

Grundtvig, an Introduction

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As an introduction to this Grundtvig-seminar on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of his death I have been asked to say something by way of a summary on the many-sided activities of this man. If we compare him to important personalities of other countries one thing will strike us first: Is there anyone else, who in a similar way has had such an influence on his country both in the areas of the life of the Church and of the culture! Usually, we have an either-or in this matter. Moreover we can say that in both areas Grundtvig has started out from a fundamentally original vision of things. His views on the Church have no parallels, and his views on culture have none either. Furthermore his very separation between cultural and Church-life is original, and the same is true of his basic account of both Christianity and culture: everything must be done and everything must be thought "for the sake of human life".

So there may, then, be good reason for also inviting foreigners to a meeting, which is designed to shed some light on Grundtvig's thoughts. But it takes a very wide-spread programme for a conference to cover all areas of Grundtvig's activity; some things will inevitably have to be left out. At the same time, this seminar will also try to give an impression of how his thoughts have not only had great importance for Denmark but have also given impulses abroad.

As a piece of background for the different contributions to this conference, I shall try to enter the very core of his problems and from there to draw different lines to his different areas of activity. His fundamental problem concerned simply the question about the interconnections and interactions between Christianity and man's life on earth. If one takes a step further back, one can see that the basic concern is with the relation between life on earth

and religion in general. It thus turns out to be a universal problem Grundtvig is interested in.

The problem has its roots in his home, a rectory in South Seeland. His father Johan Grundtvig was a representative of the Lutherans of the old days and was in clear opposition to the contemporary rationalistic ways of thought, but actually he was far away from Luther. He was shaped by the so-called Lutheran Christianity of penitence, which took shape in the seventeenth century, and by later pietism. But the view of man as a pilgrim which characterizes this conception of Christianity in fact has its origin far back in the ancient religions of the East and in the period of the syncretism of religions, which prevailed in the countries of the Mediterranean 2000 years ago, and which was to have its significance for the formation of original Christianity. It was from foreign religions that this idea took root in Christianity, that man is a stranger on earth, that the real home of the soul is in heaven, that life is a period of trial, a period of preparation – and on a Christian basis man then becomes a pilgrim, who must attain the Heavenly Jerusalem, to the aim, without tying himself to anything on the way, that man meets death as a deliverance, as an introduction to life eternal, to bliss. In spite of all his deviation Grundtvig was generally bound to a Christianity of pilgrimage, until in 1832 his life took a new turn, more than half-way through his course of life. He lived from 1783 until 1872. But together with this view of Christianity there were quite different thoughts that took root in his mind during his childhood. He found on his father's bookshelf thick old books on the history of mankind and took a deep interest in the development of human races. This interest was with him throughout his life. If he had been asked to characterize his own activities, he would without any doubt have called himself first of all a historian, he edited four times a history of the world, the largest of these right after he had attained clarity about his life in 1832.

We meet here a hidden conflict in his childhood. How can a pilgrim be all absorbed in the history of mankind without being bound to life on earth? Once Grundtvig became aware of this problem it became his main concern to find out how the heavenly and the earthly relate to each other, how human life and Christianity were interconnected. Did life between birth and death not

have any decisive meaning beyond the fact that it decided man's fate after death? Was man's life on earth not important in itself? Could only life after death be meaningful for those who had to live life?

Grundtvig's fight for a solution to this fundamental problem, concerned with "the enigma of man" as he said, was a long one. If we want to understand the fundamental point of view he arrived at, we must retrace the most important stages in his development.

After the scepticism of his student years, where he was influenced by the French Enlightenment, there followed a stormy and romantic youth. As a private tutor in a manor on Langeland he awoke to the awareness that he was a living being, in his unhappy love for the noble lady of the house, Constance Leth. He found himself cast about by his passions, he got to know the world of feelings, "the enigma" of man remained in his mind. But he found refuge in the new development of the time, in the spiritual world of romanticism. Now for the first time he understood how deeply he was influenced during his student times by his Norwegian/German cousin Henrik Steffens, who had given lectures for students both on the German Philosophy of Nature and about Goethe and German Romantic poetry. Now he began to read the Germans, and not only the Dane Oehlenschläger, who had become a poet through his meeting with Steffens. Grundtvig read Shakespeare's dramas in German translation and was deeply moved by them.

Under the inspiration of the philosopher of nature Schelling, who was Steffens' master, he was for a single moment, as we know from his diaries, tempted to see the fundamental contradictions of the human conditions reconciled, and he could therefore look down upon "miserable human existence". Meanwhile the ambitious strivings towards Heaven ended in a painful reversal: as we find out from his diaries from a few months after this event of the 6th May 1806, he realizes that man cannot rise over himself. Man is not a master of himself. Eternity cannot be gained with the strength of man.

But as he did not understand Christian talk about the reconciliation between Heaven and Earth, he takes to preaching from Nordic mythology about life as a drama, a fight between good and evil. Romanticism has opened his eyes to the importance of mythology for the interpretation of human life. The Nordic gods now

become the saving rock, that offers him a firm point in the conflict of the passions, and it was his fascination with Nordic mythology that made Grundtvig into a writer. He discontinues his diary and from now on addresses his writings to the public. He went on writing until his death. If one were to print all his writings, they would fill well over a hundred fat volumes.

The mythological period, where he writes the *Nordic Mythology* (1808) – after having returned to Copenhagen, turns gradually into a preoccupation with history, and his youth ends with a crisis in 1810, because his old father wants him as a chaplain in order to be able to keep his parsonage. As a way of escaping Grundtvig allows himself to be caught by the idea of becoming a crusader and a reformer, perhaps even a martyr for the faith, in that he understands in a moment, that it is only the Christian faith that makes nations flourish. Patriotism and faith belong together. In this way he sees for the first time a Christian unification of the Heavenly and the Earthly – after 1810 he had to give up the idea of all-embracing unity entertained by the romanticists.

But the year ends in a mental collapse. It becomes clear that Grundtvig is strongly manic-depressive. The lofty dreams end in a deep depression and he has to be shown home by some good friends. This meant that he resigned himself to his father's faith to the Lutheranism of the old days. God has punished him for his hybris, and in spite of his unsolved problems he allows himself to be ordained as a subordinate chaplain to his father and became a spokesman for the Lutheran Christianity of penitence that he grew up with.

But the parson and the historian fight within him. His first "Chronicle of the World" (1812) is quite out of balance for that reason, because he is half parson, half historian. A third of this book is concerned with the false faith of the Copenhagen parsons! History is judged from God's word, the Bible, and from there he goes on to condemn Napoleon and his triumphs, and the desire of Norway to free herself from Denmark. But when Napoleon had ended up on Helena, and Norway was separated from Denmark, so that the prophet became out of work, and when all possible positions as a full-time parson seemed to be inaccessible to him, he demonstratively lays down his parson's gown after his father's

death and declares, that he does not intend to preach again, until the king gives him a parsonage.

It was undoubtedly a great relief to him not to be under the obligations of a parson to fight against all false faith, especially as he has not yet found a solution to the problem, that he is fundamentally concerned with. But now he decides to look for enlightenment on this point from another angle than that of Christianity: He will explore life, as it is lived on earth. Through historical, philosophical, and linguistic works he tries to work his way towards "the enigma of life" in a journal under the title "Danne-Virke", which he both edits and writes himself. The journal appears for four years. Now the "parson" must be silent, and the historian come into his own; but – as he says – the reader will be able to find Christianity behind all his writings. His language changes completely. The prophet's emphatic, shivering voice is exchanged for plain and humorous Danish speech. At this point, Grundtvig has begun his philological activities. At the same time he translated the ancient Nordic chroniclers Saxo and Snorre into popular Danish, and for the rest of his life he cultivated his mother tongue and sought out all the sources of language. From his childhood he knew both the Seeland and Jutland dialects, and he became a passionate collector of ancient popular proverbs and sayings. The spirit of a people manifests itself not only in mythology, but also in the picturesque everyday speech of men. And now, after the loss of Norway, it is the spirit of Denmark, that Grundtvig tries to give voice to.

But apart from the Danish language he also cultivated Anglo-Saxon in order to be able to translate medieval Anglo-Saxon poetry. In that particular area he won for himself international recognition. His linguistic gifts were outstanding. He could write both in Danish and in German; he learnt English later, and from his days at school he was quite at home in Latin. One realizes that from his long and contorted constructions in Danish. Nonetheless he became a demonstrative purist: for all foreign words he insisted on finding original Danish equivalents. The snobbish use of foreign expressions which plagued the cultured élite, was opposed by Grundtvig whose aim was, that the mother tongue, which alone

was the “language of the heart”, should win that favoured place, which it deserved among all Danes. No one has made more of the Danish language than Grundtvig: high sensitivity alternates with rough humour. The Danish mentality was given expression in all possible ways in his poetry and songs – although Grundtvig was utterly unmusical. Romanticism marked his language, although he broke away from the romantic view of man, its reconciliation of all contradictions and its pantheism.

As far as his language is concerned, it developed decisively during the period Grundtvig wrote his *Danne-Virke*. In relation to his view of cultures and man, it was during this period that he tried to find a general human basis for his views. It was therefore, that the Christian preaching had to be suspended for a time. But the preacher comes back into his own in 1821, when Grundtvig got a parsonage in Praestø, and a year later in Copenhagen. But it soon shows that he has not found a solution to his problem, the relation between Christianity and human life. And the more uncertain he is about this basic problem, the more gloomy his sermons sound.

No one knows where Grundtvig would have ended up if he had not by chance hit upon an old book, written by one of the Church Fathers from the 2nd century, the Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon in the South of France, whose work “Against the Heretics” was directed against a strong movement in the second century AD, the so-called Gnosticism, which had also entered his own congregation. This religion really corresponded fundamentally to the religious milieu Grundtvig had grown up in, the view of man as a foreigner in the world, that life on Earth was not a real life. Gnosticism denied that God was the creator of the world.

It was only slowly that Grundtvig took over Irenaeus’ view of creation. Seven years passed before he understood that the religion in which he had grown up was in fact determined by Gnosticism. But in 1832 Irenaeus won the day, and for the rest of his life, Grundtvig’s theology and preaching were decisively influenced by Irenaeus. Without this man it is hard to know where Grundtvig would have ended up.

It was not just through his view of creation that Irenaeus became important for Grundtvig. Through his spiritual father Polycarp, Irenaeus was rooted in Johannean Christianity, which is also quite

clear in Grundtvig, and not just in the meaning which St. John's Gospel had acquired for him but also because it showed Grundtvig the way to the recognition that there was a Christian Church with an oral tradition, before the New Testament as a book came into being. Until now the Bible had been the very foundation of Christianity for him. He had got involved in a fierce conflict with opponents of the biblical Christianity of the old days and looked for an incontrovertible criterion for what true Christianity was. He now saw that the Bible could no longer serve as this incontrovertible foundation. At this point he made his own "incomparable discovery". He came to believe that the apostolic faith, which had been handed down through all the generations of the Church, was the criterion for true Christianity. This view did not get Grundtvig any nearer to the solution of his problem: on the contrary it got him involved in a struggle within the Church of Denmark to rid it of the heretics, now that it had become objectively ascertainable what constituted being a Christian. His struggle was a failure, and he gave up his parsonage, although he could not tell himself, really, why he made this decision. Meanwhile a new period of research started for Grundtvig, where he could again try to get his problem solved. He translated Irenaeus and re-read his old German masters. He wanted to ask permission to leave the Church with his followers and to found a new free Church of the right faith outside the official Church of Denmark. That could of course not be allowed, because there was no religious freedom in Denmark at the time. This freedom was first introduced in 1849.

But before this question was quite solved, Grundtvig was already led on quite new ways. On a royal scholarship he had been on three tours devoted to research in England, in order to study old Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the English libraries, in which the English themselves were showing no interest. These travels changed his life and his universe of thought. Grundtvig became a new man. It was said that one could see it in him: the clouds that had overshadowed his features before had now disappeared, he had found the solution to his problem.

I shall not go into the sources of his inspiration in England, except to say that they did not have any immediate influence. As Grundtvig said himself: he had to "write himself to clarity". After his return from England he had to sit down and work over his

experiences. He did that in the course of his work on a new edition of his old Nordic Mythology. In England he had told the story about this, his love from his early days, but now he had to explain to himself his real relation to this mythology, and moreover he needed a coherent explanation of that human life which had suddenly struck him in England. He wrote one sketch after another, wrote four times as much as finally went into the introduction to this book. But the Nordic Mythology of 1832 became the work that marked his decisive break-through in the development of his view of the eternal and the worldly life and their relation to each other: now he could distinguish between the work of the Creator and of the Saviour. Christian faith and human interpretation of life had to be kept apart. Mythology was no more fanciful ideas, as only a year before he had maintained. Now it was a poetical language which could shed light on what it is like to be a man on earth. His new Mythology became a fanfare with which Grundtvig opened the cultural struggle, which mobilized all his energies literally until his death. Faith is of an eternal kind, the cultural struggle for the sake of human life belongs to the realm of time.

As Grundtvig puts it, he had almost miraculously had his eyes opened to life, the natural life of men, life as we all have it, life as it is now. Before, he had wanted to reshape life, the world and man. Everything should be shaped in a Christian way. In his stormy youth he wanted to make the whole people into a Christian people. He gave that up now. Formerly states were to be governed in a Christian spirit, and only Christians knew what God's thoughts were in the affairs of states and peoples. Now he drew a line between Christianity and politics. Before, all science should also be Christian, all true wisdom was Christian, and there was no truth outside Christianity. Now he saw that the Northern heathens through their mythological pictures had spoken truly about life, just as a heathen poet like Shakespeare spoke the truth in his dramas. For the same reason Grundtvig could now share human enlightenment with other people of different faiths, as long as they knew the difference between living and dead enlightenment.

Now he says that no German philosopher had more eagerly than himself tried to shape the world and men according to an idea, in his own case a Christian idea. The ideals of the past were the stan-

dard, the present should be judged from the outside. But now Grundtvig turns back to human existence as it presents itself now, to the present, to reality. The answer to the question that had bothered him before, the question what man's life meant, had found a clear answer: it meant everything both to God and to man. Life is God's creation, and salvation is designed for this creation. It is present and for that reason alone eternal.

In 1810 Grundtvig turned to faith in God and salvation, now he turned to human life as God's creation, and then he understood God's salvation in a new way: as the deliverance of this life from all its enemies, from the dark, from sin and death. Death was no more a liberation from the life on earth towards that life which was alone worth calling "life". Salvation was not any more salvation from life but salvation for life. Sin was no more connected with the very idea of man's existence on earth, but it now meant that men on earth had a will of their own, that they were disobedient to their creator. Forgiveness therefore meant a rebirth as God's child, it was an event through which men were given back to their daily life in order to serve it and make use of it. No man is anything outside the context in which he is living. Grundtvig's rejection of the old Lutheran Christianity of penitence meant the rejection of Christianity of the individual man, the rejection of the idea of the individual soul's salvation from this life which man must live on earth. That thought only leads – as it does in Gnosticism – to godless self-cultivation.

So the congregation is no more a collection of saved people, a sociological factor, a self-oriented community of the faithful with their backs to the world.

Before, he could call the Church "a holy moral society". Now the only function of the Church was to proclaim the faith, to preach it and to sing praise. The Church itself is invisible, and only God himself knows its limits.

The apostolic creed loses its character of an objective criterion for the true faith. Now the faith is defenceless in the world.

At the time when Grundtvig wrote his new edition of the Nordic Mythology, which had little in common with the old but is what was the result of his experience in England and his turning towards human life as it is, and when he set out in his cultural struggle

for the sake of human life, he also became a parson again. He received the right to preach in a church in Copenhagen, but not a regular parsonage. Yet in one of his first sermons he says: "Now it is a joy to preach". Twice he had laid aside his preacher's gown, but now he puts it on again – and he continued to preach until his death forty years afterwards. This joyful remark indicates that for Grundtvig sermons now become an unrestrained joyful message for sinful and grieved men. Sermons of penitence become a thing of the past, and new sermons of reawakening begin – where reawakening means to wake up to take one's life from God's hand for nothing, to become a child again before the face of God, and from this position to allow oneself to be given everything.

Christianity cannot be shown objectively, it can only be "confessed, preached and praised". Grundtvig's own Christian evidence lies in his songs of praise, which continue to be sung every day in the churches of Denmark. No one has done more to make songs of praise the sign of life of the Church. He must be unique in the history of the Church, having written more than 1,500 church-songs, partly original ones, partly adaptations of Jewish, Greek, Latin, English and German songs. "The Danish Book of Church Songs" of 1953 has Grundtvig's name below about 35% of its 754 songs. None of the great Christian feasts is likely to be celebrated in Denmark without him, just as it is a fairly rare occasion when a service on Sunday does not contain a song by Grundtvig at all. For baptism, confirmation, weddings, and funerals, Grundtvig has written invaluable songs. Only morning and evening songs are in short supply. The reason for that was probably that Grundtvig did not know the feelings of morning and evening from personal experience. He worked right round the clock, and when he got tired he pulled up his blanket, turned down his lamp and fell asleep for a few hours in his chair.

From his youth, Grundtvig tried to write songs, but he managed to write only little, before he broke through to clarity on his basic problem.

It was, when his eyes were opened to life as we have it before us, to the present, to the life of men, as it really is, which alone means something, man's existence today, where the battle has to be won, at the moment, when Grundtvig turns his eyes to this

reality, God's kingdom also becomes a present reality. The gospel loses its status as a norm for life and becomes exactly an evangelion, a good message, which makes life new. The Creator shows himself as he who does not deny or reject his creation, although men misuse it so much. Salvation is no more only a matter of the future, God's kingdom is among us, but it is hidden away. There will come a time when it will be visible to everyone.

That is the basic message of Grundtvig's songs. The concept of the "now" which characterizes the introduction to the Nordic Mythology of 1832 and constitutes the first signal for a Nordic struggle against the death that threatens human life from all sides, this "now" breaks forth at the same time both in his sermons and in his songs. At the time that he says "Now it is a joy to preach", he also writes his first free song of praise. Here he says: "Cast off are now the fetters of death". Death is not any more a deliverance from life, it is the enemy, the enemy of God and of man. Salvation is salvation for life.

Sin is not connected with that in man which is bound up with this world, but with the fact that he is self-willed and disobedient to the creator. Now the thoughts of Irenaeus have broken through. Christianity has nothing to do with a rejection of life. That would be gnosticism. The pilgrim's view of the world has now been overcome. Grundtvig himself is under the impression that he has broken with centuries of Christian tradition.

The Church is not any more an objective power in the world, a divine institution with changing fortunes, which can be kept clear of heretics and law-breakers, now the Church is invisible and can only be seen through God's work. By contrast the institution of the Church is a purely human phenomenon, a civil institution, which must be steered along in a worldly way and by civil laws given by parliament. Its parsons are the people's functionaries while the Holy Catholic Church has only the Holy Ghost as its priest. The institution of the Church can now be a framework even for the most widely different creeds. There should be complete religious freedom for the individual. Everyone should be allowed to join the church and the parson he wishes to join. This became reality in Grundtvig's lifetime, and it was also made possible, for groups inside the People's Church to found independent congregations, which elected their own parson, built their parsonage

and a church. Since then they have even been allowed to use the ordinary church, and even very small groups can get the use of these churches for their special services.

In this way the Danish Church has built-in safety-valves everywhere, with the result that it failed to break up. Minorities are to be respected – on the basis of Grundtvig’s thoughts on freedom. The Church becoming an autonomous body must be avoided because a purely political administration can best ensure the freedom in the citizen’s institution, which the People’s Church should be. There is no other country in which such a policy with regard to the Church is pursued. Even in the other Scandinavian countries, the development went in the opposite direction. The development is towards the independence of the Church over against the State.

Grundtvig is afraid that a division within the Church could create a division among the citizens, and that the Church could become a political factor in the state. Generally speaking, the differences in creed must not affect the collaboration which the citizens of the state can have in cultural areas, if they stand together quite independently of their differing creeds in a common view of culture. Grundtvig’s own aim is no more to oppose Church and culture to each other but to preach Christianity in the Church and at the same time to join with others in the fight for the living instead of the dead, with men of different or even no creed, who have eyes for the fact that man is “a divine experiment of dust and spirit” and not just a biological product or – as the old Lutherans put it – a stick or a stone, – because they had overlooked the fact that man was created in the image of God. The decisive sign for this is, that man was created with a living speech on his tongue. The breath of life is blown into man, and the word is drawn from this breath. In speech the world of the spirit manifests itself. The old Lutherans were of the opinion that there were only two kinds of spirit, the spirit of the world and the Holy Spirit. They did not know the spirit of man which can combine with others in spite of differences in creed to fight against that which is without spirit and inhuman. As a living being one can have a feeling for the fact, that life is not a rational affair, that there is something that will not yield to rational analysis. Two and two does not always make four. There is a difference between the living and the dead in a society, in the life of a people, in teaching, in linguistic ex-

pressions. The opposition between "life and death" was the crucial opposition for Grundtvig in the cultural struggle. A culture has to be living, not stamped with death or inhumanity.

After Grundtvig had finished his great Nordic Mythology, where he conceived of myths as a language of symbols, a human interpretation of life on earth – he began for the fourth time a History of the World. Now it was to become a story about the lives of nations without a raised finger, as before, and without moral judgments on the past. The past was no more a norm for the present or the future. Youth could use the past as a source of experience, when the way into the future had to be outlined, the golden mean between reaction and revolution. But in any case, history had to be continued: life is never at rest.

As a political thinker, Grundtvig rejected his Christian conservatism and declared himself to be in agreement with the spirit of the time, where before he had been at variance with it. The freedom of the people should be realized. But he was not interested in a modern democratic constitution; he thought that a simpleton of a king would be the best thing for the freedom of the people, because the "cultured" who worked for a "constitution" were only interested in governing the people instead of the king. Grundtvig was elected into the constituent assembly, and he was against moves to imitate foreign patterns of constitutional organization. If Denmark was to have a new constitution it was in any case going to have to be a Danish constitution tailored to the needs of the situation in Denmark. One had to be careful not to start with general principles, but to organize things in such a way that there could be ever-changing laws and forms as they were required at any given time. Grundtvig was unable to vote for the final draft of the constitution, because it did not give enough freedom, but he did not want to vote against it because he did not want to be associated with the reactionaries. But when it was later attempted to change the constitution in a reactionary direction, he fought – after he had been voted into parliament at the age of 83 – to retain the benefits of the liberties introduced by the constitution. He fought in vain. But that was his last political move. Meanwhile many of the ideas which he had advocated as a politician throughout the years had borne fruit, not least in the areas of freedom of culture, law and the Church.

He had learnt much from English Liberalism, although his own concept of freedom was significantly different from that, say, of Adam Smith. Grundtvig did not start out with a belief in the general harmony of society which would result if only every individual got his freedom so far as that could be stretched before it interfered with the freedom of someone else. He went exactly the opposite way round: he began with the freedom of the others to interfere with one's own freedom. "I am not free if you are not". Freedom is not primarily the freedom of the individual, it is a question of freedom among men in their communal life. There certainly is here an element of the ancient cultural heritage of the North, whereas Adam Smith built on the notions of modern individualism.

In the Danish Parliament he was a lonely man, although he stood on the side of the "people", that is of the peasants. At that time they made up 80% of the population. His opponents belonged to the party of the professors – as he liked to call the cultured gentlemen. One of Grundtvig's main opponents was Bishop Mynster, the strong man of the Church. Also the minister of culture, the learned Latin scholar professor Madvig strongly opposed Grundtvig's proposal to found a central folk high school in Sorø, because the minister found a monopolization of Danishness in Grundtvig's proposal.

Grundtvig had set out his thoughts about the folk high schools in the Nordic Mythology of 1832. He had done so in the context of his discovery of the importance of real everyday life, which it now became a task to shed light upon in all its aspects. Part of the reason for this college was an announcement by the king, that advisory committees of the people were to be set up throughout the country to advise the king on legal matters. Here Grundtvig was afraid that the peasants' representatives might not be a match for the cultured man in the negotiations. For that reason the peasants should be strengthened in their command of their own language and should be taught about the concerns of their country. They should become conscious of their "popular culture" and should not let themselves be overawed by the cultured academics who thought themselves that they had the exclusive right to culture in the world. Through a historico-poetical approach to enlightenment of life the brightest of the young peasants should be awakened to a consciousness that they had a home land, a history and a

mother tongue. For it is just in the youth that those strings are struck in a personality that will sound again throughout life. Through the interaction between the young and the teachers that are somewhat older and have collected some experience of life, and through interaction among the young themselves – they come from all walks of life – they will come to understand something of life, that life which is always already there, also among the young. Life does not have to be created, it only needs to be “woken up, nourished and enlightened”, so that it can gain its power over everyone. Grundtvig is not directly concerned with ethical education and intervention, but he holds the belief, that the enlightenment which arises out of a close contact with human reality will also lead again to such contact. That which is to characterize the folk high school is that it should not lead to any examination or qualification of a formal sort. Every subject has its aim in itself as a contribution towards the illumination and enlightenment of life. It is the life of the Danish people that is to be worked for, and that would also be the essential thing without political motivation.

Grundtvig's ideas about universities have a wider scope. He wanted to build up a Nordic university in Gothenburg in Sweden to replace the existing universities which were to be restructured as schools for administrators of their countries. By contrast all those that really want to do research were to go to Gothenburg: the North has neither enough men nor enough money to have more than one university. In Gothenburg human existence should be researched into, from all sides and with all perspectives. The natural sciences should also make their contributions. It was only after his visit to Cambridge that Grundtvig gave in to the scientists because he made friends among its adherents. Even mathematics was a subject for theologians to study in Cambridge! The scientific cooperation Grundtvig witnessed in Cambridge became an inspiration for the plan to build a university in Gothenburg, but there was also the Athens of antiquity in the back of his mind, with its unsurpassed symposium of “philosophers”. But it was Henrik Steffens that first introduced Grundtvig to science and opened his eyes to the “enigma of man”, the problem which the university in Gothenburg was supposed to study. When Steffens died, Grundtvig called him the “lightning man”.

But why not make do with one European university? For every cultural area has something to contribute, and the North has such a history and literature – particularly the Icelandic – and such a close relation to it, that there could be serious talk about a special Nordic Science. Grundtvig is not least concerned with the direct opposition to the Roman culture which has more or less shaped European universities. Grundtvig's view of culture is first and foremost directed against Rome. The Roman "clarity" denies life and calls forth death in all its forms. But in the North the depths and dimensions of human existence are to be researched into – for the sake of human life. And when no thought can reach further out or deeper in, the thought meets Christ, the answer to the enigma of life. He finishes the process of history. There true human life is manifested in its full clarity, not before then. God's eternal aim is light in the human life which he has created.

Obviously, Grundtvig's thoughts are shaped by his time. But if he can still be felt to be modern a hundred years after his death, that is first and foremost because of his coming to terms with his time and his own past which led him from 1832 onwards to draw a line between what comes from God and what are human works, between Heaven and Earth, between Church and culture, between Christian faith and human interpretation of life. It is from this point that the songs of praise broke forth which have left their stamp on the Danish Church life, and it was through this that Grundtvig's view of a People's Church took firm shape, so that it became more and more different from the structure of other Churches. Inside the Church the conflict about what Christianity is all about can develop freely and all the time the fight of Christianity against gnostic tendencies to believe in salvation from life is still relevant. It is against this background that one must understand Grundtvig's motto: "First be a Man, and only then a Christian". There is no question here of an educational progression or a sequence of upward steps: there is a polemical attitude against every conception of Christianity which is not bound up with the life of men as a precondition and with the language of men as that language which God alone can speak. That means also that it is for the sake of human life that God has spoken and still speaks.

But also culture, an interpretation of life, science, and political activities only become meaningful, when they all are directed towards human life and work for its further development. Grundtvig's view of popular culture can always receive new meaning where this culture is in danger, be it in developing countries or in the civilized world, where peoples and linguistic minorities fight for their cultural identity and their survival. The greater the fusions of states, the more the problem of popular culture becomes acute. The same is true of other parts of the world, where European cultural influence is being replaced by local cultures.

There still is inspiration to be gained from Grundtvig's view of man in our fight against the modern way of looking at life, the positivistic, the biological, or the materialistic economic. When science offers some explanation or other of life we can here try our hands at a modern translation of Grundtvig's way of saying what the real living man is: a divine experiment in dust and spirit. The words are those of Romanticism, what they refer to is with us today.