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Human First and then Christian: Grundtvig's Anthropology as a Pluralist Alternative

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In this article, I would like to suggest that the anthropological proposal of Nicolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, the famous nineteenth-century Danish author, offers a model that maintains and affirms religious diversity, recognizing its place in the life of the community, but without having to resort to the separation of the religious and the public, the typical response of liberalism that has been generally adopted in the modern world. Grundtvig's proposal – an ordained pastor of the Danish Church, but deeply influenced by English liberal ideas – represents an intriguing middle ground between secularization and pluralism. He understood that, in the new modern world, it was necessary to recognize not only the members of the official Church, but also the practitioners of other religions and even non-believers. The voice of the Church was just one among many. However, he also resisted excluding religion from public life, as is the case in traditional secularism.

Keywords: pluralism – Grundtvig – philosophy of religion – religious diversity – Golden Age Denmark – philosophical anthropology

Introduction

The modern age has examined from different points of view the question of what the role of religion in society and culture should be.[1] The debate in the social sphere probably has the most visible impact. The gradual secularization of society initially reduced the role of religious institutions in public life, especially

[1] For a more detailed discussion on the role of religion in the modern world, see Bravo – Stewart (2023).

in the Western world. But in more recent times, the persistence – and even increase – in social inequality, as well as the loss of confidence in the effectiveness of the modern secular state, has led to what Razavi and Jenichen (2010) call the "de-privatization" of religion, i.e., the return of religion to the public sphere.[2]

In this sense, religion has regained its role as a powerful source of identity, which has sometimes resulted, among other things, in the accentuation of differences and the emergence of conflicts between social groups. This phenomenon is particularly problematic in the current situation. The mass migration and displacement of peoples – because of war, social upheaval or poverty–with different cultural and religious backgrounds is a fact that shows the need to reflect on the importance of pluralism and tolerance.

In this article, I would like to suggest that the anthropological proposal of Nicolai Fredrik Severin Grundtvig, the famous nineteenth-century Danish author, offers a model that maintains and affirms religious diversity, recognizing its place in the life of the community, but without having to resort to the separation of the religious and the public, the typical response of liberalism that has been generally adopted in the modern world. Grundtvig's proposal – an ordained pastor of the Danish Church, but deeply influenced by English liberal ideas – represents an intriguing middle ground between secularization and pluralism.

He understood that, in the new modern world, it was necessary to recognize not only the members of the official Church, but also the practitioners of other religions and even non-believers. The voice of the Church was just one among many. However, he also resisted excluding religion from public life, as is the case in traditional secularism.

The article is divided into two sections. In the first, I would like to show that, despite the major shifts in direction in Grundtvig's work, it is possible to trace a common thread throughout his intellectual career: his insistence on inclusiveness and tolerance. In the second section, I will examine the anthropological model Grundtvig presents in his 1832 *Norse Mythology*, a work in which it is suggested that humanity shares a common life in the midst of cultural and religious differences.

[2] On the resurgence of religion in politics and the public life, see Westerlund (1996) and Juergensmeyer (1993).

I. Inclusion and Tolerance in Grundtvig's Work

Grundtvig was a restless spirit and always kept an open mind to new ideas, which he enthusiastically incorporated into his earlier theories, sometimes modifying them in a substantial manner. This could give the impression that his thought was constantly changing direction.

During these multiple intellectual revolutions, scholars typically identify two major turning points, located in 1825 and 1832 respectively. The first turning point is characterized by his ecclesial view; here Grundtvig places the life of the congregation at the center. At the second turning point, on the other hand, he gives priority to the human being and cultural life. Important interpreters such as Hal Koch (1952) and Kaj Thaning (1972) claim that these two points represent a radical transformation in Grundtvig's thought.

On the other hand, Allchin (1997) and Gregersen (2018) suggest that across these two major moments it is possible to find a certain continuity. For example, aspects of Grundtvig's early thought, such as his enthusiasm for Norse mythology, can also be found in his more mature period, albeit in a deeper way and traversed by different ideas. There are also other recurring themes, such as his historical approach or the primacy of real life over abstract theories.

In general, I tend to agree with the continuity interpretation. But, in addition to these themes, I would like to argue that the insistence on inclusion and tolerance is another element that appears consistently in the development of Grundtvig's thought. In this respect, the Danish writer's character was peculiar. On the one hand, his fervor as a pastor of the Church was unquestionable, and his passion for what he considered to be true Christianity was sometimes fanatical. But on the other hand, Grundtvig was also a staunch defender of the freedom of conscience of those who thought differently from him. In a difficult balancing act, he championed the seemingly impossible coexistence of orthodoxy and religious diversity.

This can be seen from the early stages of Grundtvig's career. Between 1803 and 1810, he devoted himself with youthful fervor to the study of the religion of the ancient Scandinavians. Thrilled by the Norse gods, the *aesir*, it seemed as if Grundtvig was renouncing the beaten path of the Christianity of his family and homeland:

> Let us turn away from the trodden path!
> This leads not to the altar,
> for there were the crowd runs,
> the gods have not their abode (Grundtvig 1880a, 39 – 40).

However, in another poem from the same period entitled *Masquerade Ball in Denmark*, Grundtvig offers a vision in which Christians and pagans, the common fathers of Danish culture, live in harmony around a bonfire which they consecrate simultaneously with the sign of the cross and Thor's hammer:

> High Odin, white Christ!
> Settled is your Clash,
> both are sons of the All-Father.
> With our cross and with our sword,
> this pyre here is consecrated to you,
> both of you, who loved our Father (Grundtvig 1808, 19 – 20).

This is an early instance of the Grundtvigian intuition that culture is composed of diverse voices. Although his aim here was to point accusingly to the philistine and frivolous character of his contemporaries in a time of crisis – Copenhagen had recently been bombarded by the English navy – the inclusive tone is evident.

In 1810, Grundtvig suffered a spiritual crisis that led him to change his position. He replaced his fervor for the *aesir* of the Nordic myths with a fanatical enthusiasm for biblical purity. Grundtvig thinks that God is found primarily in the Bible. However, even at this time of Lutheran fundamentalism, he suggests that it is possible to discover God elsewhere; as he writes in the poem *The Hill by Egeløkke*, the spirit discovered:

> There where it rested its gaze
> God everywhere;
> discovered Him in the songs of the poets,
> discovered Him in the words of the wise,
> discovered Him in the Norse myths,
> discovered Him in the course of time (Grundtvig 1880b, 341).

Again, it is not difficult to see the inclusiveness of Grundtvig. The divine is found, of course, in the official orthodoxy, but also in other cultural sources.

In 1822, Grundtvig moved to Amager to assume the position as pastor of the Church of Our Savior. We approach here his first major turning point, that of his ecclesial view and the "matchless discovery."[3] In his scriptural enthusiasm, Grundtvig faced the difficult question of who should interpret the only source of revelation, the Bible. At that time, dominated by the rationalist

[3] For a more detailed discussion on the development of Grundtvig's ecclesial view, see Thaning (1981) and Bravo (2023).

theology inherited from the Enlightenment, the typical answer to this question was that professional theologians should be responsible of explaining the Bible and, consequently, Christian doctrine.

But Grundtvig was not satisfied with this response. He observed that, while theologians might attempt to define in a scholarly way the essence of Christian doctrine, this was of little use to the individual believer, who could hardly understand theological concepts and who, in any case, had to decide for herself whether or not to accept Christianity (1906a).

Grundtvig's ecclesial view consisted in the affirmation that the truth of Christianity is transmitted through what he called *the living word*, that is, the acceptance of the apostles' creed. The immediate consequence of this "matchless discovery" was a controversy with the rationalist theologian Nicolai Clausen, whom Grundtvig accused of teaching anti-Christian doctrines (1906b, 397). Clausen sued Grundtvig for libel, and the latter was found guilty: he lost his position as pastor and was placed under a state of censure, although not long afterwards the censure was lifted, and he was allowed to resume his work as pastor in the parish of Vartov.

Grundtvig will never really abandon his ecclesial view. He will always give more importance to the real life of the congregation, to flesh-and-blood Christians, than to theological systems and theories. However, I would like to argue that the ecclesial view also shows, albeit indirectly, the tolerant and inclusive character of Grundtvig.

This is a situation in which, strangely enough, Grundtvig could appear fanatical and tolerant at the same time. On the one hand, he was unwilling to negotiate the centrality of the creed in Christianity and was ready to fight aggressively against anyone who disagreed with this principle. However, his ecclesial view also allowed greater freedom for both clergy and congregation. If a person accepts the creed, then she is a Christian; everything else is doctrinal subtleties, and in this sphere diversity is possible. Pastors should be able to choose how to interpret the scriptures and people should be able to choose the pastor of their preference; this, of course, within the established limit, i.e., the creed.

Grundtvig returns to the question of the limits of orthodoxy in his *Should the Lutheran Reformation Really Continue?* of 1831. In the third section of this work, Grundtvig discusses the relationship between faith and theology. He criticizes Luther for giving disproportionate importance to the Scriptures to the detriment of the oral testimony of faith. In keeping with his ecclesial view, Grundtvig says

that "the confession of faith in Baptism is independent of all Scripture" (1907, 328) and is the condition for belonging to the Church of Christ.

This confession of faith, and not the Bible, is the sole criterion for any doctrinal interpretation by theologians. It is essential, therefore, to distinguish "between that which all Christians must believe and confess, and that which must be left to the free disposition of the Spirit and of each individual Christian" (1907, 328). In other words, the limit of orthodoxy is the content of the creed, freely accepted by the individual. That basis is unique and incontrovertible throughout the history of Christianity. But outside that general limit, the theologian – and the individual believer – can believe whatever she wants. For Grundtvig, this freedom of conscience extended to other areas, such as the interpretation of the Bible and the choice of the ecclesial community to which one wanted to belong. Neither the official church nor the state should interfere with this freedom. Grundtvig passionately defended his ecclesial view, but in this fervor, there was room for diversity and inclusion.

In practice, however, there were other limits. In Denmark, the conventicle decree, a law forbidding lay preachers from offering religious services without the presence of a pastor of the Danish Church, had been in force since 1741. At the time of Grundtvig, this decree, which would not be abolished until 1848, was aimed at limiting the influence and growth of the religious revivalist movements.[4] Suspicious of the intellectual elitism of the Danish Church, the revivalists sought a more intimate relationship with God.[5] To this end, they gathered in "godly assemblies" to discuss upbuilding topics and to study the Bible.

Specifically, the phenomenon of the godly assemblies appeared in Ellinge, on the island of Funen. The pastors of the parish complained to the authorities and some revivalist leaders were imprisoned and fined. Grundtvig was aware of the episode and wrote an article about it in 1825, shortly before the controversy with Clausen. Apart from the formal aspect of the violation of the conventicle decree, Grundtvig wonders whether the godly assemblies commit any infraction against the public order. There is no indication that they do. On the contrary, the attendees of such meetings seek their personal improvement, so that the state gets, if not better Christians, then at least better citizens. In any case, Grundtvig claims that it is "a truth universally acknowledged that what one wants to believe and the place in which one seeks one's own

[4] For more on the revivalist movements in Denmark, see Lindhardt (1959) and Sanders (2015).
[5] On the issue of modern evangelical individualism, see Rojas (2023).

edification are things for which one is accountable only to God and one's own conscience" (1906c, 367).

On a personal level, Grundtvig disliked the godly assemblies. He thought they were a poor substitute for the influence that the Church should exercise and that they could lead to a disregard for the magisterium and the Scriptures (1906c, 372 – 373). But this is from the point of view of Christianity, not the state. Freedom of conscience, he argued, should be allowed as long as it did not infringe civil laws. Grundtvig speaks here as a liberal: the state should not intervene in people's personal beliefs. Throughout his career, Grundtvig would be a strong advocate for persecuted religious minorities, even though he did not sympathize with them.

These episodes occurred before 1832, the year in which the second turning point in Grundtvig's thought is usually placed and which will be discussed in the next section. They all show his propensity to find a tolerant and inclusive alternative. At this stage, his ecclesial view is fundamental. Although dogmatic from a doctrinal point of view, it placed the emphasis on the believer's acceptance of the creed. This immediately ruled out doctrinal imposition by the Church (or the State) and established freedom of conscience as one of the pillars of Christianity.

In the political sphere, Grundtvig seems to think at this point that the best solution is to separate the political from the spiritual and private. British liberalism influenced his thinking in this respect. However, I would like to suggest that Grundtvig's anthropological proposal goes beyond a secularism that separates religious life from public life.

II. The Inclusive Turn in *Norse Mythology*

In the early stages of his intellectual career, Grundtvig had shown that he was passionate in his convictions; on certain occasions, he had even become fanatical and belligerent, which seems difficult to harmonize with his desire for tolerance. However, the humiliation he suffered after the controversy with Clausen placated him. Outside the intellectual circles, in the countryside, the image of the stubbornness and religious fervor of the revivalists in the face of persecution and harassment by the Danish Church persuaded him of the unhelpfulness of trying to impose a belief system by force. His ecclesial view seemed to confirm this: Christianity is not about a theologian, a church or a state imposing a dogma on the congregation, but about the congregation freely accepting it.

An important element in Grundtvig's change of outlook towards a more democratic and tolerant position was his three trips to England in 1829 – 1831. Grundtvig found a very different world there than in his native Denmark. On the one hand, he discovered a place bustling with activity and where no one seemed to have a moment to pause for breath, which he did not like. On the other hand, however, he was favorably impressed by the real presence of free speech in the public debate (Allchin 1997, 50 – 51). The contrast between cosmopolitan, industrious London and small, provincial Copenhagen was enormous.

Back in Denmark, Grundtvig planned to publish a second edition of one of his early works, his *Norse Mythology* of 1808. In his period of Nordic enthusiasm, he had tried without much success to harmonize the Christian worldview with the ancient Scandinavian legends. But his encounter with the hyperactive and realistic culture of England had made him change his point of view. Instead of the bookish, speculative, and abstract worldview of the rationalist Danish scholars, obsessed with philosophical treatises, Grundtvig, inspired by the realism of the British intellectuals, decided to look at real life.

In England, in the middle of his philological studies of Anglo-Saxon literature (this was the real purpose of the trip), he had questioned whether the present Christian culture had extinguished the earlier pagan culture, or whether the worldview of the ancient Norse had managed to endure and thrive alongside Christianity. The result of this reflection was a completely new book. Although the general aim of the work was, as the title indicates, to discuss the legends of the Old Norse, Grundtvig presented here his new view of humanity, culture and religion.

Earlier, in 1825, he had discovered that the Church had existed before the Scriptures. In this new change of perspective, he similarly realizes that the individual is a human being before she is a Christian, an insight that is well known from the famous lines of his 1837 poem: "Human first and then Christian / Only that is life's order" (Grundtvig 1942, 113). Human life has existed before Christianity and the Church. More specifically, he noted that Scandinavian mythology continued to have a cultural importance independent of Christianity. It was one more voice that was part of the roots of Scandinavian life. It was no longer a matter of reading the ancient myths as a Christian-style narrative of salvation, but of understanding and appreciating it as a free voice of its own.

The interesting point here is that while *Norse Mythology* speaks specifically about ancient Scandinavian culture, Grundtvig applies this inclusive idea to all

non-Christian voices and cultures. The lines of the introductory poem express this need for recognition and inclusion: "Freedom our watchword must be in the North! / Freedom for Loki as well as for Thor" (Grundtvig 2011, 49).

In the first section of the long introduction of *Norse Mythology*, Grundtvig offers a historical overview in which he identifies the thirteenth century as the time when the spiritual development of the Old Norse was truncated (2011, 55). It seems that by "spiritual development" he means the worldview or culture of the people of the North. This spirit was replaced by what he calls *Italian learning*. For Grundtvig, this Italian learning is a decadent worldview which has ruined the vitality of whole nations, but which, fortunately, died out in the eighteenth century, with the coming of the French Revolution. In the present age, however, this learning is trying to come back.

Grundtvig associates this type of learning with the Mediterranean culture and therefore understands it as a foreign imposition on the people of the North; it is, he says, an "Italian, neo-Roman, monastic-Latin, papist-spiritual culture" (2011, 56). Just as emperors in antiquity and popes in the Middle Ages exerted their yoke on other nations, this worldview is imposed vertically and by force on other cultures, rather than emerging organically from the life of the people.

But the main problem with Italian learning is that it is a dead worldview. Grundtvig claims that it is hostile to real life and leads to the spiritual death of people (2011, 57). For Grundtvig, this means that this learning does not focus on the present, which is where genuine life resides, but on the past. In this sense, Italian learning is spurious, as it is based on imitation and speculation, not on what should be its true source, life. Apart from the anti-colonialist character of this description, Grundtvig seems to be thinking of a sterile and bookish culture that is content to blindly repeat the maxims of thinkers from a remote past. Perhaps Grundtvig was referring to the kind of discussions that were dominant in the Copenhagen intellectual circles at the time.

In contrast, he wants a living culture. We observe here the life-death duality that also appeared in Grundtvig's ecclesial view: the living word of the congregation during the ritual versus the dead word of the scriptural exegesis of the biblical theologians. He thinks that this living culture demands a new Danish development, i.e., a rethinking of the Christian and the old Danish learning, hitherto dominated by the decadent Italian learning.

An interesting idea here is that this new development requires, for Grundtvig, that the relationship between the Christian and the Danish be reconsidered. In his context, Lutheranism was inextricably linked with the Danish state. These two elements should be understood with their distinct

identities; however, Grundtvig does not suggest they should be completely separated (2011, 59). In his new cultural view, both voices must be present and in dialogue. Although Grundtvig rejects what he perceives as the sterile authoritarianism of popery, he is a pastor of the church and recognizes the cultural importance of Christianity in history. But he also acknowledges the value of pagan culture, which can be seen clearly in the sophistication and vitality of Greek and Norse poetry.

According to Grundtvig, there is a common view of humanity that allows for this kind of dialogue. This is what he calls *the Mosaic-Christian Worldview* [*den Mosaisk-Christelige Grund-Anskuelse*]. Although from its name it would seem that this is a religious notion, it is in fact a fundamental way of understanding the human being:

> For man is not an ape, destined first to ape the other animals and then himself until the world's end. Rather is he a glorious, incomparable creature, in whom divine powers through thousands of generations proclaim, develop, and enlighten themselves as a divine experiment, in order to show how spirit and dust can permeate one another and be transfigured into a common divine consciousness (Grundtvig 2011, 66).

The theoretical foundation of this anthropological model is, for Grundtvig, the idea that human beings are created in the likeness of God (2011, 61). It is for this reason that when discussing this turning point in Grundtvig's career scholars often speak of a theology of creation (Kristensson 2021). But the Mosaic-Christian – or, to use a more familiar expression, Judeo-Christian – perspective is not just about a religious worldview, but an anthropological one. This idea simply suggests that the human being is not a mere imitating monkey, which is the role to which Italian learning has reduced her, but that her existence is full of vitality, dynamism, and creativity.

For Grundtvig, the new Danish development, and indeed human culture in general, is called upon to fulfill this destiny of vitality. This is what it means to be human. However, an accident occurs in history – Grundtvig does not want to use the religious term "fall" – that diverts humanity from this destiny, so its mission is to return to the right course (2011, 61). What is interesting here is that everyone shares and can understand this human condition, regardless of their religious persuasion, "be he Christian or heathen, Turk or Jew" (Grundtvig 2011, 60). There is a shared humanity, regardless of whether one is Christian, Muslim, Jew or "heathen," i.e., an atheist.

The anthropological premise of Grundtvig is simple. All those who agree on this "creational myth," that is, who admit that the human being is called to a higher destiny, are invited to participate in the cultural dialogue, the goal of which is to achieve human fulfillment. Grundtvig also seems to think that all different voices agree that humanity has strayed from this path, renouncing its intrinsic life force, regardless of whether they call it a "fall," like the Christians, or an "aberration," like the naturalists (2011, 61). The only truly important question is what is the right way to correct the course, whether through natural means, as scientists argue, or supernatural, as various religious traditions propose.

The different minorities will be aware of their differences and will be able to formulate and defend them using the point of view of their respective traditions. For Grundtvig, the affirmation of differences is decisive, which is part of the vitality of a people: "As long as we continue to be bundled together in a single church, everything that we do is chaotic, and a quarrel as bitter as it is pointless is unavoidable" (2011, 61). In this case, it is no longer necessary to worry about agreeing on everything, since, in what is essential, what is properly human, everyone starts from the same assumptions. Of course, the solutions to the problem of humanity may be radically different, but then experience will determine who is right: "by its fruits shall the tree be known" (2011, 61).

In his already extensive career as a church pastor, Grundtvig had come to realize the ineffectiveness of an overzealous orthodoxy. When the Danish Church persecuted the revivalists, it alienated them, thus losing a valuable element of the community; however, it also failed to make the problem go away – either through conversion or criminalization – but rather radicalized them and made them hostile. Grundtvig himself observed the futility of aggressively defending his ecclesial view; confrontation led to humiliation and ostracism.

In the introduction to *Norse Mythology*, Grundtvig's solution was to turn his gaze to the natural human being. Lutheran Christianity, with its obsessive emphasis on the fallen character of humanity, had failed to appreciate its natural aspect, an oversight that Grundtvig was trying to correct. Does this mean that he was proposing a secularization in the style of British liberalism, in which the earthly is separated from the spiritual? Not exactly: "Human first and then Christian. / Only that is life's order" (Grundtvig 1942, 113). He does not separate the natural human from the Christian human, he only determines their right order. God has not created Christians, but humans, and one must

look at the development of the latter before the former. The question is to understand properly the relationship between religion and culture, not to break that relationship.

Grundtvig, of course, is an ordained pastor and his religious convictions are honest. He believes that human fulfillment and salvation can only be achieved through Christ. Is this, then, a condescending inclusivism, in which he only recognizes other positions to the extent that they resemble his Christian view? This does not seem accurate either. Although Grundtvig thinks that redemption has a supernatural character, this does not mean that he suggests that the other different positions are only valid insofar as they somehow participate in this religious view. The voices of Jews, Muslims, pagans or naturalists are not legitimate because these are "anonymous Christians," as Rahner's inclusivism (1992) would suggest, but because such voices arise from a life shared by all human beings. It is a Grundtvigian pluralism.

III. Conclusion

Like one of his famous contemporaries, Kierkegaard, Grundtvig distrusted great systems of thought. Therefore, his anthropological model is simple and straightforward. It is based on a commonsense intuition: rather than being a Christian, an atheist or a member of any other tradition or school of thought, one is human.

Although this does not seem a particularly original or extraordinary idea, it allowed Grundtvig to make a shift in perspective that would have great consequences. If the human comes first, it makes sense to start by focusing on this, not on differences. After all, this is something everyone shares and cares about. Everyone, or at least most, also agrees that humans are more than beasts destined to imitate each other through history.

This leads to another important Grundtvigian insight. Human development does not advance by learning Latin or memorizing complicated philosophical systems. It is this sterile passivity that he associates with Italian learning. Rather, true learning is found in the real life of the community, in which there is diversity. Naturally, this diversity involves different views on how to fulfill human potential. But it makes sense to listen to the different voices: "If one is truly wise, one always wants to become wiser, and thus learn from enemies as well as from friends" (Grundtvig 2011, 66). It is therefore important to Grundtvig that religious diversity remains in the public sphere rather than being reduced to the private, inner world, as traditional secularism proposes.

Thus, Grundtvig was not interested in a radical separation of church and state. One institution that reflects this notion is the Danish Folk Church, which has a clear Grundtvigian stamp. It is a state church, but one that includes in it the various voices of Danish Christian life. Pastors are free to interpret and preach doctrine, and people can choose the parish of their choice. This was made possible by the dissolution of the parish bond, which was one of the great political struggles of Grundtvig.

This may not seem much by our current standards of pluralism and tolerance. In the Western world, it is taken for granted that anyone can choose the religious community of their preference, Christian or otherwise, and it is equally acceptable to decide not to belong to any. However, increasing religious diversity due to migration and other social phenomena has shown that we are not necessarily prepared to deal with such cultural differences. Moreover, the return of religious communities and leaders to the political sphere presents new challenges that call for a reconsideration of pluralism. With this in mind, perhaps it is worth listening to the message of Grundtvig, who seems to have anticipated this kind of challenges.

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