept of «cultural island phenomena» described as an ability to acknowledge and to re-create consciously specific features, is relevant in Iceland and Faroe Islands. By having willingly chosen to observe these two islands societies, I aimed to reverse the magnifying glass effect of islands case studies into a heuristic tool in understanding modern esotericism and Christian asceticism within the Nordic world.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Those comparative fieldworks in Iceland and Faroe Islands are now included within a collective anthropological research project I steer under the title «A Mysticism for all. Conceptions of the individual and the conditions of evangelical Protestantism emergence: Europe, Maghreb, Arctic, Oceania», financially supported by ANR, the French National Agency for Research (n°ANR-08-JCJC-0060-01). I thank Matthew Wood, William H. Swatos, Jr., and Katia Boissevain who offered comments and wise suggestions on this article. Of course, they are not responsible for the argument as it appears here.

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