

Grundtvig's eschatology and its realistic significance: Reflections from the Chinese context

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In the nineteenth century, Grundtvig as a great spokesman and apologist of Christianity in Denmark had already reclaimed the proper place of eschatology in his theological thinking; from it we can understand his view of the ultimate destiny of the whole creation in its universal-historical framework. His eschatology is neither individualistic nor futuristic, nor did it separate human beings from other realities in the world, neither was it fulfilled only in a transcendent way by God's divine intervention at the end of history. To some Chinese Christians today, Grundtvig's secularizing eschatology can offer some new insights into these aspects of theology. Grundtvig fully affirms the present world by seeing it in the scope of God's continuous creation. One of Grundtvig's great contributions to Christian thinking lies in his working out of the relationship between Christianity and secular culture. Grundtvig's positive view of human nature becomes the basis for an inclusive view of salvation. With the unity of creation and redemption, all will ultimately enjoy communion with the Triune God.

Karl Barth once said that "eschatology is a harmless little chapter at the conclusion of a Christian Dogmatics" (McGrath 2001, 565). This could be so because eschatology used to be understood as a topic isolated from other theological discussions in the pattern of traditional systematic theology. Besides, the Biblical sources of Christian eschatology were mainly taken from the strictly apocalyptic books, especially from the Book of Revelation. Consequently eschatology used to be dealt with in a narrow sense, which referred only to some specific events due to happen at the end of human history. All these events were expressed by different specifically religious symbols. With the baptism of Rationalism into Christian thinking, eschatology as a revealed doctrine became further marginalized or even abandoned. Some contemporary theologians, however, like Moltmann and Pannenberg have tried to restore the position of eschatology and to argue for its central importance, because "with eschatology Christian theology provides a vision of hope through the transforming work of God" (*ibid.*). The same could be true of N. F. S. Grundtvig's eschatology already in the nineteenth century. Already then Grundtvig as a great apologist for Christianity in Denmark reclaimed the proper place of eschatology in his theological thinking, a place from which we can understand his view of the ultimate destiny of the whole creation in its

universal-historical framework. What is more, Grundtvig's eschatology was neither individualistic nor futuristic. Nor did it separate human beings from other realities in the world so as to be fulfilled only in a transcendent way through God's divine intervention at the end of history. On the contrary, his eschatology is full of realistic significance for this life, empowering people with hope and faith, not fear and trembling, to participate in God's continuous creation until the consummation of all things. These are the most attractive parts of Grundtvig's eschatology to those Chinese Christians who have been concerned only with the redemption of individual spiritual life. They have held an inactive and pessimistic attitude to involvement in social affairs, for they believe that on the day of judgment everything in this world will be destroyed. For them, Grundtvig's secularizing eschatology can offer some wonderful new insights in these aspects of our faith.

This article aims at discussing the realistic significance of Grundtvig's eschatology – that is, the way in which he worked out a theology of active human participation in God's continuous creation in the light of a realized eschatology. First of all, I will try to explore the social and intellectual background against which his eschatological view was shaped. Then I will talk about the theological sources which he used, drawing from Scripture, the Church Fathers and others. Third, I will analyze the contents of his eschatology in three aspects: first the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, then communion with the Triune God, and third theosis through faith, hope and love. Finally I will try to reflect on the realistic significance of this view from the perspective of a Chinese Protestant Christian.

The background of Grundtvig's eschatology

Serious theological thinking with the clear purpose of serving the church is not something that can be done in an ivory tower; it needs to be correlated with its social and intellectual context. Grundtvig is a great church theologian whose theology is embodied primarily in his sermons, his hymns and his liturgical texts. So in his eschatology he does not fight like one beating the air, but he addresses the concrete challenges of his own lifetime.

Grundtvig grew up in a society which saw radical social changes. In the late decades of the eighteenth century, Denmark became very prosperous because of the agricultural reforms and increasing overseas trade. But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, war struck in Copenhagen in a way which really shocked the Danes. The entire navy was seized by England; the government went into bankruptcy.

“Denmark’s history of the next 15 years is one of war, defeat and economic collapse” (Knudsen 1955, 237). With these economic and political upheavals, we can imagine how the Danes thought about eschatology at that painful time. Some might still long for a future kingdom of God, but with a passive or pessimistic attitude towards this world; others might have completely lost their faith in eschatology following the ethos of the then fashionable rationalism and scepticism.

At this time, Grundtvig also had an increasing fear of final destruction. He not only sensed the political threat to his fatherland, but also became sad about its cultural decline. His sermon on “The Masked Ball in Denmark” (*Maskeradballet i Danmark*) exactly shows his eschatological view from this final destructive mythological perspective (Thyssen 1983, 99). However, in 1812 Grundtvig published *World Chronicles* (*Kort Begreb af Verdens Krønike i Sammenhæng*) with the plan “to write a theodicy history, that is, he intends to show the birth of Christ as the central event in history, and by thus showing God’s finger in the progress of mankind, prove the truth of Christianity through history” (Jensen 1984, 18). By working on this, Grundtvig tries to promote the rebirth of his country as well as of its religious hope. This religious hope foreshadows his emphasis on the realistic meaning of his eschatology.

During Grundtvig’s lifetime, Enlightenment and Rationalism came to have an enormous influence on Christian theology. When reason was being hailed as the supreme judge according to the rationalistic optimism of the times, eschatology as a revealed doctrine was inevitably questioned or even abandoned. For example, many people, such as Henrik Georg Clausen, regarded eschatology as a superstition devoid of any real basis in life. Besides, the ideas of eternal life and hell were considered not profitable in the light of the dominant utilitarianism and pragmatism of the time (McGrath 2001, 561). What is more, in Grundtvig’s time, God himself began to be practically eliminated from serious consideration; people resorted to the order of nature and inferior common sense. Talking about eschatology meant talking about eternal values. In this view, redemption and the Deity were no longer at all considered necessary (Knudsen 1955, 225). Consequently, many among laity people gradually became oblivious of the distinctive contents of Christian eschatology.

Grundtvig strongly reacted to this from the perspective of the living Word. In his dismissory sermon “Wherefore is the Word of the Lord disappeared from his house” (*Hvi er Herrens Ord forsvundet af hans Hus?*), he attacked the priests’ sermons in Copenhagen because they were either full of rigid rational thinking which has little or nothing to do with the spiritual life, or else filled with “vain chatter

about all manner of earthly triviality” (Lausten 2002, 206). What Grundtvig tried to do here was to restore the Biblical dimension to eschatological thinking. However, he was not wholly anti-rational, but he strongly rejected the apotheosis of reason (Nielsen 1955, 157).

The theological sources of Grundtvig's eschatology

It is in this kind of social and intellectual background that Grundtvig criticized the prevalent misleading views of eschatology. Thus he began to formulate his own eschatological thinking trying to renew religious hope according to his solid faith in Christ. Generally speaking, Grundtvig has made use of four theological sources¹ in establishing his universal-historical framework for a realized eschatology.

The philosophy of Schelling

Over the latter part of the eighteenth century there emerged among German philosophers, in part as a reaction against Rationalism, the movement which came to be known as Romanticism – to which Grundtvig found himself attracted. Romanticism tends to focus on what is beautiful and harmonious in nature, and guides people to understand the world through intuition and imagination when logic and reason have failed them. Among the great philosophers of Romanticism, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling (1775-1854) is the one who influenced Grundtvig the most. Schelling believed that “the inner and ‘real’ character of all life was a spiritual, dynamic force, given expression through the principle of an absolute God, the Being who unites all within himself” (Knudsen 1976, 235). That is, the two contrasting aspects of everything will ultimately be united and brought together into God and God will be in all. In the beginning, Grundtvig was fascinated by this total and complete system of Schelling, but later he found it too idealistic and unable to solve the problem of theodicy by means of a monist philosophy which claims to embrace time and eternity in one consistent approach. So he began firmly and constantly to reject Schelling’s monist philosophy and to regard it as a snare. “For him, there is no dialectical resolution, however skillfully worked out, of the conflict between life and death, truth and lie” (Allchin 1997, 55). Therefore, we find in Grundtvig’s works that Schelling was increasingly frequently and negatively quoted. His pantheistic eschatology became a constantly renewed danger to Grundtvig.

The study of history, mythology and poetry

Although Grundtvig criticized Schelling's philosophy for the rest of his life, yet his original Romantic interests in history and poetry left an indelible mark on him.

Grundtvig's view of history thus also developed through the years. In his early writing of *World Chronicles (Kort Begreb af Verdens Krønike i Sammenhæng)*, he had a premodern view that evaluated general history in light of Biblical history, from which revealed theology and natural theology were derived. He insisted that both the bearers of Biblical truth and those who have experienced the transforming power of God can be saved from sin and enter into eternity (Allchin 1997, 39). But even at this time, his eschatology is becoming inclusive because he firmly believes that the destiny of all creation is decided by God's will. It is God's fingers that are in the gloves of history.

Besides all this, Grundtvig also drew some important insights from the study of Nordic mythology. He found that the myths were not simply symbols of natural phenomena as the rationalists had explained. Actually the myths demonstrated how the northern European peoples had understood the Transcendent Being and the moral law. In the mythological drama, the everlasting core is the triumph of good over evil. Grundtvig links this core with the manifestation of the Divine in Christianity, thus broadening his view of God's universal work. "He now sees his task as a poet and as an educator of the nation: he is 'to revive the Norse heroic spirit in Christian deeds along lines suitable to the needs and terms of the present day'" (Jensen 1984, 20). So now his view of history is no longer purely Christocentric, but gradually turns to a Trinitarian pattern.

Later it was during his three visits to England that Grundtvig discovered the "present". Shakespeare said, "what is past is prologue".² It is a beautiful way of summing up Grundtvig's new discovery. So now "his attention turns to the present as well as to the future – to the possibilities and tasks that lie ahead" (Henningsen 2004, 286). Consequently, Grundtvig no longer spends so much time and energy on the study of the past history, nor on a totally futurist eschatology which is too far from here and now. The realistic meaning of the eschatology becomes more important to him.

Furthermore, it was also in England that Grundtvig began to work on the relationship between Christianity and secular culture. He was greatly touched by the profundity of the ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry both religious and heroic. On this basis, a new kind of universal-historical science began to dawn on him. He said:

I insist that when we consider the world of the spirit with Nordic eyes and in the light of Christianity, we arrive at a concept of universal-historical development, art and scholarship which encompasses all of human being. With all its dynamics, its conditions and its consequence, the world of the spirit liberates, strengthens and enlivens all. This is in accord with the welfare of the individual, of whole peoples and all of humanity. It will lead us to the most perfect explanation of life possible on this earth.³

Here we see the inclusion of an affirmed secular culture into the realm of the Christian Spirit; we see the emphasis on a present eschatology that seeks a perfect explanation of life on this earth. However N. L. Jensen understands this point from a different perspective: "A Mosaic-Christian way of thinking recognizes that Christianity gave to the thought and culture of the world of nations a universal human character that was not known before" (Jensen 1984, 22). This universal human character becomes the basis for the unity of different cultures and religions. This is typical of Grundtvig's inclusive eschatology which argues that "adherents of other traditions may relate savingly to God" (Heim 1995, 59), but without losing the uniqueness of Christianity at the same time. In hindsight, Grundtvig's efforts here can be regarded as a good example of doing contextual theology in such a way that a positive synthesis comes into being without disregarding Christian identity.

The fourth gospel

When he became the assistant of his father in the parish, Grundtvig's life as a preacher started. In the following years, he wrote many poems and many sermons on the God-Man relationship, the *parousia* of Christ and the coming of God's kingdom, all well documented with Biblical allusions. At this time, "the teaching about eternal damnation and hell became a problem for him" (Thodberg 1983, 93); it was contrary to his insights from the study of poetry, history and mythology, but he found the vital turning point in the fourth gospel. It is there that his eschatology is "realized and anticipated as in the Johannine Writings in the New Testament" (Allchin 1997, 47). And among the Johannine writings, he said, "The discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of John must be for us a Biblical core."⁴ The reason Grundtvig prefers the Fourth Gospel is because he finds there a realized eschatology, which is definitely in accord with his focus on present history. C. H. Dodd, the English New Testament scholar, provides a thorough description of the realized eschatology. He believes that the Day of the Lord prophesied in the Old Testament has been demonstrated by Jesus' life, passion and resurrection. The kingdom of

God has already started in the coming of Jesus.⁵ “A time is coming and has come now” (John 4:23). God’s kingdom is here and now. When Grundtvig explains John 1:14, he says that

This basic oneness of the Word with our Lord Jesus Christ, you see, is not merely a profound truth which sheds light on God’s only-begotten Son, through whom he created and redeemed the world, but it is also a blissful secret which gives the believers the blessed assurance that God’s son, their Lord and Savior, is as near to them as in his Word of faith on their lips and in their hearts, and this Word has the power to conquer the world, defy the gates of hell, accomplish the good deeds of the Father, and, above all, raise the dead to life.⁶

Thus Grundtvig’s eschatological view becomes more persuasive with this Biblical illustration and affirmation; but we see that he values the Bible more in the sense of the living Word rather than any merely literal reading.

The theology of Irenaeus

Confronted by the challenges of theological rationalism, Grundtvig sought inspirations not only from the Biblical canon itself and from ancient culture, but also from the rich Christian traditions of the first centuries. In the year of 1823, he was absorbed in reading *Adversus Haereses*, the work of the famous anti-Gnostic church father Irenaeus. What attracted him most was not only his “matchless discovery” ... the foundation of Christian church was not the Canon of scripture alone, but in the living witness through the plan of proclamation, of the sacraments and the creeds in worship, but also of Irenaeus’ positive and optimistic view on eschatology. “Irenaeus’s emphasis on man as God’s creation redeemed by Christ and his teaching about God’s essence as life and love became of the greatest importance to the new view of Christianity that dawned on him” (Jensen 1984, 20). Throughout history he sees human beings as in a process of growth in faith, hope and love until we are all deified under the new headship of Christ. Irenaeus’ doctrine of anakephaliosis (recapitulation) means that “the development which was broken in Adam is resumed by Christ and fulfilled in Him so that not only mankind but also the whole cosmos finds its fulfilment in the appearance of Christ” (Tillich 1968, 45). Grundtvig understands the appearance of Christ as the living Word closely related to the Holy Spirit which is constantly transforming and renewing God’s creation until the ultimate consummation.

So eschatologically speaking, Grundtvig was influenced by the four aspects listed above. Schelling’s pantheism helped him see the

foreshadowing warning of his thinking; the study of the Nordic myths provided him with the cultural conveyer; the Fourth Gospel offered him the Biblical basis, the theology of Irenaeus shaped his theological framework. Now we may turn to the contents of Grundtvig's eschatology.

The contents of Grundtvig's eschatology

With the background knowledge and his theological sources, now we may better understand how it is that Grundtvig formulates his eschatological view. According to McGrath, the doctrine of the last things is usually composed of three crucial aspects: a) the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, b) coming of the kingdom of God and c) the ultimate destiny of the creation (McGrath 2001, 553). These themes are also covered in Grundtvig's eschatology.

The meaning of Jesus' resurrection

The resurrection of Christ is seen to be the unshakable foundation of Christian faith. According to St. Paul, "if Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are all lost" (1 Cor 15:17-18). Accordingly, Grundtvig not only takes the historical fact, but also stresses Christ's victory over death by resurrection. The problem of the combat between life and death is the central theme in Grundtvig's thinking, already in an existential manner two decades earlier than Søren Kierkegaard (Knudsen 1976, 3). Here the conflict between life and death to which Schelling had given no satisfactory solution was bridged by Christ's unique and all-encompassing resurrection from death. According to Grundtvig, all human beings who are made in the *Imago Dei* will also share in this conquest of death by participating in Christ's humanity of Christ – who has already crossed over from death to life.

Meanwhile Grundtvig was very critical about much traditional Lutheran Orthodoxy and Pietism for its too high concentration on the passion of Christ taken by itself (Allchin 1997, 247). For Grundtvig, Christ's death can never be separated from the glory of his resurrection and exaltation because His resurrection renders us the hope of life so that we become immune from the sting of death. Jesus' victory over death turns over a brand new page in human history that is reoriented into eternity. One part of Grundtvig's poem can better illustrate this:

The tempter by his evil power
The kingdom is distressing,

God crowns in His appointed hour
With joy and fruitful blessing.

(...)

Its glorious king is He who died
Upon the cross to save us,
New joy unto the world to bring
His very life He gave us
(Knudsen 1976, 126)

Grundtvig's understanding of resurrection as a victory over death is not merely confined to the individual, but is seen as a cosmic victory including the whole creation. He looks upon community as the essential characteristic of salvation. That is, through resurrection, everyone is united with Christ and consequently with each other. They together establish a community of the living faith – the universal church. Therefore the living testimonies that the church makes to the indwelling of the living Word can never be defeated by reason, but becomes the beginnings of a salvation in a cosmic dimension. The message of resurrection becomes more and more widely spread with the work of Holy Spirit to enlighten people to recognize their underlying potentiality to become Christlike. Even the celebration of Easter in the church year corresponds to the natural resurgence of the world when spring arrives and green appears after a white winter. With this universal-historical structure, Grundtvig foresees a grand panorama of the ultimate destiny of all the creation. Therefore he

sees Easter as both a cosmic and corporate reality, involving the whole believing human race, and thus sees it as the end and fulfilment of human history, nothing less than a fusion together of human and divine, a fusion together of heaven and earth in the love which the indwelling Spirit brings (Allchin 1997, 38).

The Communion with the Triune God

With the concept of recapitulation, we know that Grundtvig's eschatology is totally Trinitarian, but he is not willing to comprehend the doctrine of Trinity simply in such traditional theological terms as *persona* and *substantia*. He would rather talk about a personal and loving God who makes himself active in the dynamic development of human history by sending his only-begotten Son and the Spirit to save the sinful and to renew the creation (Pannenberg 1991, 329). So eschatologically speaking, Grundtvig believes that communion with the Triune God is the perfect consummation of all things surpassing all human imagination.

We can see this more in detail. First of all, Grundtvig's eschatology is closely related to the idea of the economic Trinity. The economic Trinity speaks of the manner in which the Trinity is made known within the economy of salvation, that is, in the historical process itself that God has ordered for the salvation of humanity in history (McGrath 2001, 251). It works also as to the doctrine of Appropriation, however, since it may still be appropriate to say that God the Father is mainly responsible for creation, the Son mainly for redemption, and the Spirit mainly for establishing and guiding the church. Grundtvig would not like to accept this as a mechanical distinction, but he understands it with the aid of the poetic imagery that can be traced back to Irenaeus before the Council of Nicea. It is very interesting here that Grundtvig sees an inseparable relationship between heart, mouth and hand at the human as well as the divine level. Heart represents the seat of *Aand* [spirit] and serves to ponder and nurture the received word of truth and to be the human creature's prompt to godliness in thought, word and deed; mouth represents the truth of intellect as it is spoken out; hand represents the power of life which embodies humanity's active will. At the divine level, "Always the Father's love is made manifest in the Word who speaks, and again made active in the Spirit who gives life, thus making the divine love incarnate" (Allchin 1997, 132 f.). Through the divine economy we see the perfect unity established between creation and redemption, which in the end involves all the creation. "With the continuous creation, reconciliation and consummation, the death of universe seems to have become less probable" (Maquarrie 1966, 312).

Secondly, Grundtvig envisages the immanent Trinity as the perfect model for the harmonious relationship within the whole creation. The immanent Trinity refers to the understanding of the Trinity as existing in "Himself", rather than in relation to the world and humanity (Ford 1989, 318). It is also called the essential Trinity because God is understood as outside the limiting condition of time and space. The doctrine of *perichoresis* (mutual interpenetration) shows "the dance of love in which each one defers to the other, makes way for the other, exchanges place with other. This is the pattern of divine personhood which we see in God and the Trinity" (Allchin 1997, 136). So from this we learn to love each other, which is not only for the benefit of this life in time, but also leads to the communion with God, for God is love. According to Grundtvig, this divine reciprocity reminds us to sweep away all the obstacles of the intra-personal communication both vertically and horizontally. In this way, the consummation of salvation history is fulfilled eschatologically in the consummation of the

Trinitarian life in itself (Pannenberg 1991, 330), which marks the climax of communion with the Triune God.

Thirdly, Grundtvig delivers a realized eschatology from the perspective of the unity between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. This means that God who is known in the economy of salvation corresponds to the way God actually is and that the human experience of God's action in the economy of salvation also shares in the experience of God's inner history and immanent life (McGrath 2001, 255). Thus the divine relationship between God and the world has two distinct forms: one eternal and the other shaped and conditioned by the limiting factors of history. Surely Grundtvig's immanent God is not to be understood as the one who sits alone in His transcendent seat in heaven, but the God who is so near to us here and now. We can infer this from the presence of the Holy Spirit with us who is never independent of the other indispensable two divine persons in their integrated work of creation and redemption. So, Grundtvig's universal-historical framework fits well into the immanent and economic entity of the Trinity.

Grundtvig declares that the kingdom of God is here and now because the King is here and now. Therefore, all his subjects have already been taken into the realized kingdom of God. From the love of God the Father, the resurrected living Word and the Holy Spirit are continuing to give life and to consolidate people's faith. "The Holy Spirit as a Unitive Being, working in the incarnation, the coming together of God and man in the Person of Christ, continues the same work of unification in the community of faith" (Pannenberg 1991, 298). So the immanent God never ceases to create and renew all the creation. "*God is with us; God is with us; God is with us.* In the simplest terms this is the meaning and perennially astonishing import of the doctrine of the divine Trinity"⁷. Therefore, where can human beings go from God's Spirit? Where can human beings flee from His presence? "When all things are in God and God is 'all in all', the economic Trinity is subsumed in the immanent Trinity."⁸

Theosis in faith, hope and love

With the introduction of realized eschatology, God's kingdom is here and now. Objectively speaking, the Triune God has prepared salvation for all creation. Yet how are fallen human beings recreated and renewed in order to inherit God's kingdom in this world? Grundtvig emphasized more the process of human growth as God's continuous creation as Irenaeus had pointed out (Gonzalez 1992, 162). In this aspect, the doctrine of *theosis* (deification) may help us to understand the process more clearly. This doctrine refers to the dynamic process

of one's spiritual growth. "The saving power is from the divine Spirit who dwells in the church and who renews the members out of what is old into the newness of Christ" (Tillich 1968, 47). Later, Allchin elaborates Grundtvig's view and makes it much easier to understand.

According to Allchin, Grundtvig

uses the language of St. Paul and St. John to articulate a vision of human salvation in which, in response to God's loving condescension in coming to share the fullness of our human situation in all its finitude, sinfulness and death, men and women are called to grow into the image and likeness of God through the gift of the Spirit. This means to grow from faith through hope into the fullness of love, a fullness which will in the end mean nothing less than our being filled with all the fullness of God (Allchin 1997, 137 f.).

Grundtvig goes on to explain this process in two steps, first the mystical or sacramental and then the ethical step.

First of all, human beings become partakers of the divine nature in a mystical way. They are reborn by the living Word and the Spirit through baptism. Thus the fullness of the risen life is mystically imputed to them. "The new life, which is participation in God's only begotten Son, the righteous, true, sacred and eternally blessed human life can only be communicated to us by the spoken word"⁹ when confession of the living Word is made in baptism. Afterwards human beings are made a new creation, whose defaced *Imago Dei* starts to be renewed by faith in the Son of God. That is the beginning of eternal life in realized eschatology.

Secondly, Grundtvig underscores the growth of life in faith, hope and love, which is the ethical aspect of theosis. Here Grundtvig introduced the concept of "Christlife" which begins with faith, grows through hope and finds its fulfilment in love (Allchin 1997, 133). On the one hand, he believes in the existence of sin and evil that often brings suffering and ordeal to Christians too. On the other hand, he insists that, with the faith in the Son of God who has conquered death, we need to encourage each other with the living Word from the gospel where hope is produced. Then we are reminded of Jesus' crucifixion that extends the fullness of God's love to us. All in all, everything is included in the commandment of loving God and our neighbours. So the mystical regeneration into immortality and the life full of faith, hope and love show us the unity between time and eternity. Christians are growing to be the citizens of God's kingdom here and now.

The realistic significance of Grundtvig's eschatology

So far we have covered the major aspects of Grundtvig's eschatology. In his vision, there is no horrible and dark day of doom, no rigid, apathetic judgment in the end. We see our Heavenly Father as a great Shepherd gradually bring humankind to a perfect consummation of creation and redemption. This is the most attractive part to a Chinese Christian. Grundtvig's eschatology is full of realistic significance.

Generally speaking, Grundtvig's eschatology is a "secularizing" theology. By secularizing it is meant that "the Christian efforts are turned toward an effective realization of the faith in the world of human problems" (Knudsen 1976, 5). It is different from secularization, which means that "the Christian approach to life is abandoned for an exclusively human or humanistic approach" (*ibid.*). In China, some traditional Christians who were greatly influenced by the theology of the earlier pietistic missionaries hold a futurist view of eschatology, which results in a kind of inactive and passive attitude toward the present world. They do not seek to find the effectiveness and relevance of the gospel in all aspects of this life by personal involvement. But Grundtvig's eschatology puts more emphasis on the bright side of creation, and this is very inspiring to these Christians. It correlates the gospel message and the present world more effectively so that most people will no longer think that the Christian dream of paradise is simply a castle in the air. Three concrete problems will be dealt with in the following part.

Firstly, Grundtvig fully affirms the present world by putting it in the scope of God's continuous creation. It is still God's great creation despite the human destruction after the fall. But in China, some Christians are influenced by the dualism of material and soul. They believe that the material world will be doomed to fade away since it has nothing to do with the spiritual life. They also find such supportive biblical verses as II Peter 3:10-11. Consequently they are not actively involved in building a beautiful and prosperous society together with their fellow countrymen. For them, the kingdom of God is completely other-worldly, and it will come true at the end of history by God's altogether sudden intervention. Grundtvig's eschatology, however, is a good counteraction to this dualism by emphasizing God's continuous creation. God continues to renew the world day by day. Grundtvig is optimistic in seeing the dynamic development of the material world in God's providence. We dwell in this world; God sustains it. Therefore, Christians also have the duty to take care of the world against pollution and other human destruction. In hindsight, Grundtvig can be counted here as the prophetic voice of eco-theology in the west in the

nineteenth century. Furthermore, the Chinese church is carrying out the reconstruction of theological thinking. One of its important themes is the shift from redemption-oriented theology to creation-oriented theology. Bishop Ting is also highlighting God's continuing creation in the framework of process theology. He believes that the created world is good and holy. God still cares for the world which is not under the occupation of any evil one (Ting 2000, 399).

Secondly, one of Grundtvig's great contributions lies in his elaboration of the relationship between Christianity and secular culture. He affirms that the Christian Spirit also works in local cultures to enlighten people to recognize the juncture of truth and immortality. In order to be an apologist of the church and better to preach God's living Word in his own life time, Grundtvig did not reject the local culture of Denmark nor the tradition of Norse mythology, but gained important inspiration and insight from it. But meanwhile these local cultures all need to be perfected by the grace of God through the living Word. In my opinion, Grundtvig's approach to culture may be regarded as Christ transforming culture in H. Richard Niebuhr's typology.¹⁰ In China, the foreign missionaries failed to make Christianity deeply rooted in the soil of Chinese culture because they often misunderstood and even rejected Chinese traditional culture. The "ritual conflict" that happened in the Qing Dynasty is a typical case. The papal bull of 1715 that prohibited Chinese Christians from honouring Confucius and their own ancestors resulted in the banning of Christianity for almost 100 years. This is because the missionaries misunderstood the filial piety toward the dead as known in ancient Chinese ethics. So Grundtvig really set a good example in his way of doing incarnational and contextual theology. As the ancient church fathers believed that *spermatikos* (the seed of Logos) exists in every culture, so also those seeds can be perfected by the Spirit ultimately.

Thirdly, Grundtvig's realized eschatology presupposes God's ultimate victory over sin and death as well as his presence with us now. This provides Christians with enormous confidence and power to confront the suffering in this world. In the modern history of China, Chinese Christians have also suffered a lot from colonial oppression and wars. Consequently some of them lost their faith in love and justice in this world. Paradise became for them an ideal shelter, as well as an excuse to be indifferent to world affairs. But Grundtvig's view argues that God not only creates but also sustains the world each day. When we are fighting for love and justice in His sight, He will be on our side with the promise of victory and peace. That is why Grundtvig also liked to involve himself in the National Assembly and became influential in the Danish political life. In a word, Grundtvig's realized

eschatology reminds us that God's sovereignty and being with us in this world is the only source of our confidence to face whatever may happen tomorrow.

What is more, Grundtvig's eschatology covers an immense scope of salvation, which also sheds light in the Chinese context. First of all, as is mentioned above, most Chinese people comply with the tradition of honouring their parents and ancestors even after they have passed away. But the cultural problem has been: how can the converted Christian descendants who enjoy themselves in heaven after death stand to see their dear non-believing parents or grandparents suffering in hell, since they may never have had the opportunity to hear the gospel? Here Grundtvig renders a good answer by emphasizing the doctrine of the "Descent into hell". The mission of Christ is to bring new life to all. He even took his journey into the place of the dead because there He destroyed the last power of death (Allchin 1997, 45). As the second Adam, His resurrection is a corporate reality that covers both the living and the dead. In short, Grundtvig's eschatology is inclusive.

Secondly, Grundtvig's salvation through theosis is a very crucial addition for those who have been much influenced by the notion of a forensic justification while sanctification has been easily neglected. That is to say, the new life from Christ should not stop at the point of the assurance of salvation, but should continue to grow into perfection. In China, some Christians have a sense of superiority over non-believers once they have believed themselves to be justified and counted as righteous by faith only. To the extreme extent, they cannot appreciate either the natural light in non-believers or the truth and beauty outside the church. For example, the good deeds done by non-believers are disregarded, for they do not have faith in God. But Grundtvig offers a complete picture of spiritual growth not only in faith, but also in hope and love. Hope provides the vision and mission to expand God's kingdom in this world; love is the concrete action to fulfill the Christian responsibility. All is from God's grace – His good will to all human beings. Salvation stopping at the threshold of the new life will inevitably lead to a kind of spiritual arrogance. Therefore, those who consider themselves superior to the non-believers actually made a fatal mistake – even faith is not from the merit of their personal choice, but a free gift from God.

Thirdly, Grundtvig's positive view of human nature becomes the basis for inclusive salvation. In his point of view, human beings are made in the image of God. Despite the fall, "there is something good left of the created glory or the relation to God".¹¹ In other words, He dynamically

related the anthropocentric and theocentric perspectives of man in such a way that he did not water down the meaning of sin from the point of the Christian faith (...) Man the sinner, has not lost the image of God, but he has ceased to yield the fruits to glorify God" (Nielsen 1955, 7).

This is the most important juncture between God and man, and between nature and grace. But in China, some Christians do mission work by emphasizing the doctrine of original sin and total depravity so much that people are not willing to take these exotic concepts and regard themselves as sinners. Pannenberg names this kind of phenomenon the "soteriological reductionalism" that takes sin as the only starting point of grace. In the Chinese culture, however, the understanding of human nature is more reflected from the ancient classic of the *Three-Word Aphorism*, which puts forward an innocent human nature in the beginning like a blank slate. Generally speaking, the western churches can understand sin in a religious sense which means the separation or estrangement between God and human beings. In contrast, the Chinese people understand sin from the perspective of moral behaviour like a crime. So it is inappropriate to import this western concept of sin directly into the Chinese context which inevitably creates some conflicts. So it is no good to push them to accept such ideas from the western theological tradition in a radical way. This is also one of the most important topics discussed by the ongoing Chinese "Theological Thinking Reconstruction" now. Grundtvig believes that *Imago Dei* links God and mankind in a precious personal relationship, even in an eschatological sense. "Sin and fall should not be considered as the sole target of God's gracious intention. This would result in a moralistic and anthropocentric reduction of grace" (Allchin 2000, 37). In short, Grundtvig believes that grace will perfect nature. Therefore, human beings with *Imago Dei* all have the underlying potentiality to be saved inclusively. "Even if he is not Christian today, he will be one tomorrow."¹²

Criticism

However, not all the aspects of Grundtvig's eschatological views can be readily accepted. If we examine and question his concept of a realized eschatology in the light of theodicy, we will not find a realized eschatology convincing enough. Although he acknowledges the existence of sin and evil, obviously he is too optimistic about human nature and culture, which are not that easy to be perfected by grace. He shared the same weakness as Irenaeus in dealing with the human and cultural vices. Besides, he may also be influenced by the optimistic spirit of progressivism since Enlightenment. However, how would he explain the immanent and the transcendent Trinity if he had

heard about the two world wars and Auschwitz in the twentieth century? With this challenge, I do not think the realized eschatology can still hold water. Instead, the inaugurated eschatology is more persuasive. Besides, maybe more room should be left for God's transcendence in his system so that the realization of eschatology will not go so much along the humanistic line.

Conclusion

Grundtvig's eschatology is both Trinitarian and secularizing. On the one hand, "the Trinity safeguards against an exclusivism (Christo-centric) and a pluralistic universalism (Theocentric)" (Heim 1995, 166). With the unity of creation and redemption, every one will ultimately enjoy the communion with the Triune God. On the other hand, his secularizing eschatology has a far-reaching realistic meaning, especially to those who hold an individualistic, pessimistic, otherworldly and futurist eschatological view. In Grundtvig's mind, every human being is supposed actively to partake in God's continuous creation until the consummation.

All in all, Grundtvig is a theologian who is deeply concerned about the existence and meaning of the church in the world. It is from the perspective of the church that his eschatology provides a new vision of God's kingdom in the realistic sense. However, "the fullness of God's mystery is never grasped by us. It is hidden in the Father the source, overflows in Christ beyond the measure of our means to receive it, and is continuously active in all of creation through the Spirit." (*ibid.*, 100). From this, we may understand why Grundtvig's eschatology should end with doxology, full of hope and joy:

O land of our king,
 Where harvest embraces the flowery spring
 Where all things worth having forever remain
 Where nothing we miss but our sorrow and pain,
 This kingdom we hail,
 As we herald abroad the promise of God.¹³

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Notes

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- ¹ See Allchin's discussion in Allchin 1997, such as pp. 32, 39, 49, 55 where the four sources were drawn from.
- ² William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. Quoted in Edwards 1997, iv.
- ³ Grundtvig, "Introduction to Nordic Mythology" (Knudsen 1976, 21).
- ⁴ Grundtvig, "Biblical Sermon" (Knudsen 1955, 42).
- ⁵ Dodd, "The Apostolic Preaching and its Development" (McGrath 2001, 562 f.).
- ⁶ Grundtvig, "18th Sunday after Trinity" (Knudsen 1976, 95).
- ⁷ Alasdair Heron (ed.), "The Forgotten Trinity", xi, (Allchin 1997, 128).
- ⁸ Moltmann, "Crucified God", 265-266 (Pannenberg 1991, 330).
- ⁹ Grundtvig, "Basic Christian Teachings" (Knudsen 1955, 53).
- ¹⁰ Concerning the five types of relationship between Christ and Culture, see Niebuhr 1951. This is just to explain generally in what way Grundtvig sees the interaction between Christ and Culture. But in a postmodern view, the identity of Christianity and culture are not closed.
- ¹¹ Grundtvig, "The Innate and Reborn Humanity" (Knudsen 1976, 76).
- ¹² Grundtvig, *Prose translated by Johannes Knudsen*. Course materials published by Dr. Hans R. Iversen, fall semester of 2004. University of Copenhagen.
- ¹³ Grundtvig, "Hymns and Poetry" (Knudsen 1976, 124).