



**Address
by President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at a conference of
Siðmennt,
the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association,
in Reykjavík
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Ladies and gentlemen,

The film *Being There* tells the story of a simple gardener named Chance, played by Peter Sellers. By a series of coincidences Chance finds himself in the limelight, the centre of attention. “Yes,” asserts Chance sincerely, “there will be growth in the spring!” “First comes spring and summer, but then we have fall and winter. And then we get spring and summer again.” Yes, the gardener certainly knows what he’s talking about. “As long as the roots are not severed, all is well. And all will be well in the garden,” he goes on.

The story of the film is that everything Chance says is meant literally. In his innocence he points out simple truths about how to cultivate one’s garden, while others read different and deeper meanings into his words. All at once, he is perceived as as having all answers to complex questions, answers which are deemed to be brilliantly clever. But those who praise him for his wisdom are two-faced. They have no intention of following his good advice about watering their garden and taking care of delicate blooms in the flora of life.

This charming tale fixed itself in my memory as soon as I first saw the film. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address this excellent gathering. That would hardly have happened, had I not been elected president, and in order for that to happen a series of events were required. But here I am, to open your discussions on the ethical questions of our time. The emphasis is on the perils of climate change, the problems facing refugees, economic injustice in the world, and finally democracy. These are all urgent issues, and I hope that those attending the conference will, at the end of the day, be filled with hope; but that hope must be based on rational argument and realism, and not on blind faith – not a hope that is grounded in deceptions by oneself or others.

I want to say a few more words about hope and faith, society and religion. For here I am to discuss ethical challenges, and here I am, invited by ethical humanists who place emphasis on ethical values and a search for enlightenment without reference to supernatural phenomena. In addition it should be pointed out that our hosts, the ethical humanists, favour the separation of church and state. They are against the custom that members of parliament are meant to attend church service at the Cathedral next door when their assembly convenes in the fall; and they are even more opposed to the article in the Constitution, which affirms that the Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the state church of Iceland – the established church, which the government is committed to support and protect.

That same Constitution protects and ensures religious freedom. Here in Iceland, the people should be able to practise their religion, or no religion. Equality, diversity and freedom are safeguarded by our fundamental laws: “Everyone shall be equal before the law,” states the Constitution, “and enjoy human rights irrespective of sex, religion, opinion, national origin, race, colour, property, birth or other status.”

These rights are guaranteed to citizens of Iceland, despite the constitutional provisions for a state church and government support. It is not surprising that this arrangement has attracted attention, and in fact it is only right that people should debate the advantages and disadvantages of this state of affairs. In that light, informed and open-minded debate is all to the good. That seems to me as much truth as Chance’s musings in *Being There*, and I don’t feel that I’m sharing any profound insights here. It is simply obvious, just as that summer follows the spring.

Dear guests! The website of this conference refers to a video about the beauty of Iceland and the splendid people who live here – smiling and happy in all their freedom and diversity. And there we also see that in Iceland the weather is always good – sunny and warm.

The video “Inspired by Iceland” commences at Þingvellir, the beating heart of our history and culture, hallowed ground for the Icelandic nation – a *lieu de mémoire* or *site of memory* as the scholars call it. At Þingvellir, a little over a thousand years ago, faith was hotly debated. The chieftains who attended Alþingi, the national assembly at Þingvellir, formed broadly two factions: on one hand the heathens who wished to continue to worship the old Norse gods, Óðinn and Þór, Freyja and Frigg and all the rest of the pantheon; on the other the followers of the new religion of the “White Christ” and Christianity, which was rapidly spreading throughout Europe.

The religious standoff grew heated, and came close to sparking armed conflict all over the country. The story goes that a volcano erupted near Þingvellir at the time, and a lava flow threatened the home of one of the Christian chieftains. The heathens took this as a sign that their gods were angry. But one of those, who had already been baptised, conclusively rebutted such ideas – a person of the Enlightenment before his time, we may say. To the armed men standing at Þingvellir on age-old lava fields, he spoke these wise words: “What angered the gods when the lava flowed on which we now stand?”

We in Iceland still learn this at school – or I did, at least. And we also learn – or learned – about the solution which the national assembly accepted, in preference to bloodshed at Þingvellir.

“And it now seems advisable to me,” said the Law Speaker, “that we should not allow those to prevail who most wish to oppose each other; let us compromise between them, so that each side has its own way in something, and let us all have the same laws and the same religion. It is so, that if we sunder the law, we shall also sunder the peace.”

Slowly but surely, all traces of heathenism were eliminated from public life – it does not even survive in the names of days in Icelandic, unlike English with its *Tuesdays*, *Wednesdays*, *Thursdays* and *Fridays*, referencing Týr, Óðinn, Þór and Freyr. The twentieth century, however, saw a re-awakening, and the Ásatrú Fellowship was founded, in which more than four thousand people find a suitable place for their philosophy, at peace with god and folk as we say in Icelandic. Christian denominations are also many and various – unlike the situation in past centuries, before and after the Reformation. And about a thousand people are registered as members of Muslim groups, a few more as Buddhists, and so on.

Yes, values and laws have changed since the year 999 or 1000, when Christianity was officially adopted as the Icelandic religion (we must accept that the sources do not indicate beyond doubt the year of the momentous event – as first pointed out by archaeologist Ólafía Einarsdóttir). Today the principle is that we shall have the same laws for all – certainly – but many faiths. And the lesson of the story is also that the religion of one, or of many, cannot be the premise of legislation that is to apply to all. Faith does not transcend the law of the land. We must continue to live together in a country where rule of law applies – a state based on a secular foundation.

Ladies and gentlemen: Have simple answers been given here to simple basic principles? Is all our life so simple, so obvious as that summer follows spring and that plants die if uprooted?

The website of this conference includes a picture which refers to the “Inspired by Iceland” video. It is photo taken from the tower of the largest church in Iceland, and in the video itself at least three churches are seen. The Christian churches I can see from my residence at Bessastaðir number more than ten. Our past and our present, our culture and existence, are bound up with the Christian religion. The history of Christianity in Iceland is sometimes a tale of cruelty and power, but it is also a story of artistic and literary achievements, a story of compassion and kindness. In Iceland’s churches the gospel of tolerance and broad-mindedness can be heard. Within Iceland’s religious groups, allies are to be found in the battle that must be fought on the ethical questions of our time, those questions which are to be discussed here today.

Finally, let me mention another film, of which I have sometimes thought since I have been in office. *Zelig*, one of Woody Allen’s best films, tells of Leonard Zelig, who is so desperate to please everyone that he not only agrees with everyone he meets, but actually takes on their appearance. He never says anything that could offend anyone, at that moment – so Zelig would quite certainly be cautious in some circles about citing Woody Allen, in view of all the allegations that have been made against him. On the other hand, Zelig would have no problem fitting in here today.

Dear guests at this conference held by Siðmennt – the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association: Later today I will have the pleasure of opening an exhibition about the history of the Carmelite convent in Hafnarfjörður, where I shall recall their prayer and selfless work for the least fortunate in society – and even the need of so many in an enlightened and free society for a faith, conviction or hope about some kind of life after this one – about being reunited with lost loved ones, and rejecting the idea that we just live and die like any plant in a garden.

And tomorrow is Seamen’s Day, when I shall visit the Fossvogur churchyard, where we commemorate those who have gone to a watery grave over the centuries. Following that ceremony a mass will be held in Reykjavík Cathedral to mark Seamen’s Day. At such events it is fitting to recall the oldest known seamen’s prayer in Icelandic, which dates from pre-Reformation times under the Catholic church – to which I once belonged. It was the rod and staff of those who risked their lives on the stormy deep. It starts:

God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
see and bless all persons,
young and old,
cargo and boards.

I wish you all the best at this conference on ethical questions of our time and that of future generations. Great challenges lie in store for us, but that is not

news. Nor is it news that without hope and purpose, freedom and kindness, the future will be dark, and of no benefit to anyone.