

The Icelandic Sagas and Social Order

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James Kalb, an attorney who lives and works in Brooklyn, first appeared in *Modern Age* (Fall 1995) with the publication of his essay on "Confucius Today." Of the aims of "The Icelandic Sagas and Social Order," which follows, Kalb writes: "The sagas have been read variously. Their narrative excellence and truth to concrete experience has attracted devoted readers such as Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden. Contemporary libertarians draw on them for an example of a stateless society. In this essay I attempt to do justice to their complexity and subtlety in order to understand the world they describe more deeply, trace the connections among its political, moral, and spiritual aspects, and understand its relevance to our own times." An attentive reader of this essay will much admire the ways in which its author achieves his particular aims.

THE RELATION BETWEEN the individual, society, and state is a confused one in our time. Is the individual everything and society nothing, or the other way around? Why should one care about the other? Can the state treat the whole social world as the theater for its meddling? If not, what are the limits? Such questions are inescapable and unanswerable in a society like our own, which has no coherent understanding of human life and is dominated by impersonal institutions and abstract relationships that have no hold on our sense of what we are.

The history of the libertarian farmers' republic that was medieval Iceland, and the vivid picture of that society presented in the Icelandic sagas, gives a fresh view of these issues. The similarities and the contrasts to our own society

are noteworthy. Like America, the Icelandic Commonwealth was a new country, founded in the light of history by European settlers and governed by common consent rather than king and priest. Icelandic political life, like ours, emphasized both law and personal independence. However, the Icelanders had no state to enforce rights and obligations. Men pursued their ends without direct protection or hindrance from any public agency, and were obliged to act themselves to secure their safety and legal rights.

The result was neither anarchy nor the tyranny of the strong, but a society that was surprisingly free and equal and more closely knit than our own, ordered by institutions that existed because men found them worth supporting. Out of

domestic and local ties grew the social arrangements felt to be needed, from alliances based on kinship and friendship to a system of assemblies governed by a common code of law. Although far from perfect, the Commonwealth was a generally orderly society, based on private property, loyalty, and individual assertiveness, that worked because those who lived in it made it work. At its moral base were honor, accepted standards of fair dealing, and concrete personal obligations that arose from the necessities of day-to-day life and called for real sacrifices to be made voluntarily.

To be sure, there were special circumstances that helped the Icelanders dispense with the state. The people were unified in religion; when Christian evangelism brought Iceland to the verge of civil war the Icelanders chose an arbitrator who decided that all would convert, and all did. Economic life was simple; the people lived by herding, farming, and fishing, supplemented by occasional expeditions abroad for trade and sometimes raiding. As a settler society without much wealth, Iceland was more egalitarian than other societies of the time or indeed of our own. The rich and famous sowed barley and washed linen. Although families differed in wealth and standing, and there were hired servants and (at first) slaves as well as independent farmers, distinctions among free men were informal and depended on character as well as kinship and property. There were no towns or aggressive neighbors, and no ethnic minorities other than Irish slaves who soon assimilated without discernible trace. The population was perhaps fifty thousand, including five thousand farmers with rights of political participation.

Whatever its special features, Iceland was not a primitive backwater unconnected to civilized Europe or our own society. Its political ideals of personal

independence and government by consent shared a common ancestry with those of England, another island peopled by Celts and Germanic settlers. Foreign travel helped the Icelanders keep up with the times and maintain their ties to Scandinavian society, which was becoming part of an ever more integrated Christendom. They often went far afield, serving in the Varangian Guard in Constantinople or, after conversion to Christianity, making pilgrimages to Rome. After conversion they also participated in the international learned culture of the time through foreign books and study, and contact with foreign churchmen.

The extraordinary quality of the Icelanders' literary culture is evidenced by their domination of Scandinavian court poetry and their vernacular writings generally. Among those writings are the *Íslendinga sögur* ("Sagas of Icelanders"), prose narratives set mainly in Iceland that give an admiring but critical introduction to the place and time. *Njal's Saga* is the longest and greatest of these, but only one of many.¹ The sagas tell with literary skill and realism the stories of individuals, families, and local communities in Iceland during the period from the settlements of the late ninth and early tenth centuries until somewhat after the conversion to Christianity in the year 1000. Their focus on the lives of particular Icelanders enables them to display the relationship among public, personal, and even spiritual aspects of Icelandic life. The sagas are not histories, and were written long after the events they describe, during a time that included the end of the Commonwealth and the loss of independence to Norway in 1262. The social order they depict was real, however, and continued down to the period of composition.

The sagas display both the practical workings and inner significance of Icelandic society, neither romanticizing it

excessively nor minimizing its admirable qualities. It was a society of men rather than material conveniences, built on personal loyalties and demanding standards of conduct, that stands in stark contrast to a modern world governed by abstract principles and faceless markets and administrators. The poignancy of the contrast is increased by the reflection that the saga world is in many ways that of the early European societies ancestral to our own, and that today we are rapidly losing touch with the ideals of independence and honor that made those societies what they were.

The sagas deal with the contentions that arise in a stateless society and test its members and institutions. The stories follow a slow and deliberate rhythm of injury, revenge and settlement, set against a background of everyday life and punctuated by litigations, killings, and small-scale battles. The conditions of the time limited as well as motivated conflict. Disputes started over a piece of land or precedence at a feast; strategies were planned and carried out in the midst of the ordinary activities of a farmstead; and friends and neighbors helped separate combatants, assess damages, and work out settlements. The evident realism shows the world of the sagas to be very like the actual world of medieval Iceland as the Icelanders experienced it.

The emphasis is on action and its consequences, and on human character. Public conduct is integrated with day-to-day economic and family life; saga heroes keep their feet on the ground and even work the fields. The heroic qualities the Icelanders admired are emphasized: courage, loyalty, generosity, physical prowess, and jealous defense of rights and honor. However, no less attention is paid to quieter virtues such as public spirit and practical wisdom, especially the ability to give good advice. All are treated in accordance with their practical effect and place in human affairs.

Characters may stand to a degree for particular virtues and vices, but they are realistically portrayed, sometimes acting well and sometimes badly. *Njal's Saga*, for example, dramatizes the social and the heroic virtues through its two main characters, the wise and prescient Njal and his heroic friend Gunnar. Both characters are complex, however, and as in other sagas the leading impression is the individualism of a time in which what counted was honor and how a man acted in difficult situations.

Upon first appearance each character gets a genealogy and very short account of leading traits, and thereafter is revealed through occasional brief comments, his own or others', but above all through action that often culminates in death. The characters face death with courage and dignity. Gunnar, surrounded by enemies, dies because his resentful wife Hallgerd will not allow her hair to be braided into a bowstring. "To each his own way of earning fame," is his response, "You shall not be asked again."² The aged Njal, besieged by enemies who have set his house on fire, tells his steward where to look for his remains, lies down in bed with his wife and grandson, who are unwilling to leave him, commends their souls to God, and dies in the flames without moving or making a sound. Participants' accounts of the disorders of the thirteenth century collected in *Sturlunga Saga* make it clear that such conduct was not a literary conceit.

The cool factual brevity of the saga style expresses the stoic acceptance of fate and the consequences of action that Icelandic life required. The rarity of descriptive details gives great force to those that are given. While Njal's sons are waiting behind a fence to kill their foster brother Hoskuld Hvitaneess-Priest, an unprovoked and outrageous crime that eventually results in death by fire for themselves and their father's entire household, the author can slow the ac-

tion and give it nightmarish clarity merely by pausing uncharacteristically to remark that “[t]he sun was up, and it was a fine morning.”³ Understatement often becomes grim humor, as with comments in the midst of battle. An attacker climbs onto the roof of Gunnar’s house and is wounded by a thrust from within. His comrades ask whether Gunnar is inside. “That’s for you to find out,” he replies, “but I know that his halberd certainly is,” and falls over dead.⁴

The realism of style and narrative is persuasive enough to have led generations of ordinary readers and some older scholars to believe in the sagas’ near-absolute historical accuracy.⁵ Even supernatural events are treated in a convincingly matter-of-fact way. Hauntings are simply annoyances, sometimes dangerous ones, that are dealt with by digging up the body and moving or burning it or holding an impromptu court to order a halt. Njal’s prescience is of a piece with his acute understanding of human character. The ringing of Gunnar’s halberd before it kills someone is, in the world of the sagas, simply a manifestation of the prowess of the man wielding it and the truth that death is fated. Supernatural foreshadowings tie the events in the story together for the reader, adding to their coherence and thus oddly to the plausibility of the story as something that had to happen as it did.

The matter-of-fact acceptance of violence did not mean that medieval Iceland was more lawless than other societies, any more than the existence of gun-fights meant they were a daily occurrence in our own Old West. Armed conflict was an exceptional event even though the security of life and property required a man to stand ready to defend with ax or spear his rights and honor and those of his friends and kin. While the sagas emphasize situations in which accepted standards demanded violent action, they make it clear that the sys-

tem was remarkably effective in containing bloodshed and composing the disputes that led to it. Assertiveness and sensitivity to points of honor did not lead to interminable feuds or armed conflicts on remotely the scale or destructiveness of wars between states. The very absence of executive government authority made it difficult to organize violence on a large scale. Even during the breakdown of order that led to the loss of Iceland’s independence, the total loss of life has been estimated at only 350 over a period of 52 years,⁶ a rate of violent death lower than that of big American cities today.

Social order was based on formal institutions as well as self-help. A code of law adopted by the national assembly, the Althing, aided in the resolution of conflicts. Courts held at the Althing and regional assemblies applied the law and backed with declarations of outlawry a system of cash compensation for offenses. Serious disputes were usually resolved by mediation or arbitration rather than by litigation, but the latter was the background of negotiation. The sagas pay as much attention to legal maneuverings and negotiations as to battles; Njal was not a warrior but a lawyer.

The system depended on decentralization of power. The only truly public officer in Iceland was the Lawspeaker, a legal expert whose duty it was to make his knowledge available publicly and to all comers. Land, the main source of wealth, was widely held. There were chieftains who presided at assemblies, voted on legislation, and were expected to protect and assert the rights of their thingmen. But they had no right to obedience, and affiliation with a particular chieftain was voluntary. An interest in a chieftaincy (the office could be sold, borrowed, or held in partnership) was not at all necessary to a saga hero. The system did not require extreme equal-

ity, however; since claims were transferable, any claim for violation of rights could end up in the hands of someone in a position to pursue and enforce it.

The diffusion of power and general acceptance of the authority of law made it difficult, in the face of formal and informal pressures, to ignore legal rights indefinitely. Overlapping networks of kinship and alliance ensured that in-laws, uncles, or friends caught in the middle would try to help resolve disputes peacefully. Even without public means of enforcement the ultimate legal sanction, outlawry, was taken seriously. An outlaw's allies could not shelter or protect him without becoming vulnerable to outlawry themselves, a sanction that was difficult to ignore however powerful or well-connected a man was, so those who had been outlawed usually either left the country or were killed.

The sagas thus present a model of a radically self-governing society, including a sober and generally convincing picture of its people and the operation of their institutions. It was a society whose ruling institutions grew directly out of natural human impulses and customs that arise to express and limit those impulses. Material needs and acquisitiveness gave rise to rules of property, contentiousness and the need to defend one's rights created a code of honor, and the social impulse gave rise to systems of alliance. Finally, the need for a common standard of conduct gave the Icelanders law and a judicial system. Since the responsibility for vindicating those ruling principles fell immediately on those who benefitted from them and on their friends and relatives, every free man had life-and-death public responsibilities. The absence of a state thus led to a social order concretely based on the importance and character of the individual.

While the Commonwealth eliminated one restraint on violence and vice, it

exercised the Icelanders in prudence, courage and decision, and on the whole they were better for it. With no public provision of security physical courage was an ordinary necessity. The need for support in disputes led to concern for personal loyalty and the cultivation of the ties between man and man. The need to deter aggressors by drawing lines that could not be transgressed led to a conception of honor as more important than material interests or even life. The resulting willingness to sacrifice everything for points of seemingly minor importance made men sensitive to the rights and concerns of those they might offend; characters in the sagas are acutely aware of the point of view of those with whom they deal, and are willing frankly to admit the moral force of an opponent's position. While armed conflict sometimes led to outrages, it was far more common for standards condemning such things to be observed. *Hóf* (moderation) as well as *drengskapr* (high-mindedness) were aspirations that powerfully affected conduct.

The Commonwealth of course had its flaws, and the sagas reflect critically as well as sympathetically on the heroic ideal and the society in which it was at home. A way of life that grew so directly out of natural impulses and the immediate necessities of cooperation and limiting conflict had strengths, but it left important issues unsettled. For all their pride in their ancestors, the saga writers have a sense that something essential was missing in early Iceland. They saw that maintenance of honor could not be the highest good, but if it was not what was?

In *Njal's Saga* the issue takes the form of the nature of true manhood. The world of the sagas was one in which public life required direct participation in a system of physical force and counter-force that put the manly virtues in demand. To show fear or weakness was to multiply

risks for oneself and fail in one's obligation to support and protect others. An accusation of cowardice could quickly drive a man to rash action, and an imputation of homosexuality was unforgivable. While the conception of honorable conduct had a social side, and included keeping one's word, respecting the rights of others and accepting a settlement of a dispute made by good men, the emphasis was on the combative virtues. Moderation had to be based on strength and a willingness to use force.

The question for the characters in *Njal's Saga* was whether the essence of manhood was stopping at nothing to get what one wants, or courage and endurance in support of moral commitment. The ideal implicit in Icelandic life went beyond the former without reaching the latter, and lost its coherence as a result. Those like Skamkel, who identified manliness with aggression, were recognized as bad men and ended badly. Nonetheless, those who rejected aggression seemed to lack something. Gunnar, although the best warrior in Iceland, was forced to wonder whether he was less manly than others because he was so much more reluctant to kill. Njal knew how to die without flinching, but his wisdom was combined with physical inertia and an odd inability to grow a beard that repeatedly became a topic of insult. He relied on the combativeness of others, notably his self-destructive son Skarp-Hedin, to make up for his own inactivity.

The problem was insoluble for pagan Icelanders because they had no conception of goods transcending ordinary natural purposes that could allow man's ultimate end—the proper object of moral commitment—to be distinguished from what particular men happen to want. Manly honor rooted in pure assertiveness was in the end self-contradictory, because in idealizing the assertive self it made what was asserted something ideal

and therefore not merely the self. A man who asserted the self seemed to lack loftiness, while a more disinterested man seemed to lack energy; both qualities were necessary for true honor, but it seemed impossible to have them together. The problem was eventually resolved by adding Christian love to the native heroic conception to form a knightly ideal personified by Kari, Njal's son-in-law and avenger, who combined strength and courage with humility, forbearance, and in the end forgiveness. *Njal's Saga*, written by a Christian author about a society that was at first pagan and then only partially Christianized, is thus in part a study of the relation of Christianity to Icelandic life.

It is not easy to make political life fully consistent with either heroism or Christianity, let alone with both. The survival of a heroic ethic after the introduction of Christianity involved awkward compromises. Christianity could hardly countenance killing to vindicate honor, and it otherwise made the demands of honor more equivocal. Accepted conceptions were necessarily undermined by prominent converts who refused to fight when attacked, such as Hoskuld Hvitane-Priest in *Njal's Saga* and Kjartan Olafsson in *Laxdæla Saga*, another saga dealing with the Conversion.

One could argue easily enough that Christianity eventually destroyed heroic society in Iceland. Norse paganism had lent substantial support to the social order, providing supernatural backing for the personal assertiveness, courage in the face of defeat and death, and sacredness of honor that were at its base.⁷ It also favored a certain passivity that led to unreserved acceptance of libertarian politics. Pagan Icelanders found it too hard to distinguish temporal from eternal things to believe that the here and now could be changed. Such an attitude was visible in the personal lives of saga characters who do nothing when

they know by supernatural foresight that they are walking into some catastrophe from which they apparently could escape without toil or dishonor. It was equally visible in the political outlook of men who could not imagine goods that transcend and transform day-to-day life, and so accepted conflict as the natural and inevitable setting for realization of the most admirable human qualities.

With the conversion of Iceland the moral order changed. Conceptions that had grounded the Commonwealth became weaker as the old ideals of personal independence and defense of honor came to appear less absolute. Universal ideals took root that suggested better principles of government than the struggles of self-willed men, and made the day-to-day workings of society seem too paltry for supreme sacrifices. Some of the most characteristic saga heroes seem out of place in a changing world. Egil and Grettir, eponymous heroes of two major sagas, were great pagans, splendid fighters who could not tolerate an insult or slight, but they lived in a world in which men like them were increasingly outmoded. Egil died in bed before Christianity was accepted in Iceland, but Grettir, who came later, ended his life an isolated outlaw on a rocky island off the Icelandic coast.

Organizational tendencies in Christendom also had a subversive effect. Tithes led to a greater concentration of wealth in the hands of clerics and the private owners of churches. More generally, medieval Catholicism had a pronounced centralizing and reformist tendency. Notions of church polity that demanded hierarchical control from Rome and subjection of each nation to a king obedient to the church tended more and more to disrupt the theoretical legitimacy and often practical operation of the native Icelandic system.

Some have thus seen Christianity as the downfall of the Commonwealth.

Nonetheless, the history of Europe proclaims the possibility of Christian societies with heroic features, and in recent times the apparent obsolescence of honor⁸ has coincided with that of Christianity. The two are linked as well as opposed. Since every society has internal conflicts, the issue is not theoretical consistency but relative practical compatibility. Christ's kingdom is not of this world, and Christians are necessarily torn between the demands of the world, even what is noblest in it, and those of the Gospel.

Christianity benefits a political order if it supports it at its points of weakness; conversely, a society is sufficiently hospitable to Christian life if it has institutions that teach men to sacrifice natural inclinations toward pleasure, comfort and safety in favor of higher goods. The latter condition was satisfied in Iceland by the conception of honor. As to the former, Iceland converted voluntarily, mainly in response to its own needs, and thrived for more than a century thereafter, retaining its independence and form of society for over 250 years. Traditional Icelandic qualities continued in new guises, as pagan stoicism became Christian resignation and a Christian coloration was given to ideals of courage in the face of defeat, suffering, and death. The Christian emphasis on reconciliation made the political order work more smoothly, and a stronger conception of individual responsibility restrained the crimes of big men who could no longer break the law and have their dependents pay the penalty. The Commonwealth was destroyed not by insufficient willingness to kill but by worldly contention and the resulting concentration of wealth, power, and chieftaincies in too few hands. Whatever the tension between the Commonwealth and Christianity, it thus appears on balance that they supported each other, and that Christian Iceland should be seen as the

fruition rather than the incipient decadence of the Commonwealth.

The relevance of the sagas to our own times is that they display with unusual clarity how heroism serves a social function and arises naturally out of the difficulties of ordinary life when the power and responsibility of government are severely limited. A heroic social order is based on the character and integrity of the individual, and requires an extensive sphere of individual responsibility for matters that are important socially. In a confused social order like our own that tends toward radical centralization individuals can have no clear responsibilities, and a lack of heroism is the consequence. In the years ahead that lack is likely to turn to acute need as the growing failure of social institutions throws us more and more on our own resources.

We are richer materially than our ancestors, and better informed in many ways, but our lives seem to lack the moral weight theirs had. The governing principles of our society come home to us and make us what we are. We have all been touched by the dream of endless progress in securing comfort and equality through rational organization. That dream has troubling implications. Since it treats virtue as a means to what is pleasant, and prefers social technology to individual effort and sacrifice, it has little use for the difficult virtues. It makes loyalty and personal integrity sentimental values with no serious function, and replaces an understanding of personal moral worth that makes concrete demands on individuals with one that has little content beyond a claim to equal treatment. As a society, we are told that it is our obligation to eliminate the need for virtues such as courage and endurance, and as individuals we are taught to prize above all tolerance, flexibility, and acceptance of change—in effect, to attend to short-term individual satisfac-

tions and comply with what others have decided for us.

Morals must deal with reality, and the dreams of assured order and comfort that have guided modern society are only dreams. The sagas tell us something important about life that moderns try to ignore. It is becoming clear that the all-provident state will be unable to fulfill its promise because it destroys the conditions of its own success. Hedonism dissolves social cohesion and makes sacrifice for the common good seem irrational. Bureaucratic rule weakens the public spirit that arises from political participation, and so destroys the disinterested support it needs to be effective. Nor can proposals for trimming bureaucracy and improving efficiency, such as increasing the role of markets, save the situation, since they do not affect the root of the problem, the egalitarian hedonism and ultimate state responsibility for individual well-being that undermine personal moral ties and individual responsibility.

Egalitarian hedonism is too abstract to impose concrete limits on either private self-seeking or state power. Unprincipled conduct in public and private life is the consequence. Attempts to dress hedonism in the language of human rights only aggravate its tendency toward abstraction and confer an unwarranted moral dignity on impulse and appetite. Through its very universality the modern conception of rights becomes empty, finding it difficult even to distinguish the rights of man from those of animals. Society thus becomes unable to establish the boundaries needed for its own defense. Plato tells us that a polity that rejects the good, the honorable, and even the commercially sound in favor of the pleasant will slide into anarchy and despotism, unable to maintain the standards required to secure the physical comfort and safety that are its bedrock demand. The appalling tyrannies that

have disfigured modern times, as well as current statistics on crime and other social disorders, support his view. For the present the tyrannies have fallen, but in a world of dissolving landmarks what will enable us to resist their return?

The failure of the modern experiment in comprehensive social management shows once again that each of us is a moral agent in an imperfect world, who, subject to chance, makes his own life and must live with the consequences of his acts and the acts of those connected to him. The Icelandic sagas explore that situation in its starkest form. In the years ahead the failure of the all-protective state and growth of public and private lawlessness will bring the harder virtues back into demand. Flexibility, sensitivity, and self-expression can be fundamental moral ideals only in a state that takes all serious responsibility on itself, leaving little to individuals, families, or independent communities. With the collapse of attempts to construct a setting in which those ideals can be central to moral life others will come to the fore.

The sagas demonstrate how more concrete and demanding moral principles such as honor can evolve and become effective socially. Honor is not a sufficient basis for morality, but it is better than love of material comfort and security. It pays far more respect to human nature, and directs men's attention beyond themselves, leaving them

open to something higher. We have particular need of it today. Free institutions depend on the dignity of the citizen, but without a conception of individual honor dignity remains a pure abstraction. If it has no special connection to particular men who feel called upon to assert and defend it when it is violated, dignity will play no practical role. The loss of honor therefore means the loss of freedom.

The Icelandic Commonwealth stands for freedom and honor-loving aspects of the heritage of the European peoples that have been essential to their greatness, and that we have all but lost. It shows us community based on self-respect and personal loyalty, courage to make decisions and accept the consequences, and endurance to bear what is unavoidable. The whole tendency of life today points away from such things. Without wanting to revive a long-dead world, we can recognize something in it that is part of the moral ecology of any decent society. In their accounts of the Conversion the sagas give an example of moral reform through acceptance of principles that transcend the existing social order. We need to follow that example. By their representation of heroism the sagas can enlarge and strengthen our moral imagination and help us recapture something of what we have lost. We need them for that.

1. In addition to *Njal's Saga*, the major sagas include *Laxdæla Saga*, *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Egil's Saga* and *Grettir's Saga*. 2. *Njal's Saga*, Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson, trans. (New York, 1960), 171. 3. *Ibid.*, 232-233. 4. *Ibid.*, 169. 5. As one very distinguished critic comments, "Skarpheddin's jump and slide on the ice, and the meeting of Grettir, or whoever it was, with the bear do not fade from one's memory. You can't believe it is fiction." Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York, 1960), 52. 6. Einar Ól.

Sveinsson, *The Age of the Sturlungs* (Ithaca, 1953), 72. 7. The writers of the sagas do not assign a leading role to pagan religion in the lives of Icelanders. As Christians it would have been difficult for them to emphasize it, and some features of the religion, such as human sacrifice, would have been particularly shocking to describe. 8. See Peter L. Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor," *European Journal of Sociology*, XI (1970), 339-347.