

# Halldór Laxness and the Politics of Paradise

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Some of the fundamental differences between the social organization of east Asia as opposed to that of the West may well lie at the heart of contrasting conceptions of ideal places. The word *ideal* while suggesting the best of all possible places is also inextricably associated with the concept of ideas, of mental activity, of purely spiritual reality. Although the word derives from the Greek *ιδέα* which itself derives from *εἶδω* meaning that which is seen, Plato used the word as a technical term denoting a universal as opposed to a particular. In a more modern context, Descartes, to cite a well known example, grounds reality in mental reflection, in reflection on ideation. But Leibniz's use of the term *idealisme* in his *Réponse aux réflexions de Bayle* (1702) established *idealisme* as a philosophic term for anti-materialist metaphysics, which was taken up by many of his contemporaries and has been firmly established as such ever since. Given the pervasiveness of anti-materialism deep in the foundations of western thought for more than two millennia, it is hardly surprising that ideal places have been associated with utopia, generally understood to mean no place. As Marin points out in his discussion of the publication of *De optimo Reipublicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia Libellus Vere Aureus*, a correct translation of the Greek of More's neologism *Utopia* ( $<\omicron\upsilon + \tau\omicron\pi\omicron\varsigma$ ) does not mean nowhere in the sense of a place that does not exist except in the mind of the author. Understood toponymically, it designates *a* no place, i.e. the radical ideational other of any place whose fundamental alterity cannot be annulled. ("Frontiers" 11).

By contrast east Asia has been relatively free of anti-materialist metaphysics. To the extent that much of east Asian social philosophy can be traced to Confucius and his followers, the emphasis has been far more on the cultivation of the individual as the basis of a just society.<sup>1</sup> Virtue—or however the vexingly rich and difficult idea of 仁 (Chinese: *ren*) is to be translated—is far more practical, this worldly, and situational than the Platonic concept of the πόλις, the ideal city. Kyoto, for example, modeled and built as an ideal city with the mountains to the north and east to protect it from evil spirits and a river flowing through the beneficent southern prospect, is the focal point of a rich cultural tradition of utopian think-

ing and an example of one possible result of eschewing the all too tempting flight into metaphysics that is inscribed in the foundation of so much western thinking.

The ideal place I wish to discuss is one that has a real existence in time and space, a literary existence in the fictional narrative, *Paradsarheimt* (*Paradise Reclaimed* as it is known in English) by the Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness, and an ideal and spiritual reality. The contrast between the community's efforts to create a heaven on earth as described in historical documents as opposed to Laxness's fictional account illustrates much about both nineteenth- as well as twentieth-century utopian strivings.

Perhaps one of the most notable characteristics of this community, Spanish Fork, Utah, is that by most standards nothing very remarkable ever happened there. In 1850, just three years after the first settlers—the Mormons—arrived in the valley of the Great Salt Lake, one of their number traveled to a more hospitable valley sixty-five miles to the south and laid claim to some land for farming. Shortly thereafter, others followed and a small fort, Fort St. Luke, was established. By 1855 the security of a frontier fort was no longer deemed necessary, so the Utah Territorial Legislature granted the community of Spanish Fork a charter. Like hundreds of other communities scattered from Canada in the north through the United States' intermountain west to Mexico in the south, Spanish Fork grew relatively rapidly as immigrants left their homes, mostly in Europe and the eastern United States, and settled in the Rocky Mountains.

The driving force behind this immigration was the idea of gathering to Zion to build the kingdom of God on earth. The idea of establishing Zion was taken in part from the Hebrew Bible by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon faith, and elaborated by his successor, Brigham Young.<sup>2</sup> As early as 1831, Joseph Smith taught that Jerusalem needed to be restored to its former glory and that Palestine was to be recognized as a homeland for the Jews, while at the same time a New Jerusalem was to be established on the American continent.<sup>3</sup> At its founding, the fledgling church met with opposition and persecution that drove adherents from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. After a brief period of relative peace, persecution once again arose. Following the martyrdom of Joseph Smith in 1844, Brigham Young led the faithful on a trek of more than a thousand miles into the largely uncharted wilderness to the desolate valley of the Great Salt Lake. There the pioneers, who had driven teams of oxen or walked pulling handcarts, built homes hoping not only to be free from persecution but also, under divine guidance, to establish a community of peace and material prosperity, to build the City of God, and to establish the New Zion. This idea of heaven on earth presupposes a conception of perfection in another sphere and at the same time the belief in the human capacity to build on earth a likeness or type of the transcendental that is neither demeaned nor debased.<sup>4</sup>

Of this enterprise as it relates to the Mormons, Harold Bloom notes, “Nothing else in all of American history strikes me as *materia poetica* equal to the early Mormons, to Joseph Smith. Brigham Young, Parley and Orson Pratt, and the men and women who were their followers and friends” (79).

In 1861, George A[lbert] Smith, a close associate of both Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, provided a particularly telling description of the view within the Mormon community during much of the nineteenth century of this effort to build the City of God:

Our toilsome journey across the Plains, the difficulties we had to encounter in making a settlement, were such as are unparalleled in the history of mankind, rendered so by the necessity of conveying our provisions over a desert for upwards of a thousand miles. You may search the history of the whole habitable globe in vain to find a parallel. We were guided by the hand of the Lord from the beginning of this great work. This people commenced to radiate forth from this place [Salt Lake City], cities began to rise up, Branches were organized, new towns sprang up into being, new valleys have been and still are being discovered, and other advantages gained up to the present moment, with a corresponding ratio of increase which is truly astonishing. . . . You might inquire into the condition of other valleys, and you would be invariably told that the whole country was a barren desert. This was the case with Spanish Fork and various other places that are now the most fertile. The Lord has opened our eyes, that we can see and understand the nature of the facilities that surround us, that we produce the finest of grain, and make ourselves happy. (*Journal of Discourses* 9: 66–7)

In addition to the first-hand description of the sacrifices required to reach and settle the wilderness and the specific reference to the community of Spanish Fork, several important aspects of the dynamics of transforming the wilderness into an ideal place—making it blossom as a rose—can be inferred.<sup>5</sup> The ideal community consists of God’s opening the eyes of those who had gathered to Zion, an outwardly desolate and inhospitable place, to its hidden resources, indeed its true nature. This divine guidance coupled with hard work led to two notable results: economic prosperity—“we produce the finest grain”—as well as felicity and a sense of well-being. Indeed, economic prosperity and deserved contentment were not only important aspect of a widely held concept of Zion, but also sure signs of God’s continuing beneficence and favor.<sup>6</sup>

A more comprehensive and theologically based description of what Zion meant to nineteenth-century Mormons centers on the idea of people living and laboring together as equals in a spirit of love. They would have all things in common and

work together as equals. Each would contribute to the common good according to individual talents and receive in turn that which is necessary for well-being according to individual circumstances, wants, and needs. They would enjoy the fulness of life or happiness in the highest degree possible on earth. To create such a society required significant commitment, but the rewards were thought to outstrip by far any sacrifices or accommodations that needed to be made.

During the nineteenth century, several communities tried to live these principles in their most comprehensive form with varying degrees of success, but more typically communities lived a modified and less rigorous version that Brigham Young introduced and saw as a preparatory step toward the ideal society. Spanish Fork was among the earliest and most successful communities to adopt the United Order as the plan was known. The United Order centered on the establishment of cooperative enterprises in an effort to come near to the realization of an ideal community on earth and to achieve a very high degree of economic self-sufficiency. In January of 1867 the Spanish Fork Cooperative was established and in many respects served as the prototype of many later similar institutions that sprang up in Mormon communities. These cooperatives were soon thereafter combined into what was known as Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution—ZCMI—which survives to this day, but more or less as a typical upscale American department store. On May 2, 1874, the first steps in establishing a cooperative store and organized the community under officially sanctioned guidelines of United Order were taken. The economic goals included relative income equality, group self-sufficiency, and the elimination of poverty. The citizens of Spanish Fork were committed to the principles but found it difficult to implement the required changes in their way of life. The financial ledger at the close of 1874 showed a positive balance of \$3.14, but three years later that balance had grown to a more respectable \$314.41. In many respects their efforts must be counted a success, but following the death of Brigham Young in 1877 and the growth of political pressure for the Mormons to become more fully assimilated in American society, the United Orders gradually began to transform themselves into more typically American communities. Vestiges of the United Order in Spanish Fork, however, lasted well into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Halldór Laxness's novel, *Paradísarheimt*, that describes certain aspects of Spanish Fork's experience with the United Order begins in the spring of 1874—just as the United Order was being established in Spanish Fork—when Steinar Steinsson rides from his home to Þingvellir to meet the king of Denmark at a special meeting of the Alþingi commemorating the thousandth anniversary of the settlement of Iceland.<sup>8</sup> Notably the fictional beginning of the novel and the historical establishment of the United Order in Spanish Fork are precisely contemporaneous.

Laxness, born in Reykjavík in 1902, has long had a strong commitment to



social justice and been an articulate spokesman for the fundamentally utopian conviction that things can be better. When he first left Iceland for Europe in the early 1920s, he was appalled at the hunger and misery he observed following World War I but was even more distressed by ostentatious displays of riches by the wealthy few and the use of public funds for ultimately vain, self-serving, and meaningless monuments. Alarmed by the shameful disgraces of unbridled capitalism, he was drawn to Roman Catholicism, eventually converted, and spent time at the Benedictine monastery of Saint Maurice de Clairvaux in Luxemburg preparatory to his ordination to the Catholic priesthood. His novel *Vefarinn mikli frá Kasmír* is the most eloquent articulation of his social consciousness informed by the Catholic tradition. He was, however, not ordained but traveled instead to the United States, where he lived in California from 1927 to 1929 and became a friend and supporter of Upton Sinclair. From his friend, he drew support for his condemnation of social injustice and learned of the political power of the novel. He returned to Iceland where he nurtured a growing sympathy for socialism. He visited the Soviet Union during the winter of 1937–38 and was heartened by the aspiration of the Soviet state, particularly because he saw it as the only viable alternative in Europe to the rising fascist tide. He wrote monumental cycles of novels—*Salka Valka*, *Sjálstott folk*, (*Independent People*) *Ljós heimsins* (*World Light*), and the trilogy consisting of *Islandsklukkan*, *Hið ljósa man*, and *Eldur í Kaupinhafn*—exploring the ameliorations of a host of social ills. In 1955, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature as an author whose works were prime examples of literature of an “idealistic tendency” as Alfred Nobel’s will dictates. The prize, as is often the case, gave him international visibility and a new degree of credibility. Since that time, however, he has publicly denounced doctrinaire Communism and become more sympathetic toward western-style democracies. In a letter to his old friend, Upton Sinclair, dated March 9, 1957, he explains that he had never really been a Communist—and incidently had never won the Stalin Prize although that honor was frequently mentioned in the press—but was rather a left-leaning socialist. He then notes: “If Socialism does not mean the well-being of people, it means nothing at all” (*Gjörningbók* 181). This observation in a myriad of variations and repeated many times during the last forty years offers considerable insight into Laxness’s hopes of social justice and fascination with utopian strivings.<sup>9</sup>

Laxness came to write *Paradísarheimt* precisely as a result of his profound commitment to what appears to him as the fundamentally human hope that things can be better. The plot is based on a picaresque story written by the Icelandic farmer Eiríkur Ólafsson á Brúnum (1832–1900) who had converted to Mormonism, emigrated to Utah, lived in Spanish Fork, but became disillusioned and returned to Iceland.<sup>10</sup> In a pamphlet that accompanied the American edition of the novel, “The

Origin of *Paradise Reclaimed*,” Laxness explains,

In the fall 1927, confronted with the straight up-and-down, stern, and simple forms of the Mormon Temple of Salt Lake City, and the flat Tabernacle opposite made to look like the Mouth of God, this random reading of my boyhood, the story of the long peregrinations of the little man through the kingdoms of the world in search of the Promised Land and the still more hazardous adventure of his poor family who set off to join him later, all this was brought to my mind again, this time with a force of reality that did not leave me in peace for over thirty years. (6)

Thus with a gestation of period of the numerologically significant thirty-three years, the novel appeared in Icelandic in 1960 and in an English translation in 1962. But something more powerful than the force of place and the recollection of boyhood reading gave rise to this novel. With arresting clarity, Laxness notes:

Many readers have asked what could have moved me, a man from faraway parts, born and bred in Iceland, to write a novel with the center of its plot laid in Utah. It is all very simple. Many of use are to some extent believers in a Promised Land where truth and happiness shall prevail forever; and even if we do not believe it ourselves, we think it wonderful when other people do so. This wonderland is not primarily of a geographical nature, although it might coincide with a geographical location. What is still more wonderful, its truth is above facts, though some facts might in certain cases harmonize with it. Perhaps it is one of the fundamental ideas inborn in humanity that such a place should exist. Some birds, too, have this idea and maybe some fishes. A certain type of realist, commonly called an idealist, constantly tries to wed this dream to geography and its truth to facts. There have been many attempt at this in the world, some of them crowning with considerable success. (3–4)

What must be particularly noted is Laxness’s explicit divorce of the Promised Land from geographical considerations; the Promised Land, the name notwithstanding, is not generally a specific place. Its truth, moreover, is not susceptible to empirical investigation and is not well accommodated by ordinary categories of judgment. It is precisely a marvel, an amazement, a source of awe; it is a wonderland and wonderful in the most basic sense. In that it is above facts, it is in between affirmation and negation and does not admit of a truth asserted in terms of affirmations and negations.<sup>11</sup>

*Paradísarheimt* begins with an account of Steinar Steinsson trip to Þingvellir to give the king of Denmark a particularly fine Icelandic horse. There for the first time he encounters a Mormon who had returned to Iceland to tell his compatriots about the revelation from God that “leiddi síðan mormóna með beinni opinberum

til fyrirheitna landsins sem er guðs bústaður og konúngsríki helgra manna af næstum dögum í Saltsjódal” (32) [“showed the Mormons the way to the Promised Land which is God’s home and the kingdom of the Latter-Day [sic] Saints in the Salt Lake Valley (30)”]. Although Steinar befriends the Mormon, he thinks little of his message. Later, though, he goes to Copenhagen to visit the horse he had given the king, meets this missionary, accepts his message archetypically while drinking the remarkable water that flows from Kristine Piil spring in a tranquil grove of trees.<sup>12</sup> It is said that,

*Hver sem bergir á þessu vatni og horfir mót sólu um leið, han mun á þeirri stund fá nokkurn forboða uppheimalífs, en þó einkum sæla aðkenning algleymis sem frá segir í bókum Austurlanda. Verða þó eigi með jarðneskum vísindum skýgreind frumefni þessa vatns, né in heldur bent á hvaðan sá stóri þrífnaðarauki kann að berast sem býr í vatninu. Verður mönnum því að lofa alnáttúruna og blessa hennar smíð af bergíngu svaladrykks er þar stökkur af grjóti. (133–4)*

Whoever sips this water and looks towards the sun at the same time is granted at that moment a glimpse of celestial life, but more particularly a blissful foretaste of the nirvana that is described in the books of the East. It is beyond our mortal ken to analyse the elements of this water or to define whence its healing properties arise; one can only praise Nature and bless her creator at the taste of the refreshing drink that gushes from the rock. (117)

Steinar decides to emigrate to the Promised Land planning to send for wife and children once he had established a home for them in Zion.

When Steinar finally reaches Utah, he is sent to Spanish Fork where he is taken in by the Icelandic community that had already been established. He marvels at the prosperity of the community, which is described with gentle satiric humor as a manifestation of the hand of God.

*Risnar voru þær menníngarstofnanir sem gera sveit að borg: sammkunduhaus, pósthósti og búð. Guð (samvinnuverslunarstofnun Siónborgar) átti búðina. Auga hans bar malað yfir búðardyrnar, umleikið geislum sem vorum einsog broddar á ígulkeri, og þessi orð “heilagur sé drottinn”. . . . Öll tilhögun fyrirskipuð af hálfu kirkjustjórnarinnar . . . þá vitnaði alt í senn . . . um handleiðslu drottins og það sem kallað er kórrétt hugsun. Alt sem mönnum hlotnaðist og áskotnaðist sýndi að kenníngin átti upptök sín í alheimslöggmálinu. Nýir skór og hattur var lofgerðarefni um kirkju helgra manna af hinum næstum dögum og forsagnir hinna miklu leiðtoga. (161–2)*

The cultural institutions that transform a village into a town were

already in existence: a community centre, Post Office, and a shop. God (in the person of Zion's Co-operative Mercantile Institution) owned the shop. His eye was painted over the shop-doors, surrounded by rays like the spines of a sea-urchin, and the slogan, "Holy is the Lord". . . . All the arrangements prescribed by the Church authorities . . . bore witness . . . that the doctrine had its origin in cosmic law. New shoes and a new hat were matter for eulogising the Church of the Latter-day Saints and the prophecies of the great leaders. (140)

Steinar formally joins the Mormon Church and assumes the anglicized name Stone P. Stanford, which reaffirms and, perhaps, amplifies the affiliation of his true nature with stone, which his Icelandic name indicated. The denotation of his new given name is obvious, but the middle initial—P.—about whose origin no one was sure invites consideration. Although the novel never says so specifically, Peter or a derivative thereof which ultimately derives from the Greek *πέτρα* meaning stone or rock is a logical possibility. The New Testament associations with the name Peter as the apostle upon whom the church was to be built resound. Peter is also the apostle through whom, according to the Gospel of Matthew (16: 13–19), the revelation of the divinity of Jesus crossed from heaven to earth: hence the family name Stanford, literally *stone crossing* in Old English.<sup>13</sup> Consistent with this name, Steinar takes up the profession of a brick maker and mason. The English word *brick*, however, loses some of the force of the Icelandic from which it is translated: although it is in some instances translated from the Icelandic cognate for brick, it is also translated from *múrsteinn* (*múrr* = wall, *steinn* = stone) which clearly marks the proximity of brick to stone and extends the significance and associative possibilities of his name and profession. The adobe bricks he forms and leaves in the sun to bake are remarkably regular and much in demand. In them are combined clay and straw—mineral and vegetable elements of the earth—which are in turn fused and made hard by the light of the sun, a common image at least since Plato of the divine. The bricks thus fashioned link Steinar by way of personal name and productive capacity to the concept of Zion as George A. Smith described it in terms of the combination of the secrets of the earth, human labor, and divine guidance.<sup>14</sup>

Steinar determines that he can make even better bricks if he learns to lay bricks which he does with extraordinary skill. As a result he soon has more money than he had ever had before in his life and advances rapidly the hierarchy of the church. With the money he has earned, he was able to pay the fare for his family to join him in Spanish Fork, where he wanted to install them in the large and well furnished home he had built for them from his own adobe bricks. But when they arrive, he sadly learns that his wife died at sea and his daughter, raped aboard ship, is pregnant. With polygamy not only accepted but a sacred obligation, his daughter readily

becomes the fourth wife of the local bishop, and Steinar marries and brings earthly honor, acceptance, and eternal glory to a woman who had been an outsider to the community. He accepts a call to return to Iceland to tell the story of Zion built in the tops of the Rocky Mountains and finds, contrary to his expectation, nothing but indifference on the part of his compatriots. Encountering neither the opposition that could have made him a martyr or at least a knight of faith nor acceptance, he returns to his farm. It is badly rundown from years of neglect. He almost instinctively starts picking up the stones that have rolled down from the mountain to repair the dilapidated walls. A passer-by asks him who he is and what he is doing. His response is telling:

*Ég er sá maður sem heimti aftur Paradís eftur að hún hafði leingi verið týnd, og gaf hana börnum sínum.*

*Hvað er slíkur maður að vilja hér, spurði vegfarandinn.*

*Ég hef fundið sannleikann og það land þar sem hann býr áréttaði vegghleðslumaðurinn. Það er áð vísu allmikils vert. En nú skiftir mestu máli að reisa við aftur þennan vallargarð. (300–1)*

“I am the man who reclaimed Paradise after it had been lost, and gave it to his children.” “What is such a man doing here?” asked the passer-by.

“I have found the truth, and the land it lives in,” said the wall-builder, correcting himself. “And that is assuredly very important. But now the most important thing is to build up this wall again. (254)

This ending, that echoes *Candide*’s famous final words, “il faut cultiver notre jardin,” has typically been taken as utter disillusionment tantamount to a rejection of Steinar’s earlier faith and paradisiacal vision. Although much links Voltaire’s *conte* to *Paradísarheimt*, the temptation to derive a sense of isolation and futility from the parallelism of the endings too neatly resolves Voltaire’s wonderfully enigmatic, polyvalent conclusion and undervalues the power of the possessive pronoun *notre* to posit an ongoing community.<sup>15</sup> Attempts to equate Steinar’s return to his farm with Laxness’s disillusionment with Soviet communism are, moreover, from a methodological point of view ill-conceived. Although the general relevance of Laxness’s rejection of communism for a broad understanding of his work need not be denied, the suggestion of such a simple one to one correspondence is a failure to understand and appreciate the complexity and richness of an author’s relationship with the text. With specific reference to utopian writers, Manuel and Manuel rightly note:

One of the most prickly tasks for the commentator on utopia is to assess the commitment of a utopian author to his own work. Appraisals range from the mere *jeu d’esprit* through rhetorical *decalmatio* as a didactic device, from utopia as wish rather than anticipation to zealous

conviction of the need for or expectation of the total implementation of the utopian principles on the morrow or at most the day after. When the utopian is torn by doubts, on the manifest or covert level, an evaluation becomes acutely problematic. (27–8)

Little in the text of the novel, moreover, justifies a reading that ends in regret and disillusionment. Steinar is in Iceland proselyting for the cause that had taken him to Spanish Fork in the first place. He experiences disappointment at the indifference of his fellow Icelanders but never explicitly or even implicitly repudiates his faith, although he has seen its strengths as well as its weaknesses: he found a truth and knows where it is to be found. Commentators—Hallberg, Keel, Sønnerholm, and Friese for example—who insist on seeing a broken and disillusioned man, may be unduly influenced by the historical antecedent of the novel: Eiríkur Ólafsson á Brúnum did in fact renounce his faith and mocked his experience. Strong traditional generic conventions, which are applied uncritically, also suggest disillusionment. Manuel and Manuel note: “Utopians are almost always tragic or tragicomic figures who die unfulfilled: the future does not begin to conform to their fantasy” (27). More recently Bernard Levin has written: “We *can* enter [Utopias], but there is an immense entry fee; it is called disillusion, and only those who are wealthy enough to pay the impost in Fool’s Gold (for ordinary money does not suffice) may cross the threshold of certain disappointment, and perhaps even never find the way out (xiv). Steinar’s experience with the Mormons in Utah has not been entirely positive nor presented uncritically. A rigorous fundamentalism seems almost fanatical; social and doctrinal rigidity have led to uncharitable behavior; and the commitment of the church and the community to polygamy has been difficult. The fact that Steinar is not beaten when he returns to Iceland as a missionary as had happened to prior missionaries is portrayed more as disinterested passivity on the part of his countrymen than a commendable open-mindedness.

En er mormóninn hefur upp boðskap taka menn því af blíðlegu tómlæti einsog var í móð hjá ossum löndum í fornsögunum er þeir tóku trú ókunnna, áriðl þúsand, og tóku þó ekki, af, því þeir nentu ekki að þræta; eða settust niður og bundu skópveingi sína, af því þeir nentu ekki að flýa, ef þeir voru ofruliði bornir í orustu. (299)

(But when the Mormon began to preach it was received with the kind of amiable indifference that was in fashion amongst our compatriots in the Sagas when they accepted an unknown faith in the years 1000, and yet did not accept, because they could not be bothered to argue; or when they sat down and tied their shoelaces because they could not be bothered to flee when they were overcome in battle. (252–3)

The paragraph ends with the explanation that wrestling with a lot of wool when it is



not even in sacks is no fun.

Deep resonances in the Icelandic title, however, suggest a kind of closure that it neither naively and uncritically optimistic nor unjustifiably dejected. The verb *heimta*, whose past participle is *heimt* of the title, *Paradísarheimt*, means to recover or reclaim, but also in the word are resonances of the noun *heima* meaning home. Etymologically the verb suggests the idea of fetching or bringing home. Steinar must thus reject the idea that he laid claim to paradise, that it is his to hold and to bequeath. The reclaimed paradise must be understood as a paradise that is brought home, that is brought to one's dwelling place, and that is associated with what is most intimate and inaccessible to others. Accordingly in his account of the origin of *Paradise Reclaimed*, Laxness rejected the concept of an ideal being linked too intimately to topology, geography, or categories of empirical judgment. Steinar has won a truth but not necessarily any facts. Paradise is an ideal but not an ideal place.

Martin Buber's considerations of the nature of Zion are instructive in this context. A series of lectures given in Jerusalem and published in Hebrew in 1944 first appeared in an English translation in 1952 under the title *On Zion: The History of an Idea*. Eventually they were published in German in a volume of addresses and articles on Jewish topics entitled *Der Jude und sein Judentum*, which Buber considered an augmentation of his *Werke* published between 1962 and 1964. As early as 1929, Buber had reminded fellow Zionists that Zion is more than a nation but is the Kingdom of God over all mankind. Later in the book, a chapter devoted to Ahad-Ha'am, the pseudonym for Asher Ginzberg, Buber explores the doctrine of the center. The foundation of a state was necessary as the organic center of world-wide association of Jews. Zion, though, had long since ceased being exclusively and narrowly a geographical term or a poetic metaphor. Rather,

“wer Zion liebt, liebt eine mögliche Vollkommenheit und ist in die Pflicht genommen, dazu zu helfen, daß diese Möglichkeit zur Wirklichkeit werde. . . . Von dieser Arbeit und von dieser Hingabe der Zion Liebenden muß die Umwandlung des Volkes ausgehen. Das Volk soll Zion lieben lernen; solange dies fehlt, «fehlt uns die Grundlage, auf der allein das Land wiedererbaut werden kann». (433–4)

Not too long after Steinar would have returned to Iceland, the Mormon concept of Zion began to evolve and become more comprehensive in a way that is similar to the development of the concept of Zion that Buber describes. Once the continued existence of the church was no longer seriously in question and a center was secure, the admonition to emigrate to Utah—to gather to Zion in a literal and geographic sense—was replaced with the council to stay at home and establish Zion throughout the world as expression of charity and an undeviating commitment to the perfectibility of every individual. Although the concept of Zion as an ideal *place*

became an ideal defined in terms of purity of heart and oneness of mind, the center place—the City in a High Place, the new Jerusalem, the City of God—would stand as sustaining point of reference, a ground, and an ultimate foundation.

## Notes

1. Exceptions, to be sure, can be found especially in traditions influenced by neo-Confucianism or Taoism. Wing-Tsit Chan's description of specifically Chinese philosophy, though, illustrates a more general tendency. "Chinese philosophers, both ancient and modern, have been interested primarily in ethical, social, and political problems. Metaphysics developed only after Buddhism from India had presented a strong challenge to Confucianism. Even then, basic metaphysical problems, such as God, universals, space and time, matter and spirit, were either not discussed, except in Buddhism, or discussed only occasionally, and then always for the sake of ethics. Discussions have been unsystematic, seldom based on hypothesis and logical analysis, for Chinese philosophers have always shunned abstraction and generalities and have always been interested more in a good life and a good society than in organized knowledge" (132).
2. See for example Jeremiah 31: 1–12: "1 At the same time, saith the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. 2 Thus saith the LORD, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest. 3 The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee. 4 Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. 5 Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things. 6 For there shall be a day, [that] the watchmen upon the mount Ephraim shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the LORD our God. 7 For thus saith the LORD; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, O LORD, save thy people, the remnant of Israel. 8 Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither. 9 They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. ¶ 10 Hear the word of the LORD, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock. 11 For the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of him that was stronger than he. 12 Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the LORD, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all." Although other such biblical passages could be noted, the most important sources of the idea is to be found in the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants.
3. Revelation 23: 2–3 "And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their

God.”

4. Manuel and Manuel see the Judeo-Christian conception of heaven on earth along with the Hellenic concept of the ideal city built without the help of divinity and often in direct opposition to divine wishes as the foundation of western utopian thought. They continue, “The relation of the utopian to the heavenly always remains problematic. Utopia may be conceived as a prologue or a foretaste of the absolute perfection still to be experienced; it then resembles the Days of the Messiah or the Reign of Christ on earth of traditional Judaism and Christianity, with the vital addition of human volition as an ingredient in the attainment of the wished-for state. Or the utopia, though originally implanted in a belief in the reality of a transcendental state, can break away from its source and attempt to survive wholly on its own creative self-assurance. Whether the persistence of the heavenly vision in a secularized world, if only in some disguised shape, is a necessary condition for the duration of utopia is one of the unresolved questions of Western culture” (17).
5. Isaiah 35: 1–2: “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the LORD, and the excellency of our God.”
6. Echoes of Max Weber’s studies in the sociology of religion as explicated particularly in the first volume of his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, the first part of which was translated into English under the title *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, can certainly be heard.
7. See in this regard Arrington, Fox, and May’s *Building the City of God: Community & Cooperation Among the Mormons* for a detailed account with an extensive bibliography of Mormon communitarianism during the nineteenth century. See also Arrington’s earlier *Great Basin Kingdom: An Economic History of the Latter-day Saints*.
8. Kumar and Bann assemble several engaging articles dealing with the close but ambivalent relationship of utopianism and millennialism.
9. McTurk’s translation from Swedish of Peter Hallberg’s biography is the best generally accessible introduction to Laxness’s works from a biographical point of view. Wilhelm Friese’s recent (August 1995) *Halldór Laxness: Die Romane: Eine Einführung* is a competent treatment of the novels from a biographical, stylistic, and broadly ideological point of view.
10. *Lítill ferðasaga* (1878) and *Önnur Lítill ferðasaga* (1882)
11. Marin touches briefly on this line of thinking in “Frontiers” but had developed the it in considerable detail in his earlier *Utopiques* (1972) and more recently in *Lectures traversières* (1992).
12. The close connection between drinking water from a secluded and protected spring and spiritual experience have numerous parallels in both the eastern (for example the Taoist concept of 壺天 [hu tian]) and the western tradition. The New Testament account of Jesus at Jacob’s well (John 4: 4–42) is particularly relevant. Note particularly verse 14: “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”
13. Matthew 16: 13–19 “When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto

him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." See also Tate "Eldorado."

14. The metaphor could well be compared to Goethe's evocation of Faust's rehabilitation and passage to a higher level of existence in the first scene of Part Two, "Anmutige Gegend." There Faust awakening from a healing sleep first looks directly into the rising sun but turns away confessing he cannot endure its brilliance. He then sees a rainbow in the mist arising from a waterfall. The light coming from the realm of absolutes symbolized by the sun is refracted or even mixed with matter creating the colorful display. Faust then understands, "Am farbigen Abglanz haben wir das Leben" (l. 4727), that is in the fusion of the earthly and the divine.
15. See especially Tate for a discussion of Laxness's literary debt to Voltaire.

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