

S.S.Heggem, "Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig", M. Eliade(red), *Encyclopedia of Religion* [Second edition, 2005], s 3704-3706

❖ Grundtvig, Nikolai Frederik Severin

Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) was an influential Danish theologian, philosopher, historian, educationist and writer. Each of his writings expresses one of his numerous professional voices, centered in his own heart. His childhood, the often turbulent course of his life, and his relationships with women, men, children and diverse contemporary groups are all reflected in his authorial voices. His life was inseparably linked with the natural landscape, geography and cultural milieu of Denmark-Norway, which he viewed from the perspective of a distinctive historical and universal consciousness. Grundtvig was founder of much that in the spheres of church, "folk" and politics, is today perceived as characteristically Danish.

BIOGRAPHY

Born into a clerical family in Udby in eastern Denmark, Grundtvig was influenced by his upbringing in an orthodox Lutheran, pietistic parsonage. However, his theological studies (1800-1803) led him eventually to a rationalistic theistic faith. When working as a private tutor on the Egeløkke estate on the island of Langeland, he fell in love with a married woman, and this experience of the challenging power of love created a new crisis, leading to a romantic awakening. Through this experience his interest in Nordic mythology and romanticism was created and confirmed. From 1808 to 1811 he worked as a secondary school teacher in Copenhagen, where he went through another crisis of faith. This led him back to his roots, both theologically and physically, insofar as he accepted in 1811 his father's wish to be an assistant pastor in Udby. But in 1813 he went back to Copenhagen, where he lived from 1816 to 1821 exclusively as a writer. From 1821 onwards he worked as a priest, and discovered his own theological foundation, expressed as a "peerless discovery". He realized that the foundation of the church is not the Bible but the living Christ himself, present in a living, historical tradition, with baptism and the Eucharist as sacramental signs of his presence. His pamphlet, *Kirkens gienmæle* (The church's retort), directed against Henrik Nikolai Clausen, a theologian at the University of Copenhagen, gives strong expression to this fundamental approach. But he was censured for this work and had to become a freelance writer.

Grundtvig made four trips to England (three between 1829 and 1831). English literature (*Beowulf*, *Exeter Book* etc.) and the nation's mentality made a considerable impression on him. After 1832 his censure was lifted, and in 1839 he agreed to become a pastor at the Spital Church at Vartov in Copenhagen. From 1848 to 1858 he was also a member of Parliament. Grundtvig had a close relationship to Norway, and for some time he considered emigrating there. Norway had been a part of Denmark during large parts of its history, but in 1814 Norway separated from Denmark, a political development which Grundtvig deeply regretted.

Grundtvig was married three times and the father of five children. Until his death in 1872 he went on writing. One of his last poems, *Gammel nok jeg nu er blevet* (Long enough now has my life run, 1872), stands as a permanent sign of his way of living through writing and of writing his whole life into his work.

GRUNDTVIG'S THEOLOGY OF THE HEART'S DIFFERENT VOICES

With extraordinary symbolic power, Grundtvig recreated in his writings a traditional concept of heart-rhetoric, closely connected with the dynamic theological concept of the Christian idea of "the Living Word." "Heart" refers to all thinkable levels and subjects within his wide-ranging engagements, where diverse voices express themselves and demand new expressions, mediated through his texts.

Grundtvig belongs inseparably within the nineteenth century Romantic period, yet he also stands in contrast to romanticism, pointing both backwards and forwards in time. This is apparent not least in his anthropology. For him, the human being is a divine experiment. His religious philosophy is characterised by a poetic micro/macro pattern of

thinking, with humankind at the center, created in God's image, in a heart-relationship with God, created and creative. Human existence is therefore a graced condition, and life amid God's material creation is a time not of religious penance as the way to Christ, but of creative fulfillment of God-granted human potential: *Menneske først, kristen så*, "first a human being, then a Christian."

In his philosophy of history, as expressed, for example, in *Christenhedens Syvstjerne* (The Seven Stars[or pleiades] of Christendom) (1860) and *Sang-Værk til den Danske Kirke* (Song-work [or carillon] for the Danish Church) (1836-37), we find in coded form those historical-cultural voices out of which he constructs his narratives concerning the past. He speaks of a cultural and religious community of tongues in interactive entities (*Sangskoler*, "song-schools"), which between them chart the historical progress of Christendom. They proceed like a chorus of voices: the Hebrew "song-school," the Greek, the Roman, the Anglo-Saxon, the German, the Nordic and - the seventh and last- the future, or the "unknown," which Grundtvig may have expected to be the Indian voice from Asia. A chief warranty of each of these voices is that they articulate themselves in the true language of the heart, the local mother-tongue.

Grundtvig's concept of love gathers all his thinking into one domain. He perceived love as the center of all life that is lived, its wellspring, way, meaning and goal. In some fifteen hundred hymns he interpreted and renewed the Nordic-European ecumenical hymn-rhetoric in order to mediate his existentialist-nuanced philosophy of love. He developed in new directions the metaphorical, gendered mode of expressing the divine, with special focus upon the relationship with God, in a comprehensive relationship discourse. The human being in the world is a loving and loved microcosm. Language, gender, body, continuity, process and metamorphosis - all have a central place in the hymn rhetoric, in which he gave fresh currency to the spiritualized erotic and to erotic spirituality without ignoring the hazard of sexism. As one of the most frequently used words in his hymns, *heart* embodies both the center and wellspring of the human body and of the written texts.

In his liturgy-shaping hymn texts, Grundtvig's gendered language of the human relationship with God comes fully into its own. He envisages the relationship with God in three main models of a dialogue modulated by the heart: the relationships between parent and child, between friends, and between lovers. This entails his construing the Trinity in different ways, to mirror human life as truly and flexibly as possible; characterized not only by multiple relational models but by androgynous conceptual models and by reciprocity as an ideal.

With the creative principle as his primary category, he re-created and renewed the European hymn tradition in a comprehensive gift-rhetoric. The individual praising God in psalmody is, in Grundtvig's linguistic-philosophical and intertextual hymn rhetoric, a representative microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm. We also meet representations of "The Daughter of God" equivalent to "The Son of God" within his experimental concept of the Trinity. In an 1870 sermon he argued - with the help of his evolved classical, gendered rhetoric of "the heart" - for women priests. A crucial point in his argument is that the absence of thoughts and feelings, germane to women and springing from the heart, harms the church at the core of its own heart.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIS HYMNS

Grundtvig's hymns have exercised a wide, profound influence in Denmark and beyond, notably in Norway, where they are reckoned as the country's own cultural treasure, together with the legacy of two other great Danish hymnwriters, Thomas Kingo (1634-1703, orthodoxy) and Hans Adolf Brorson (1694-1764, pietism). In the Danish *Hymnal*, Grundtvig is represented by over 250 original and reworked hymns; and in the Norwegian *Hymnal*, by more than 40. The Danish hymn tradition stands in direct descent from Martin Luther's musical-poetical hymn project used as a medium of reformation in the 1500s. The vital, musical and ecstatic word, in glorification of the life force and in protection against the power of death, is the primary impulse in Grundtvig's contribution to this Protestant and popular aesthetic.

LASTING INFLUENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Through his countless textual voices and his cultural, political, educational and church activities, Grundtvig wrote himself into Danish history with a distinctive Nordic, European and universal rhetoric. He has exercised an enormous influence on Scandinavian liturgical practice, theology and education. In the present time, his influence on educational matters has also increased outside Scandinavia through the so-called Grundtvig Initiative, which is part of the European Union's adult educational initiative and represents a concept that, in the modern search for popular models of social participation in a global context, has gained a substantial international foothold.

SEE ALSO Christianity, article on Christianity in Western Europe; Music, article on Music and Religion.

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Grundtvig's works are available in English in *Selected Writings*, translated by J. Knudsen (Philadelphia, 1976). In Danish, the standard text is *N.F.S. Grundtvigs Udvalgte Skrifter*, 10 vols., edited by H. Begtrup (Copenhagen 1904-1909).

Among Grundtvig's overwhelmingly abundant output, the following represent the rich diversity of his textual voices. In 1812-1814 the philosopher-historian was active with his revised edition of *Kort Begreb af Verdens Krønike, betragtet i Sammenhæng* (Concise View of world-chronicle, considered in context). Between 1833 and 1843 his historical universal voice was again heard through his three-volume *Haandbog i Verdens-Historien* (Handbook on World History). In 1816-1819 we see the philosopher of religion, literary critic, and antiquarian in his periodical *Danne-Virke*. In 1824 he wrote his *Nyaars-Morgen* (New-year's morning), which displays and gives promise of the poet and self-symbolist. In *Kirkens Gienmæle* (The church's retort; 1825), following his "peerless discovery," he identifies himself as fierce defender of the unity, antiquity and authority of the Church. *Nordens Mythologi eller Sind-billed Sprog* (Mythology of the north, or the language of myth), displaying Grundtvig the mythologist, came out in 1832. The shaper of liturgy reveals himself in the first volume of *Sang-Værk til den Danske Kirke* (Song-work [or carillon] for the Danish Church; 1837). The educationist is represented in the text *Skolen for Livet og Akademiet i Soer* (School for life and the academy at Sorø; 1838). In *Den christelige Børnelærdom* (Christian Instruction for Children; 1868), the mature theologian declares himself. The church-historical visionary poet reveals himself most clearly in *Christenhedens Syvstjerne* (The Seven Stars [or pleiades] of Christendom; 1860). The philosophy of history that permeates this work is the same as that forming the foundation of the structure and strategy of *Sang-Værk til den Danske Kirke*. Finally, the confessional Grundtvig speaks through many sermons, for example in the three-volume collection *Christelige Prædikener eller Søndags-Bog* (Christian Sermons or the Sunday book; 1827-1830).

Secondary Sources

Since 1963 Grundtvig scholarship has been dominated by the work of Kaj Thaning, principally his three-volume *Menneske først - Grundtvigs opgør med sig selv* (First a human - Grundtvig's Battle with himself; Copenhagen 1963), but current scholarship increasingly dissents from Thaning's interpretation. Leading works on Grundtvig's educational ideas and on Grundtvig as poet in the early nineteenth-century context are, respectively, K. E. Bugge's *Skolen for Livet. Studier over N. F. S. Grundtvigs pædagogiske tanker* (School for Life. Studies in N. F. S. Grundtvig's pedagogic thinking; Copenhagen 1965), and Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen's *Det handlende ord. N. F. S. Grundtvigs digtning, litteratur-kritik og poetik, 1798-1819* (The operative word: N. F. S. Grundtvig's authorship, literary criticism and poetics, 1798-1819; Copenhagen, 1980).

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