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STATE–CHURCH RELATIONS IN ICELAND

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the changes in State–Church relations which took place in Iceland in recent years. Until recently, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as the State church, held on the island a strong social and political position, and was closely connected with the state structures. Since the mid-1990s in Iceland there is, however, observed a process of gradual loosening of the State–Church relations, the most spectacular manifestation of which in recent times was prepared by the Constitutional Council, after the outbreak of the economic crisis, new draft constitution which did not provide for the protection and support of the National Church by the state (as it is stipulated in the effective constitution). The impact on the change in the status of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its relations with the state structures was exerted primarily by two factors: an increase in religious pluralism of Icelandic society (caused mainly due to the influx of immigrants to the country) and greater attention, both of the authorities and Icelandic society, to issues of human rights and the principles of equality. The present article consists of three parts. In the first part there is outlined a brief history of religious Iceland, pointing to the role of religion and Church in the history of the Icelandic nation. The second part deals with the contemporary religious landscape of the island, while the third one is devoted to the issue of the evolution of State-Church relations.

Keywords: state, relations, Scandinavia, Evangelical Lutheran Church, Iceland

1. Introduction

Over the past dozen years, both at the level of public as well as scientific discourse, there has been noticeable an increased interest in religion as an important factor which influences the process of shaping the international order, political processes, maintenance of social and cultural divisions or articulation of needs and expectations of specific social groups. Wider and deepened consideration of the religious factor in regard to functioning of local communities, states and societies, as well as the entire international community was conditioned by phenomena and processes such as globalization, in particular associated with it cultural homogenization and heterogenization; intensification of international migration flows leading to pluralism and diversity of societies; development of ideas and international legal regulations on the protection of

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human rights; religiously motivated terrorist activities or the progress of civilization (which due to the scientific and technological development introduced to public and political debate issues of broadly defined morality, such as an *in vitro* method or cloning of living beings or their organs). At the same time, all these elements have contributed to the modification of the State–Church relations. On the one hand, what we can observe is peculiar reframing of the 'State-Church' relations into 'state - religion' relations; and on the other one, the traditional European models of 'State-Church' relations (State/National church, separation of Church and State, or cooperationist/concordat system) more and more often are of little cognitive value and turn out to be not entirely in tune with the reality [1]. Not infrequently it stems from the need to reconcile tradition and cultural heritage with the requirements of multiculturalism, standards relating to human rights and the principles of political correctness.

One of European regions where there is observable both an increased interest in the religious factor in the political sphere and changes in the approach to the State-Church relations are the Nordic countries, including Iceland. These countries, on the one hand still characterized by a high percentage of citizens belonging to the traditional 'national churches' (Denmark 79%, Finland 76%, Iceland 80%, Norway 77%, Sweden 68%) [2], on the other one, have witnessed in recent years (mainly due to the development of migration processes) a significant religious diversity of societies, which is reflected in the fact that at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century there were recognized by the state nearly 600 religious organizations in Norway, more than 100 in Denmark, around 40 in Iceland and Sweden, and 25 in Finland [1]. The increased religious pluralism of the Nordic societies did not go unnoticed in the State-Church relations in these countries. Considering Nordic countries, Denmark and Iceland still have established the Evangelical Lutheran majority churches, while the formal separation of majority Churches took place in 2000 in Sweden, in 2012 in Norway, and in Finland as early as in 1919. An interesting case in this context is Iceland, where although the official status of the major Church is held by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, in recent years there have been observed significant modifications in the State–Church relations, which may lead in the future to complete separation and independence of these institutions.

2. Religious history of Iceland

The Republic of Iceland is an island country, located in the northern, subarctic Atlantic Ocean, on the island of Iceland and several adjoining smaller islands. The land area of the country reaches 103,000 km² and is inhabited by the population of 325,600 people (2014), which calculated per square kilometre gives only 3.16 people. Until recently, mainly due to geographic isolation and continued for centuries relatively low living standard, Iceland remained an ethnically, religiously and culturally homogeneous country. In recent years, however, the situation, due to the influx of immigrants, underwent some changes

(in 2014 almost 303,000 people living on the island held the Icelandic citizenship, while 288,000 were born in Iceland) [Statistic Iceland, http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Citizenship-and-country-of-birth].
Modern Iceland is ranked as a rich country, with a high level of economic and social growth. In terms of political and constitutional system Iceland is a parliamentary republic, fully embodying in its actions the idea of human and civil rights protection.

Christianity has been present in Iceland basically since the very beginning of its inhabitation by humans, which is a peculiar phenomenon in Europe. Historical documents indicate that even before the permanent colonization of the country by the Viking sailors, which started in the 1070s, the island had been reached and periodically inhabited (in summer seasons) by Gaeilge monks from Ireland, who found here a convenient place for religious contemplation. It may be assumed that Irish monks had discovered Iceland at least 100 years before Norse Vikings arrived there. After the arrival of the latter the monks either left Iceland, as they did not want to live among pagans, or were expelled by them [3]. The Icelandic historiography of the period of years 874-930 is called *landnám*, which means 'the period of settlement'. At that time, Iceland was reached by groups of, in the dominant extent, Scandinavian settlers, whose number at the end of the settlement period was estimated at 20 to 60 thousand. It was a predominantly pagan population, but among the first settlers were also followers of Christianity, who flowed into Iceland from Ireland, England and Scotland or came from the Viking settlements where the Christian faith had already been widespread. As a result of national unification, an essential element of which was the establishment a national assembly – *Althing* in 930, Nordic beliefs dominated the religious sphere of the island community, pushing Christianity to the margins of religious life. The power structure of the new community favoured pagan religion, as local leaders based their position and power also on the foundation of religion. Therefore, almost until the end of the tenth century the so called Icelandic Commonwealth was almost entirely a pagan society [3, p. 29].

The Christianization of Iceland took place in 1000, following a decision of *Althing*. Religious conversion of inhabitants of the North Atlantic islands was of a particular interest for Norwegian rulers who sought in this way to expand and strengthen their sphere of influence. Therefore, they were the initiators and promoters of missionary and Christianization actions directed in this region of Europe. According to the tradition and the historiography the issue of the adoption of the Christian faith caused a deep political and ideological conflict in Iceland, threatening the collapse of the forming at that time island community. Eventually, the dispute between supporters and opponents of Christianity was submitted for the decision to Thorgeir, a pagan priest, who held the position of so-called Lawspeaker in Althing, who after giving it some thought advocated, in the name of the established social order, for the formal acceptance of the Christian religion (all Icelanders were to be henceforth Christians), with the

simultaneous permission for the practice of ancient pagan rites, except that they were to be practiced secretly.

It is assumed that the full conversion of the Icelanders to Christianity was a process of at least two centuries, and that during this period Iceland dealt with a situation of peculiar religious pluralism, which lasted until the twelfth century, when the Catholic Church finally established its structures and monopolized religious life of the island [4]. The conversion to Christianity by Iceland not only led to the inclusion of the country in the sphere of European civilization forming at the time, but also contributed to a significant flourishing of Icelandic national culture. The Church in Iceland quite promptly gained a dominant position in the political and cultural life of the nation: two bishoprics (in the south in Skalholt established in 1054 and in the north in Holar established in 1106) and approximately 11 monasteries gained the status of the centres of social and cultural and political life. Monasteries played a particularly important role in the development of rich, medieval Icelandic literature, including well-known Icelandic sagas. Thanks to the Church the Icelandic culture also quickly underwent internationalization. As emphasized by Johannes Nordal and Valdimar Kristinsson: "The first centuries after Christianity was adopted can undoubtedly be described as the formative period in the nation's cultural and social life. The part played by the Church in shaping Iceland's culture can hardly be exaggerated." [5]

The change in the religious landscape of the island took place in the mid-sixteenth century, when the king of Denmark (under the authority of which Iceland had been since 1380), Christian III decided to introduce in his subordinate lands the Lutheran Protestantism. In Iceland, however, the religious conversion was met with resistance. While in the Diocese of Skalholt the Lutheran order was successfully introduced as early as in 1541, in the northern diocese of Holar, it was achieved only 10 years later (after the execution of Bishop Jon Arason, the leader of the anti-Danish opposition, today hailed in Iceland as a symbol of the defence of national interests).

After the introduction of the Reformation the Danish authorities quickly decided to use the Church structures as an instrument of control over the distant colony. The royal officials in Denmark, which managed all the affairs of the Church, treated the Icelandic Church as a more or less obedient instrument of the administrative apparatus of the state. Paradoxically, this situation served also the Icelandic national interests as local pastors in Iceland were obliged to supervise the education and Christian morality of the island inhabitants. They were obligated to conduct regular inspections in all the houses belonging to their parish, to check prevailing morale as well as religious and educational standards. Consequently, although in practice there did not exist a system of school education on the island (except the Latin School), until a mid-eighteenth century illiteracy was eliminated [4].

At the same time Icelandic pastors, especially in the nineteenth century played an important role in the process of national revival and development of independence movements. To a large extent it was due to the fact that, firstly,

while Icelandic students thanks to special privileges and facilitations generally left to study in Copenhagen, most clergymen were educated on the island (in Skalholt, Holar and later Bessastadir Latin Schools); and, secondly, although the Icelandic Church had become an element of the Danish administration, the Icelandic clergy were not as dependent on it as Icelandic secular officials. Therefore, the local clergy were the leaders of a social and political movement which sought to modernise the country and to give it the state of autonomy [5]. The Icelandic Church still played an important role in the formation and protection of national culture. An important event in this context was, for instance, translation and print of the Bible (by the bishop Gudbrandur Thorlaksson in 1584 in Holar), which significantly contributed to protection of the Icelandic language.

The intensification of independence struggles in Iceland took place in the 1830s. At that time the Icelandic intellectual seven more openly and decisively articulated the need for reforms granting more political freedoms and civil rights to Icelanders. The independence leaders in their actions in this respect could rely not only on the support of friends or family members, but also on pastors who, through their social functions, had close contacts with ordinary people. The role and importance of the clergy in the social and political life of this period is perfectly illustrated by the fact that before 1920 clergy often constituted as much as approximately1/4 of the Althing [4].

Under the influence of the independence pressure, Danish authorities in 1874 (the millennium anniversary of the settlement of the island) agreed to partial autonomy and granted to Iceland a constitution. Apart from transferring to Icelanders legislative and administrative competences, the constitution granted the Evangelical Lutheran Church the status of the National Church. In this way the Evangelical Lutheran Church was formally included into the Icelandic state structures. At the same time the new constitution introduced freedom of religion, which granted other denominations the possibility to officially function in the religious sphere of the country.

3. Modern religious landscape of Iceland

Since the Reformation times the dominant position in Iceland has been held by the Evangelical Lutheran Church with more than 75% of the population (2014) being its followers. Currently, the Church is organized in one diocese, headed by Bishop of Iceland. Since 2012 the position has been held by a first-ever woman, Agnes M. Sigurdardottir. The organizational structure of the Church is based on nearly 280 congregations and about 160 pastors and deacons working in parishes, hospitals and other institutions. In conditions of specifically Icelandic localism many of the congregations are small - approximately 120 of them comprise less than 100 members. In addition to pastoral work most of the clergy are also engaged in social and educational activities involving various projects for children and youth, counselling and teaching. Furthermore, in most parishes there operate choirs with the total number of about 2,000 Icelanders

involved in them [Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, http://kirkjan.is/english/].

Table 1. Ten largest religious associations in Iceland in 2014.

No.	Name	Number of followers	Population (%)
1.	The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland	244 440	75.10
2.	The Roman Catholic Church Diocese	11 454	3.50
3.	The Free Lutheran Church in Reykjavik	9 386	2.90
4.	The Free Lutheran Church in Hafnarfjordur	6 221	1.90
5.	The Independent Congregation	3 312	1.00
6.	The Asatru Association	2 382	0.70
7.	The Pentecostal Assembly	2 075	0.60
8.	The Buddhist Association	964	0.30
9.	Seventh-day Adventists Church in Iceland	754	0.20
10.	Jehovah's Witnesses	688	0.20

Source: own study based on Statistic Iceland, [http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Religious-organizations, accessed 26.08.2015]

In fact, until the early twentieth century, the Evangelical Lutheran Church hold the 'monopoly' in reference to the Icelandic nation. It was only at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that some changes in the monolithic religious landscape of Iceland could be noticed [5, p. 235]. It was largely connected with the disclosed at the end of the nineteenth century harsh criticism of the National Church and the general religious situation in Iceland. More and more frequently a reform of the National Church, its renewal and breaking close relations with the Danish state administration were demanded. Ultimately it led to the establishment of the so-called Free Evangelical Lutheran Congregations, which were based essentially on the same doctrinal and ritual principles as the National Church. The establishment of the Free Churches was motivated mostly by nationalist movements, but in the creation of some of them an important role was also played by personal issues related to the dissatisfaction of some pastors with a failure to be appointed a specific Church positions (often pastors who were omitted when granting promotions left the National Church and set up their own congregations) [6]. Currently in Iceland apart from the National Church there function three Evangelical Free Church Congregations: the Free Lutheran Church in Reykjavik (with less than 3% of the faithful), the Free Lutheran Church in Hafnarfjordur (with almost 2% of the faithful) and the Independent Congregation (with approximately 1% of the faithful) [Statistic Iceland, http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Religious-organizations].

In recent decades, along with the development of globalization and migration processes, the religious landscape of the island has been further diversified (Table 1), so that today Iceland officially recognizes more than 40 religious organizations. At present (apart from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland) the greatest organizational structures and the highest number of

members on the island are associated with the Catholic Church. The Catholic religion has returned to Iceland in the late 1850s, when two French priests (Fr. Baudoin and Fr. Bernard) established on the island a mission dedicated to French sailors working in fishing in Icelandic coast [The Catholic Church in Iceland, Brief History of the Catholic Church in Iceland, http://en.catholica.is/history-of-the-catholic-church-in-iceland].

The development of organizational structures of Roman Catholic confessions took place, however, only at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, the Catholic Church in addition to their pastoral work, engaged itself in educational activities (erecting schools) and care for the infirm (running hospitals – the one built in Reykjavik by the Catholic Church in 1902 for many years was the largest hospital in Iceland). In the twentieth century the number of Catholics in Iceland grew very slowly. In 1960, members of the Catholic Church constituted only about half a percent of the population (897 people). In 1994, the number increased to 1% (2,535 people) [http://en.catholica.is/history-of-the-catholic-church-in-iceland]. It was not until the twenty-first century that a dramatic increase in the number of Catholics was observed on the island, which was associated with the influx of large numbers of immigrants from traditionally Catholic countries. According to official statistics, in 2014 the number of Catholics reached 11,454 people, representing 3.5% of the total population of the island. Church sources give data that approximately 70-75% of Catholics in Iceland are Polish immigrants. Religious life of the followers of the Catholic Church inhabiting Iceland revolves around the cathedral in Reykjavik (Christ the King Cathedral in Landakot) and five parishes that comprise the diocese based in Reykjavik. It is headed by Bishop Petur Burcher, who is of Swiss nationality, while the priests come from countries such as Iceland, Poland, Germany, France, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Ireland, Slovakia and Argentina [7].

Among other religious associations observed in the religious landscape of the island there should be enumerated: the Asatru Association, the Pentecostal Assembly, the Buddhist Association, Seventh-day Adventists Church in Iceland, Jehovah's Witnesses or the Muslim Association of Iceland.

Describing the religious landscape of Iceland one should pay attention to its specificity. It includes assemblies based on pagan beliefs. The best known and largest (representing the largest non-Christian religious group on the island) is the Asatru Association with over 2,300 members. The religious association, that worship the old Norse gods of the pre-Christian period, was set up in 1972, and in 1973 was officially recognized by the State of Iceland. The Asatru Association was conferred the same rights as granted to other religious associations, due to which the religious services rendered by them are binding and recognized by the state [8].

Registration of religious associations in Iceland falls under competences of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Several basic conditions need to be met by the association in order to be recognized by the state. First of all, the association must be "a religious community with a core of practicing believers that can be recognized as a part of or related to a world religion that has historical or cultural

roots". In addition, the community aspiring to official recognition by the state must meet on a regular basis, it must be rooted in the Icelandic society and its members have to pay taxes in Iceland.

For registration the following specific information is required by the state:

1. the name of the religious association and its address;
2. a list of members, their addresses and identity numbers;
3. doctrines and connection with other religions or religious movements;
4. laws and regulations concerning its financial matters;
5. the names of board members and the leader;
6. activities of the religious association such as regular religious gatherings or anything confirming that it operates continuously.

Prior to the official registration by the Ministry of Internal Affairs a special committee of three academics from the University of Iceland must give their approval: one is from the Faculty of Theology and Religion, one from the Faculty of Social Science and one from the Faculty of Law, the last one being the chairman of the committee [9]. Generally it is noticed that Iceland has a liberal system of recognition of religious associations [1].

With regard to the religious life of Icelandic society it is often emphasized that in terms of religious beliefs Icelanders resemble more peoples of North America or European Catholic countries rather than the Nordic ones. In this context, it has been indicated that in Iceland in comparison with other Scandinavian countries, more people believe in God and declare that they find serenity and strength in religion (Table 2) [5, 10].

Table 2. Religiosity of people in seven Western countries in 1990.

Country	**Iceland**	**Denmark**	**Sweden**	**France**	**Spain**	**Ireland**	**USA**
Questions	(%)						
Religious person	75	73	31	51	66	72	84
Belief in God	85	64	45	62	86	98	96
Belief in life after death	81	34	38	44	52	83	78
Find comfort and strength in religion	75	27	26	36	59	83	80

Source: [5, p. 234]

Nonetheless, in recent years Icelandic society underwent the process of atheization. The survey carried out by Gallup International shows that in 2012 only 57% of Icelanders assessed themselves as religious, while approximately 10% defined themselves as 'avowed atheists', which classified Iceland to the group of 10 most atheistic societies of the world [Global Index of Religion and Atheism - 2012, WIN-Gallup International, http://www.wingia.com/web/files/news/14/file/14.pdf].

It is relevant to note, however, that Icelanders are characterized by a specific approach to religion. Many years of research on the island carried out by Richard F. Tomasson showed that Icelanders are a highly materialistic society, practically oriented, and even secular, and at the same deeply religious in their own way. According to the researcher, religiosity of the residents of Iceland is marked with rationalism and tolerance, as well as rejection of dogmatism [4]. Therefore, religion in Iceland is regarded as a private matter of an individual, and thus issues of faith usually do not occupy an important place in public or political discourse. In words of one of Icelandic scientists: "Religion has never been the subject of dispute in the nation. Religion is for priests, and work for the people." [11] It seems that the islanders treat religion in a very individual way, eschewing its institutionalization. Therefore, although the majority of Icelanders receive the major sacraments, the attendance at religious services is low (already in the 1990s only 10% of the adult population declared participation in the church service once a month), and churches are generally filled with the believers only at important holidays.

4. The evolution of State-Church relations

Almost throughout the twentieth century the National Church of Iceland enjoyed a strong social and political position. It stemmed, on the one hand, from the cultural homogeneity of the Icelandic society, and on the other one, it was conditioned by the important role that the Church played in the state formation process. In certain respects, a parallel situation took place in Poland with regard to the Catholic Church, which especially due to its opposition activities in the era of the Polish People's Republic, after the political transformation gained large political influence [12, 13]. When Iceland became fully independent (after the ultimate annulment of the 1918 personal union with Denmark in 1944) the strong position of the National Church was officially confirmed on June 17, 1944 in the adopted Constitution of the Republic of Iceland. Article 62 of the Constitution proclaims that: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the State Church in Iceland and, as such, it shall be supported and protected by the State. This may be amended by law." [Constitution of the Republic of Iceland, http://www.government.is/constitution/] In order to change the status of the National Church it is required to conduct in this regard a national referendum. It is stipulated in Art. 79 of the Constitution, which states directly: "If Althingi passes an amendment to the status of the Church under Article 62, it shall be submitted to a vote for approval or rejection by secret ballot of all those eligible to vote" [http://www.government.is/constitution/]. The amendment which would enable to cancel the status of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the state church was made to the earlier, imposed by the Danish, the Icelandic constitution of 1874 in 1915 when issues concerning the relations between the State Church and the Danish administrations were the subject of fierce political debate [9]. The Constitution of 1944 repeats this provision. The procedure to carry out such a change is not easy, because it requires not only to be supported

by the majority in the Althing, but also by the majority of citizens eligible to vote.

In the new republican political system the National Church is headed by President of Iceland, who together with the minister in charge of Church affairs, must be officially a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

At the same time, in line with the standards of modern democratic states, the Icelandic basic law includes also provisions on freedom and religious liberty as well as equality of rights. They are stipulated in Art. 63, 64 and 65. In accordance with Art. 63 "All persons have the right to form religious associations and to practice their religion in conformity with their individual convictions. Nothing may however be preached or practised which is prejudicial to good morals or public order." Article 64 provides that "No one may lose any of his civil or national rights on account of his religion, nor may anyone refuse to perform any generally applicable civil duty on religious grounds. Everyone shall be free to remain outside religious associations. No one shall be obliged to pay any personal dues to any religious association of which he is not a member." And Art. 65 stipulates that: "Everyone shall be equal before the law and enjoy human rights irrespective of sex, religion, opinion, national origin, race, colour, property, birth or other status" [http://www.government.is/constitution/].

As already mentioned, the demands to separate Church and the State emerged in Iceland at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century. At that time, however, they were primarily associated with the bid to gain independence of the Icelandic church from the Danish government. In the first decades of the twentieth century, also the Church authorities demanded greater autonomy of Church structures from the state and postulated for the establishment of an independent body - Church Assembly, which would decide on all Church affairs. A substitute of such a body - an Advisory Church Council (Kirkjurad) was established in 1930, and only in 1957 there was established an advisory body to parliament on Church affairs - Church Assembly (Kirkjuthing). The institution held authoritative power on typically ecclesiastical affairs (such as liturgy or church teaching). These collegial bodies comprised both clergy and laymen representing local communities. Since 1938 laymen have also participated in the election of the Bishop of Iceland, and since 1997 most of the members of the Church Assembly have constituted lay people (one among of whom is also elected the chairman) [9].

It was in the mid-1990s when the momentum of efforts to separate Church and State renewed in Iceland. In many environments, not only atheistic, the concept of a secular society in which no religious association or religion is to be promoted in the public sphere, especially in places such as kindergartens, schools or other similar public utility institutions was spread. Not infrequently there were adduced in this context arguments relating to the concept of human rights, the principles of equality and social pluralism. It got even to the point where the Asatru Association sued the State of Iceland, arguing that financial support for the National Church provided by the Icelandic authorities was not in compliance with the constitutional principle of equality of all people regardless

of their religion (after losing the case before the court of first instance and the Supreme Court the Asatru Association lodged a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg). At the same time the demands for the separation of Church and State were met with increasingly wider social acceptance. Surveys conducted by Gallup since 1994 showed that 51-74% of the Icelandic population were in favour of the separation of Church and State effected in any way [9].

Such a situation led to the first of many years major changes in the State-Church relations, which is widely recognized as a significant step towards the full separation of the two institutions. It was the reform of 1997 (no. 78/1997), which regulated both issues concerning church property as well as independence of Church from State. Under its provisions, on the one hand, the Church transferred its real property to the benefit of the state, in exchange for which the government agreed to pay salaries to clergymen. On the other hand, Church Assembly received full legislative power in ecclesiastical affairs, and executive and administrative powers in this matter were transferred from the Ministry responsible for Church affairs directly to the Office of Bishop. Therefore, as noted by a subject matter expert, Petur Petursson: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland was therefore not supposed to be a state church any more but an independent religious body – though still a National Church" [4]. This reform entailed significant changes in terms of the functioning of the National Church, its legal position and relations with state bodies. Under its provisions, the Evangelical Lutheran National Church gained the status of a specific and independent religious organization with a special relation with the state. As pointed out by Petrusson these changes were beneficial both for the state authorities and the Church. Government officials sought to part with the responsibility for the Church matters mainly for two reasons. Firstly, they were aware of their incompetence in terms of co-governance of the Church. Secondly, they knew that the privileged position of the National Church caused more and more problems and had been increasingly criticized as it was not in line with the principle of equality of religious communities. Similarly, some Church hierarchs were in favour of granting the Church greater independence from state authorities and from the Althing, arguing that the existing close relations made it difficult for the ecclesiastical structures to adapt to the new reality. They even pointed out that some members of the Althing and officials in the state apparatus not infrequently were either indifferent or downright hostile to the Church. At the same time, however, both the state and the church sought to maintain the principle of state aid for the National Church and its protection [9].

The reform of 1997 did not, however, give a definite end to the debate on the status of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and its relations with the state. The theme returned in a broader context of a need to reconstruct the political system of the Republic of Iceland, proposed in the circumstances of the political and economic crisis. At the end of 2008 Iceland, as a result of the turmoil in the global economy as well as inefficiently led economic policy, found itself in a deep economic crisis, which removed the Independence Party having ruled

uninterruptedly since 1991 from the position of power. In January 2009 the government of Prime Minister Geir Haarde collapsed and power was taken by leftist parties (Alliance and the Green Movement - Left), which subsequently won early elections in April 2009. The new leftist government of Iceland initiated work on a constitutional reform which was supposed to lead to a radical transformation of the political order. For this purpose, there was established the Constitutional Council, composed of people not previously involved in party and political life of the country, and it was supposed to draft a new constitution. Importantly, prepared by the Council and published in the summer of 2011 the draft constitution no longer contained the provisions on the protection and support of the National Church by the State. It did not also refer to the Christian foundations of the Icelandic nation (state and law). The draft was then put to a national referendum which was held on 20 October 2012. And while in general the proposal of the Constitutional Council, as the basis for a new constitution, gained acceptance of 64% of the voters, the question included in the referendum: *Would you like to see provisions in the new Constitution on an established (national) church in Iceland?* was answered positively by 51% of the voters (Table 3) [Statistic Iceland, http://www.statice.is/pages/2465]. It is all the more astonishing as the previously mentioned surveys conducted since the 1990s consistently demonstrated that, in accordance with the principle of equality in religious matters, slightly over half of the population of Iceland was in favour of the separation of Church and state. The hierarchy and those closely connected with the Church clearly interpreted such a result as public support for the maintenance of the constitutional article stipulating that the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the National Church and should be protected and supported by the State [4]. It should be noted, nonetheless, that voter turnout in the referendum as for Iceland was extremely low (less than 49%) [http://www.statice.is/pages/2465]. Finally, the process of the constitutional reform, based on the draft prepared by the Constitutional Council never eventuated.

Table 3. Results of the referendum of 20 October 2012.

Questions	Number of valid votes				Valid votes (%)			
	Total	Yes	No	Un-answered /void	Total	Yes	No	Un-answered /void
Do you wish the Constitution Council's proposals to form the basis of a new draft Constitution?	114570	73509	36302	4759	100.0	64.2	31.7	4.2
Would you like to see provisions in the new Constitution on an established (national) church in Iceland?	114570	58 455	43 914	12 201	100.0	51.0	38.3	10.6

Source: own study based on Statistic Iceland, http://www.statice.is/pages/2465, accessed 31.08.2015

Simultaneously, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, referring to the principles of equality and human rights, further steps were taken, which may be perceived as further loosening of relations between state and church, or more broadly state and religion. Thus, for example (which is especially important from a symbolic point of view) in 2010 the Ministry of Juridical and Church Affairs was renamed the Ministry of Juridical and Human Rights and since 2012 non-religious organisations, bringing together people with secular beliefs (such as the Secular Humanist organisation) may apply for registration under conditions similar to religious organizations, and thus may apply for participation in the religious tax levied and distributed by the state [4].

5. Conclusions

Summarizing the current reflections it should be noted that religion and the Church played a significant role in the history of Iceland. Their contribution was made in both the nation and state building processes, in shaping national culture, in the struggle to preserve national identity and to gain independence, as well as in the creation of modern Icelandic society. Therefore, religion may be regarded today (next to political activism and literary heritage) as one of the three main pillars of the Icelandic culture [14].

At the same time the establishment of the Protestantism on the island in the mid-sixteenth century resulted in strong connection and dependence of the institutional Church from state structures. Thanks to that, as well as to its independence activities and social functions, the Evangelical Lutheran Church gained in Iceland not only a strong social, but also political position. When Iceland became a fully independent state it was reflected in the provisions of adopted in 1944 Constitution of the Republic of Iceland, where Evangelical Lutheran Church was recognized as the state church and was officially granted support of state authorities.

In the last two decades, however, the close relations between the state and the National Church significantly loosened. It was due to several factors, the most important of which included: increasing religious pluralism of Icelandic society (largely as a result of the influx of immigrants from countries with different religious and cultural traditions), resulting in the occurrence in the religious landscape of the island of new religious communities and in greater attention paid, both by the authorities and the Icelandic society, to the issues of human rights and the principles of equality (also in the religious dimension). Iceland is a country where issues of religious minorities and religious freedom in recent years have gained importance [1]. In addition, the general attitude of Icelandic society to religion as a private matter of each individual is also conducive to the processes of separation of church and state. Therefore, as forecast by Petursson, in the near future one can expect in Iceland deepening separation of church and state, the process of which and its ultimate outcome will probably fall within the scope of interest of the mainstream public debate [9]. Today, after the implementation of the law on the National Church in 1997,

it is noted that the State-Church relations in Iceland have been located in the so-called 'collaboration model' and are closer to the Swedish/Finnish than the Danish/Norwegian model [1, 9]. Despite the changes in relations with the state and limitation of certain social and religious functions the Evangelical Lutheran Church is still the largest religious institution in the country, with privileges unavailable to any other religious association, relatively high (especially financial) support and assistance of the state. Christian values are still widely accepted in Icelandic society. The church represents a huge potential, which enables it flexible adaptation to changing conditions.

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