

Human Comes First

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Human Comes First: The Christian Theology of N. F. S. Grundtvig

Edited and translated by Edward Broadbridge, Aarhus University Press, 2018. Pp. 496.

The Human Comes First: The Christian Theology of N. F. S. Grundtvig is a judicious collection of some of the most important theological writings of this significant and somewhat maverick nineteenth-century Danish thinker. Although Grundtvig is not nearly as well-known in the English-speaking world as his more celebrated contemporary Søren Kierkegaard, his impact upon Danish Christianity, and by extension, Protestantism in northern Europe in general, was profound. During his lifetime, Grundtvig became an enormously popular preacher and hymn writer and was championed at various times by King Christian VIII as well as by subsequent monarchs and dowager queens.

Sometimes, Grundtvig worked within the national established church, with which he had a fraught and complex relationship, and sometimes he operated outside it. This anthology reveals his development of a unique theological vision that synthesized a tolerant doctrinal orthodoxy with a high view of the sacramental life of the church. Grundtvig also combined these themes with an appreciation of God's work in human cultures outside the confines of the church. As future volumes in this impressive series of Grundtvig's writings will show, his influence extended far beyond theology to include political life, cultural studies, poetry, and public education.

This volume does justice to the many dimensions of Grundtvig's theological productivity. It brings together the diverse literary genres that Grundtvig utilized to articulate his distinctive theological program, including essays, selections from books, lectures, sermons, and letters. Within each section, the representative samples are arranged thematically, dealing with such topics as the relation of church and culture and basic Christian teachings. Overall, the flow of topics is somewhat chronologi-

cal, for Grundtvig's concerns evolved, and different issues captured his attention at different stages of his life. Despite his changes in focus and emphasis and his occasional changes of mind about particular church-related topics, these excerpts display the underlying continuity of his thought.

The sections are introduced by brief essays penned by a variety of Grundtvig scholars and enthusiasts, most of whom have studied and taught in Copenhagen and Aarhus. Some editors of the individual sections are more analytic and descriptive, while others are more overtly adulatory and apologetic. Remarkably, in spite of the multiplicity of editors, their interpretive perspectives cohere nicely. The historical background information that the editors provide makes Grundtvig's concerns come alive, even for readers who are not familiar with Lutheranism in Denmark in the nineteenth century or with Scandinavian religious history at all. The selections show that Grundtvig's vision has a relevance far beyond the borders of that tiny country. The spirited translations allow Grundtvig's voice to be heard as an important contribution to contemporary theological discussions.

The theology that emerges from these pages is based on Grundtvig's most distinctive conviction that the redemptive work of God completes God's creative purposes. God's grace heals and perfects the potentialities that have always been latent within all human beings. According to Grundtvig, the seeds of faith, hope, and love are indelible components of the image of God in human nature. Although sin is a serious impediment to the actualization of these potentialities, it has not destroyed them. In this regard, Grundtvig's view of the relation of creation and redemption more resembles the theological pattern of Irenaeus than that of Augustine.

As several editors point out, Grundtvig rejects the doctrine of total depravity. In spite of the Fall, a contact point between created human nature and God's gift of revitalising grace remains. This does not make God's redemptive work superfluous, for grace is necessary to heal and energize created human potencies and to empower them to strive for a higher spiritual goal. That goal is nothing less than recreation in the image of Christ, particularly in the image of Christ's expansive love. As many of the editors emphasize, Grundtvig's motto was that "the human comes first," and then the more intensive Christian virtues can be added.

This optimistic evaluation of creation and human nature motivates Grundtvig to claim that God is at work in the world beyond the walls

of the church. The selections from his writings aptly display his positive view of human cultures as instruments that God employs to enlighten and morally educate human beings. According to Grundtvig, God has used and is still using different cultures to humanize our species, for each culture harbors within it the seeds of faith, hope, and love. The activity of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to the sanctification of the church.

As his essays show, Grundtvig stressed the ways in which the yearning for the divine life was present, not only in the ancient Hebrew and Greek cultures, but also in Latin, German, English, and Nordic cultures. He detected an historical progression in this succession of cultures, as each one added valuable insights and virtues to the maturation of the human race. He proposed that this progression has not been concluded, but that the culture of India may host the next stage in the evolution of Christian, and more broadly human, spirituality.

The selections also make it clear that another foundational and persistent theme for Grundtvig was the priority of the ancient oral tradition of the church over the written biblical cannon. He argued that the language of the Apostles Creed, the baptismal formula, and the Lord's Supper (or at least the oral traditions from which they are derived) predated the codification of the New Testament. Grundtvig's controversial "matchless discovery" was that the creedal and sacramental language was traceable back to Jesus himself. These words are performative, for they communicate the new life in Christ to the heart. They do not merely narrate God's saving activity, nor do they merely provide raw material for the construction of theological systems.

Consequently, these ritual speech-acts are even more authoritative than the Bible and must be used as the hermeneutic lens through which the Bible is interpreted. As the editors emphasize, this conviction put Grundtvig at odds with the traditional Lutheran teachings about the ultimate authority of the Bible as well as with historical-critical efforts to stipulate the "real" meaning of the biblical texts.

Other selections in the volume show how these theological convictions led Grundtvig to define the Church in terms of the presence of Christ made available through the words spoken in the confession of faith and through the sacraments. As the editors note, for Grundtvig the church is not defined by its polity nor by an espoused doctrinal system. Rather, the church occurs wherever the creedal and confessional language enables an appropriation of Christ's life to occur.

The editors show how the one issue that underwent the most change in Grundtvig's career was his assessment of institutional churches. Most particularly, his attitude towards the established Lutheran Church of Denmark evolved considerably. His earliest writings were a condemnation of the rationalism that had infected the national church and a call to purge the church of its contaminated leaders. His attack on the perceived infidelity of church-sanctioned professors led to his being sued by the influential biblical scholar and theologian H. N. Clausen. Grundtvig's call to cleanse the church and return to "old-fashioned" Christianity was succeeded by a flirtation with the possibility that spiritual health might be found not by purging the church but by leaving it and joining alternative Christian communities. This sensibility persisted in his continuing advocacy for the toleration of non-Lutheran congregations in Denmark.

In his mature years, Grundtvig concluded that the national government-supported church should be retained, although the government should use no compulsion to make individuals join it. National churches, he concluded, serve a valuable function by educating the population and fostering a moral consensus. He further argued that Danes should be liberated from the legal requirement that, if they remained within the national church, they must be members of the geographic parish in which they resided. Rather, all Lutherans should have the freedom to choose which congregation they wanted to join, based on the compatibility of a particular pastor's theological leanings with the individual's own convictions. Along with this, Grundtvig argued for the freedom of Lutheran pastors to preach their own construal of the Christian faith. In some respect, Grundtvig won this battle, for the "parish-tie" was abolished in 1855 and "free churches" unaffiliated with the established church were officially allowed in 1868, although tests for orthodoxy were still required for the ordination of Lutheran pastors. As Grundtvig's writings show, his desire to allow considerable doctrinal latitude within the state church put him at odds with such ecclesial authorities as Bishop H. L. Martensen, while his mature defense of the value of a national church put him at odds with Søren Kierkegaard.

This anthology succeeds admirably in highlighting these aspects of Grundtvig's theological orientation. This very helpful and well-selected sampling of Grundtvig's unique theology would have even more value if it had probed more deeply into some of the ambiguous aspects of his writ-

ings. For example, more could be said about the way that he integrated (or failed to integrate) his developmental view of cultural history with his focus on the validity of divergent cultural appropriations of Christianity. The first strand in his writings tends to suggest that later cultures are more spiritually adequate than earlier ones, while the second strand intimates that all cultures have comparable (but different) virtues and therefore have equally powerful predispositions to Christianity. The first strand implies a hierarchy in which later cultures can incorporate the values of their predecessors, while the second strand points to a more egalitarian assessment of all cultures. The relation between these themes could have been explored in the editorial introductions or in a few more short selections from Grundtvig's writings.

The relevance of Grundtvig's thought for contemporary theology could have been explored in more detail. For example, his insistence upon the hermeneutic priority of creedal and liturgical traditions could have been compared to recent appeals by some theologians to the interpretive habits of a reading community as the critical factor that stabilizes the meaning of a text. Grundtvig's insistence that the Bible must be read in the light of the creedal practices and sacramental experience of many Christian traditions has many intriguing parallels and intersections with certain types of "post-liberal theology" and "radical orthodoxy." Such a conversation could inject an appreciation for theological freedom and experimentation into these contemporary movements, thereby resisting the caricature that they encourage a rigid traditionalism.

Grundtvig's voice could also be used to counteract the tendency of some post-liberal theologians to sharply distinguish expressions of Christian faith from their cultural environments. In this respect, he may have anticipated the recent theological proposals of Kathryn Tanner.

Of course, one anthology of the writings of a creative, insightful, and unique theologian cannot shed light on every aspect of his thought and cannot put him in dialogue with every promising theological conversation partner. The accomplishment of this volume in making Grundtvig's thought available to English-speaking readers cannot be minimized. It is a spectacular achievement.
