Grundtvig's Relevance Today: The Current Debate

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Hardly any individual has meant more to Denmark and the Danes than Grundtvig. But lately he has suffered a fall from grace in public opinion. Why is this and what does it mean to Grundtvig and to Danish society?

First I must say that it is an honor and a pleasure for me to have been invited to the Danish American Heritage Conference at Grand View College to address this very distinguished audience about Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig. The Danish poet, pastor, educationalist, and politician who has meant a lot to this particular place. And who, no matter what, has meant more to Denmark and the Danish than both his contemporaries—in these days, the most celebrated H. C. Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard—ever did.

I am fully aware that this might be a rather provocative way to put it, and that it might stir some irritation among members of the honored audience, but so be it. One of Grundtvig's important contributions to our culture is the recognition that discussion and disagreement can be very productive indeed, when it comes to reaching new insights and a better understanding of your own position.

So in this truly grundtvigian respect, the aim of my provocation is wholly constructive, and I intend in no way, whatsoever, to diminish the importance of Andersen and Kierkegaard, these two great geniuses of Danish and European culture. I am also painfully aware that in a recent poll in one of the leading Danish newspapers, Andersen was elected the greatest Dane of all times—and this almost without competition—followed by Niels Bohr, A.P. Møller, Søren Kierkegaard, H.C. Ørsted, and as number six, Grundtvig. A fall from grace, I must say. Ten or twenty years ago he would have been the undisputed number one. I have no doubt about that, whatsoever.
But nevertheless, Grundtvig has put his own distinguished mark upon us Danes, as individuals and as a people. He has in various, strange, and not always traceable ways touched upon our lives, even before we became conscious of him being present in our common history. And I believe that some of you might agree with me in this: he has done it in such a way that in order to understand Denmark and the Danish, you will have to understand N.F.S. Grundtvig. Or perhaps this is too ambitious a way to put it, because many Danes have never really understood Grundtvig. They have heard about him—well, most have. They know the picture of him, or rather the icon, of this huge, old man with a great white beard, the sacrosanct granddaddy of the people, you might say, sitting solemnly and thoughtful in his chair. But ask them, ask the common Dane, “Who was Grundtvig, what did he say, what did he write, what has he meant to you?” and they will give you a lot of different answers, if any at all.

In many ways, the first description of Grundtvig made by a visitor to Denmark from abroad—in this case the English traveller Edmund Gosse in 1872—still seems to correspond to the mental picture of him shared by the average Dane today. Gosse witnessed Grundtvig’s last service in the small church of Vartov in Copenhagen and was completely overcome by awe and astonishment. “He looked like some troll from some cavern in Norway,” he writes. “He might have been centuries old.” When he spoke it was like someone “talking in the cellar below our feet. From the vast orb of his bald head, very long strings of silky hair fell over his shoulders and mingled with a long and loose white beard.”

And it was not only the Englishman Gosse who did not have a clue what old man Grundtvig was talking about. A lot of his Danish-speaking contemporaries seemed to have had the same problem. H. C. Andersen found him mostly loud and amusing; Kierkegaard regarded him as a talking head, a booming beer barrel. And others found that this general lack of understanding was to the general benefit of his many followers. They always seemed to hear
something supporting their different points of view. But in spite of his somewhat obscured rhetoric and awesome prophetic appearance, many of Grundtvig's contemporaries regarded him—and many of his present-day fellow countrymen still regard him in many ways—as an unquestionable authority to be called upon in very different matters.

For example, when Danish politicians or debaters want to be listened to or agreed with in cultural, churchly, or educational matters, they ask rhetorically, "What would old Grundtvig have said about this?" Not that many of their listeners will know what Grundtvig actually would have said, but, nevertheless, they do agree. And when, most recently, leading debaters and politicians called for more effective learning in Danish schools and a means of controlling the quality of this learning, Grundtvig's name popped up almost per instinct, as a kind of mantra, giving weight to a critique of these thoughts. But why is not always easy to explain.

The apparent ignorance about what this otherwise well known historic and influential person did or did not say may, indeed, explain something about the character of his overall influence. A modern Danish writer has compared Grundtvig and his impact on Denmark and the Danish people to a hidden water current—a current watering the roots of our society and common culture, but running so deep that words or definitions to describe it might be difficult to find.

As such, Grundtvig often is used as a symbol or a metaphor of everything genuinely, indisputably, and positively Danish—something including true democracy, freedom, social equality, dialogue, quality in education, and so on. Grundtvig is the one to turn to in times of change and crisis. Just mentioning his name seems to bestow upon many Danes a sense of consolation, a sense of belonging, a sense of regaining an otherwise endangered identity as a people. Accordingly, it should be asked: Why is this? How has his influence succeeded in seeping through all these layers of history to become this deep, subterranean current, an influence short of exact definitions, a national gene-code? To answer these questions we must turn briefly to Grundtvig's biography and here seek to trace
the both historical and theological preconditions for his peculiar
weight upon the Danish mind.

The early Danish nineteenth century was enriched by a lot of great
writers, thinkers, and artists. Notable among them, of course, were
Grundtvig, Kierkegaard, and H.C. Andersen, as well as writers such
as Oehlenschläger and Ingemann and artists such as Thorvaldsen,
Lundbye, Købke, and Skovgaard. All these romantic geniuses, who
lived in the relatively small, dirty, and unpretentious capital city of
Copenhagen, were in different ways related to what has been called
the Danish Golden Age, a visionary epoch in which Danish values
were strongly heralded and the country’s past became a source of
inspiration for a time—a golden time—to come.

Born two hundred and twenty two years ago, in 1783, Grundtvig
was a witness to the aftermath of the French revolution and the
enormous impact it had upon the European way of thinking, but
also, in a more direct sense, a witness to the Napoleonic wars and
their threat to Denmark as a stable, absolutist monarchy. It has often
been said that Grundtvig was born as a part of the old Europe, but
became a part of the new Europe with its many new political and
social institutions, as well. He lived on the brink of modernity—this
state of mind we since have struggled to grow accustomed to.

After taking his degrees in theology, the young Grundtvig became
a teacher at a Manor House on island of Langeland, where he came
to consider himself a true romantic poet. Being faithful to that role
he fell hopelessly in love with the young lady of the manor and
returned to Copenhagen, where he became a fulltime writer from
1808. As a writer, he was obsessed with the old ways of the people,
frantically calling his fellow men to join him in his exploration of a
better and richer past. In this way, Grundtvig regarded himself—
and so did many European poets of the time—as a prophet, a seer
and a visionary, leading the people on the right path towards
salvation. Grundtvig’s main source of inspiration, though, was in
these early years not the Bible, but Norse mythology. The ancient
myths, he felt, were pointing toward our present and linked the
Danish people with their ancient forebears.

In 1810, Grundtvig’s old father urged him to become a curate in
his native parish, Udby, in the southern part of Zealand, and, as a
consequence of this, Grundtvig experienced a spiritual crisis. He had other ambitions and aspirations, and he started to doubt whether he was a true Christian. After going through a spiritual crisis, Christian faith became an existential reality and a necessity to him; it became, so to speak, the firm and solid ground under his feet. From then on he was both a writer and a preacher, both a national revivalist reformer and a clergyman with strong, outspoken biblical views. But, we must ask: How could he, in any way, combine these two very different ways of looking upon the world and his fellow man? How could he, at the same time, be both a fundamentalist—openly confronting the tidal waves of change that in those days came to shake all European institutions—and a reformer engaging in new habits of thinking?

A solution to this problem dawned upon Grundtvig as a sudden recognition in the beginning of the 1820s. Whereas he had previously regarded the Bible as being the foundation of the church, he now arrived at the view that the apostolic confession at baptism is the true basis of Christian faith. It is the door through which we enter the church, and so it has always been. The Christian congregation, therefore, is not something of the past only, but a present and living reality. It has been there since before the Bible was written. As such, Christianity is not something to be scrutinized by scribes or zealously guarded by the clerics. It is there, accessible for every one, infants as well as illiterates. This recognition of the true foundation of the church was important to Grundtvig for several reasons.

First, he experienced a great relief. It was not, he saw, his task to turn people into devout Christians or to force them into the church. As baptized members of the Christian congregation they were already there, and as such he could address them as his fellow countrymen and enlighten them about their historic inheritance. He could, in other words, start to distinguish more clearly between faith and philosophy.

Second, Grundtvig expressed his opinion on these matters in a publication called "The Church’s Reply," which consisted mainly of a violent attack on a professor Clausen in theology, whom he accused of being a false teacher, making the Bible the foundation of
Christianity. Clausen, in return brought an action for libel against Grundtvig, and Grundtvig was fired and placed under censorship until further notice. This meant that he became a strong and zealous advocate for freedom in matters of belief, and he became a symbol of such in his own time and until our present day.

Third, Grundtvig’s so-called “unparalleled discovery” also made him increasingly aware of the tradition of the church. This, among other things, resulted in intense readings of the old Greek church father, Irenæus. From Irenæus, he took up the belief that man is made in the image of God, and that this image, in spite of the fall, is never completely lost. Therefore we can look upon and speak about the world, and man who inhabits it, in much more optimistic terms than the orthodox Lutherans had ever done. This notion brings a peculiar hope-filled ring to Grundtvig’s thoughts and writings. Man, as he saw it, is created in the image of God and will therefore grow in understanding and will, through time, reach fulfilment. In spite of the fall, God in Christ fulfils the destiny of man through history.

All in all, Grundtvig had gained both a sense of homecoming—a homecoming to the true foundation of the church with the creed—and, at the same time, a growing will to engage himself in his own time and together with former adversaries, to struggle for freedom and the enlightenment of his countrymen.

Three times between the years 1829-31, Grundtvig went to England on a grant from the king to study old Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. On each visit he gained some very strong impressions of the civil and literary life of England. He was specially impressed by the active civic life he witnessed, and he regarded it as the result of the personal freedom of the British society.

This recognition, he claimed, was like another homecoming. Not to the church this time, but to his own present time. What he had searched for in history was alive and kicking out in the noisy and industrious streets of London. The Nordic spirit was active, right here, right now. He had been asleep, now he was awake.

Grundtvig describes what you might call this second conversion in his book Norse Mythology from 1832 and in a series of lectures called Mands Minde [In Living Memory] in 1838. The book as well as
the lectures gained widespread attention. Now people actually started reading and listening to him. After many years of having been the laughing stock by large parts of the Danish public, he was now, you might say, officially regarded as a prophet. People came from all around to attend his services or his lectures.

One of Grundtvig’s main ideas was that we, at this very important time in the history of Denmark and of Europe, with all the revolutions and democratic upheavals going on, must collaborate both with Christians and with naturalists (by naturalist, he meant those who don’t partake in the Christian faith but who regard man as a spiritual being). We must work together on a renewal, a Nordic Christian renewal of culture, which should build on the Bible, the Norse and Greek mythologies, and the history of the people, but, at the same time, incorporate every skillful endeavor from mathematics to poetry.

This indeed was the starting point for the later people’s folk high school, which in the name of Grundtvig gained immense popularity and was one of the main pillars in the building of modern Danish society. But Grundtvig’s aim was political as well as educational. As he saw it, the political development must lead to greater popular participation in the governmental decisions. He was anxious that new leaders to come could gain far too much power, unless the people were given to such a degree of democratic education that its voice might speak freely and strongly. In a democratic high school, people would be able to participate in the democratic constitution that was about to come.

Consequently, Grundtvig’s thinking—in its theological, educational, and political aspects—gained widespread appeal in a time of change and transformation, the nineteenth century, as well as in the twentieth century, an era where Danish politics came to be dominated by the social democratic party and the construction of the welfare state. Grundtvig’s appeal to the people, to the civil society, was now in accordance with the overall aims of a new generation of politicians seeking an ideological foundation for their state-building. His ideas of freedom, of civil participation, of equality in learning, and a church capable of holding together different opinions in matters of belief, all contributed to his later overall influence. And it
contributed eventually to the overwhelming kind of popularity that, as mentioned, turned him into a symbol, a national icon, an unparalleled authority, and a hidden water current.

But as seen so often before, defeat was lurking close behind this seemingly total victory. Grundtvig’s undisputed status, combined with a still more superficial knowledge about him and what he actually represents, has recently made him and the influence he has had upon us vulnerable to harsh and not always fair criticism. Thus, I believe, came about his falling from grace in the newspaper poll that I mentioned in the beginning of this paper. So where we once tended to attribute to Grundtvig all that was good and fair in Denmark and Danish culture, church, school, and politics, some debaters have now begun to consider him and his influence as the root of many evils, notably among them a happy amateurism, a self-sufficient nationalism, and a xenophobia, all in all a general reaction toward globalization and the general changes in the society of present day.

But this discussion also has something to do with a recent change of the political climate in Denmark, and as a consequence of this, an outbreak of the so-called culture war, known also in the United States. In the Danish culture war, Grundtvig, for obvious reasons, often surfaces in the discussions and often is used to justify various points of view: A scoundrel to those who welcome modernization and globalization, and a hero to those who decidedly do not. Of course, this oversimplification of Grundtvig’s thinking does not contribute to a proper debate about him and the influence he has had upon us. Polarization and a certain kind of Grundtvig-fatigue seem to be the outcome.

Furthermore, Danish society—as a consequence of the culture war—is going through a period in which the market, or the people, is constantly challenging the traditional ways of the state. The old institutions are questioned and scrutinized. The welfare system, the educational system, the common cultural heritage, the people’s church, all these traditional institutions are no longer undisputed certainties one can take for granted. On the contrary, they are subjects of discussion. Gradually they are forced into a more vulnerable and unstable position where traditional aims and values
are to be reconsidered, formulated, and, in this process, made clear and outspoken.

Why do we value these ways of learning? Do we not want our children to be better readers and writers? Which works of art and literature do we want them to learn about? Should we still cling to our traditional ways of helping the poor and supporting the unemployed? Should we not expect the priests to believe in God and give voice to their faith in a way everybody should be able to understand? All these basic questions are surfacing in Denmark in these years, provoking ordinary people as well as politicians to make clearer statements about their basic values.

As you might imagine, it is not easy when things you valued and took for granted are brought into the clear daylight, in order to be criticized or to be subjected to inept simplifications. Something will inevitably be lost when you force what hitherto was a hidden current into clear daylight.

Consequently, the inherited legacy from Grundtvig, which has lived its own unspoken life in the heart of many Danes, is now to be reconsidered, and hence becomes a target for both criticism and redefinition. In the old days of the people’s folk high schools, the old grundtvigians say, we did not discuss Grundtvig and grundtvigianism, we just did it, we lived it. But as today’s Danish generations are confronted with new religions, new values, and new ways of thinking, things just cannot be lived and hinted at, they have to be spoken about and declared.

So grundtvigianism, Grundtvig’s ideas, and the hitherto unspoken grundtvigian values have to be spoken out, talked about, and clearly defined. This means that some people now openly reject him. Former grundtvigian schools call him a fundamentalist, a nationalist without relevance to modern Danish society. Debaters accuse him, as mentioned earlier, of being a man who seriously belongs to the past. Others, however, have actually begun reading him, trying in different ways to make him relevant to our present situation. Whether this succeeds or not will determine the future destiny of Grundtvig, and of Denmark.

Will he survive another century then?, it is asked. Will his thinking endure for another generation? I do believe so, even
though it is hard for me to say how and where. In many ways we are back to basics. I can only say that in an era in which we constantly are called back to foundations—in political, educational, and theological matters—Grundtvig always is urging us not to forget the wider scope. As god-created beings we must be on the move, constantly guarding both our freedom and common responsibility for our fellow man.

That is one of the funny things about Grundtvig. Every time you think that nothing more can be said about him and his influence, he suddenly emerges in new and unexpected places, ever so ready to strike back. We will just have to wait and see.