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## Public Theologian *avant la lettre*? N.F.S. Grundtvig as Historian and Politician

*Ulrich Schmiedel*

*The Common Good: N.F.S. Grundtvig as Politician and Contemporary Historian*, translated by Edward Broadbridge, edited by Edward Broadbridge and Ove Korsgaard, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2019.

In a footnote to the conversations collected in the immensely influential compilation *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Charles Taylor makes a striking statement about secularity: “Were Martin Luther King’s secular compatriots unable to understand what he was arguing for when he put the case for equality in biblical terms?”<sup>1</sup> Criticizing Jürgen Habermas’s suggestions about the significance of translations for post-secular societies, Taylor is not convinced by the terms of the debate about secularity. Translations are needed between two different languages, but what if there is neither a clear nor a convincing difference between religious and non-religious language? Was King, arguing religiously, difficult to understand for secular people? Would Immanuel Kant have been easier to follow? Was Kant, arguing non-religiously, difficult to understand for non-secular people? Would King have been easier to follow? As Taylor puts it, “Would more people have got the point had he invoked Kant?”<sup>2</sup> Taylor’s footnote points to the increasingly interdisciplinary field of public theology. Public theologians are interested in the significance of theology for the public sphere. If theology impacts the private and the public life of people inside and outside churches, they argue, it can contribute to the common good, even in secular or post-secular societies. As far as I can ascertain, Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) is neither analyzed nor assessed in debates about public theology, although he was – as

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” in Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) 34-59, here: 58 fn. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

I would like to suggest in this review – a public theologian *avant la lettre* who could help to re-define the terms of the debate.

The series “N.F.S. Grundtvig: Works in English” consists of five collections of Grundtvig’s writings in English translation. *The School For Life: N.F.S. Grundtvig on Education for the People* (volume 1) started the series with Grundtvig’s writings on education, well-known all over the world. Selections of his poetic (volume 2) as well as his theological (volume 3) and his philosophical (volume 5) writings have followed – with the historical and political writings collected in *The Common Good* (volume 4) couched between his theology and philosophy. *The Common Good* starts with Grundtvig’s “Lectures on Contemporary History,” before it surveys the development of his political vision and his political views in three phases: from 1830 to 1848, from 1848 to 1864, and from 1864 to 1872. The conclusion on “Grundtvig’s Political Legacy” showcases how Grundtvig’s reflections have been invoked and interpreted in politics inside and outside of Denmark until today.

The editors, Edward Broadbridge and Ove Korsgaard, have taken Grundtvig’s lectures on contemporary history as a point of departure because these lectures form and inform his politics. “Denmark, the Most Fortunate Land in the World” points to the center of Grundtvig’s politics: his country. In his account of Grundtvig’s life, Korsgaard argues that Grundtvig positions his political philosophy between “liberalism” and “idealism” by comparing Denmark’s history to the histories of a number of European nations since the French Revolution (28). Given that Grundtvig was a self-admitted Anglophile who travelled to the United Kingdom again and again, liberalism has the pole position in his thinking. (In “England as a Model,” he mentions his “‘Anglomania’ – or in broad Danish – ‘gone mad about England’” (120).) Although neither a “Germanophile” nor “Germanophobic,” Grundtvig treats idealism more critically because “the German philosophers [...] do not much care about how things hang together [...] in the sensual world”; they are only interested “in the *idea* of them, meaning in their own heads” (63). Of course, Grundtvig trades in clichés about the cultures of countries here, but what these clichés highlight is that his history is contextualized internationally rather than nationally. Although his reflections center on Denmark, he regards Denmark from the perspective of the world as much as he regards

the world from the perspective of Denmark. Through his history, Grundtvig shapes the contours of his political philosophy.

Korsgaard compares Grundtvig to the leading lights of European and American political philosophy, culminating in a thought-provoking comparison to Alexis de Tocqueville. Although they write about two different and distinct countries, both study the public sphere in a socially, politically and economically advanced society, while coming from a privileged position at home. Both philosophers are stunned by what they see. Korsgaard points out that “England was in the midst of the industrial revolution, which only made its presence felt in Denmark after Grundtvig’s death [...]. So, in crossing the North Sea, he was in a sense taking a step into the future, into a social process which was to change the world” (29). The future, however, provokes fascination and frustration. While the one philosopher, writing about the US, is impressed by the equality of people (and not so much by their freedom), the other philosopher, writing about the UK, is impressed by the freedom of people (and not so much by their equality). Indeed, equality was not what Grundtvig found in England, which is why he criticized the House of Lords for preventing the UK from implementing equalizing reforms. Korsgaard makes a convincing case for the similarity of the two philosophers, in particular their shared concern for “the people.” He surveys semantic shifts in “the people” in Scandinavia, stressing the significance of Grundtvig for the shift of “*folkelig*” from the domestic to the non-domestic, namely “the national.” According to Korsgaard, “Grundtvig is without doubt the single person in Denmark who has contributed most to giving the concept of ‘a people’ its modern meaning” (37). The consequences of this shift are spelled out in the development of Grundtvig’s views about the monarchy that move his thinking from a more hierarchical concept (king above people) to a more horizontal concept (king as people):

As you know, gentlemen, I am a dyed-in-the-wool royalist! If you were not aware of this before, I hope that you have nevertheless learned through my talks on history that I do not belong to the extremists, who would make gods of their kings and would sacrifice their peoples at the altar. I only call that man a true king who [...] would make sacrifices for his people and would listen to their voice as his best counsel. (164)

The thread running through the political philosophy that Grundtvig develops in his analyses and assessments of history is a search for “the spirit of the people,” particularly his own Danish people, in the aftermath of the French Revolution – the dawn of democracy in Europe. Korsgaard argues that Grundtvig wanted to know what went wrong with the Revolution. Why did it end up in terror? Arguing for a reformist rather than a revolutionary approach to politics, he answers that “freedom is like fire” (63). Freedom has to be embedded in a public sphere that stresses “the common good” (64). For Grundtvig, such embeddedness requires education: “We need to be far better educated than we are at present regarding ‘the common good’” (64). His well-known proposal for a People’s High School in Sorø, then, is also a consequence of his political philosophy. Through education, the Danes could and should learn to be Danes, thus working towards the common good of the Danish people.

The contours of Grundtvig’s political philosophy shaped his political practice. As mentioned above, the editors have divided Grundtvig’s political practice into three phases. Grundtvig had no patience for the reactionary restoration of Europe after the Treaty of Vienna in 1815. According to Korsgaard, Grundtvig found it “boring” (175), so his political practice begins with the break-up of the restoration that led to democratic uprisings across Europe. From 1830 to 1848, Grundtvig reflected on the requirements for freedom in the state, both nationally and internationally. He concentrated on connections between internal and external freedom, insisting that neither one’s heart nor one’s head can be free, if one’s body is not. As a consequence, Grundtvig became a staunch critic of slavery. Offering striking observations on the significance of “the Negro Question” for Haiti (219), he worked for the abolition of slavery, both theoretically and practically. This work led him to be critical of England’s slave trade because slave owners were compensated by the state, using the people’s – the taxpayers’ – money. “Can I then admire this ‘magnanimity?’” Grundtvig asks (220).

In 1848, Grundtvig became a practical politician. Given the turn towards democracy in Denmark, the phase from 1848 to 1864 was characterized by his reflections on “the people,” including constitutional rights and restrictions to the power of the king. Grundtvig’s “‘Of the people’ is our watchword (1848)” is a captivating poetic condensation of the concept of the people, interesting both for how he does and for how he does not define it:

“Of the people” is our watchword  
through the land from top to toe!  
Something new is in the making,  
even simpletons must know! (230)

These verses point to Grundtvig’s conception of what could be called the “constructedness” of any people – a conception that Korsgaard connects to Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” (39). Grundtvig asks,

What does “of the people” mean?  
Does the nose or mouth distinguish  
how a “people” can be seen?  
Does a buried people’s marrow  
lie concealed in some long barrow,  
or behind the broom and plough  
in each coarse and lumpish brow? (230)

These questions could be read as a critique of racial(ized) constructions of “the people” that work through appeals to blood and biology. Instead, Grundtvig defined the people through language:

Of a “people” all are members  
who regard themselves as such,  
find their mother-tongue sounds sweetest  
and their fatherland love much. (230)

Danish, then, was central to Grundtvig’s philosophical and practical approach to politics. The language of the people served a double function: it was descriptive (allowing Grundtvig, the philosopher, to study his people) and prescriptive (allowing Grundtvig, the politician, to shape his people). These functions work together. The speech “Why does N.F.S. Grundtvig want to be in Parliament?” (1848) makes clear that his election to parliament would mean that Danish would have to be spoken there. Grundtvig was aware of language as a cultural and social boundary marker, internally and externally. “The learned gentlemen come rushing in with their foreign jargon,” claiming “that whoever does not know their ‘abracadabra’ cannot

join in any talk on matters of state! So if the Danish language alone could be spoken in Parliament [...], you would all see this as a good deed for city and country folk alike” (239). Language, then, is a tool to empower people.

Prussia’s defeat of Denmark in 1864 (which led to the unification of Germany under Prussian predominance in 1871) had a significant impact on Grundtvig’s politics from 1864 to 1872. The loss of land that came with the defeat rekindled the debates about the constitution, Denmark’s “Basic Law.” In the Upper House, Grundtvig resumed his practical politics, again showing his position as a politician of the people. Korsgaard argues that Grundtvig saw himself as someone who speaks for the people because he was of the people – a claim that many spokesmen of the upper class found impossible (338). Grundtvig’s last speech in parliament summed up his political philosophy and practice in characteristic prose:

I am well aware that the learned members smile, if not laugh, at all such predictions and have often called me ... “Mr. Fortune-teller” – and sometimes even “Mrs. Fortune-teller”! However, I also know that although we speak of “telling fortunes” when we make a certain prediction about the future, there is great difference between how one predicts. I have never made predictions on the basis of the lines on a hand [...], but only on the basis of the information we can all gather by taking good note of the nature [...] of a people, of the course of history, and of the signs of the times. The learned seldom turn their attention to such observations, but I have been doing so from my youth onwards. (349)

Taken as a whole, then, *The Common Good* showcases Grundtvig’s political philosophy in action. Theologians know of Grundtvig as a foundational figure for the school of thought that came to be called Scandinavian creation theology. The founding fathers of this school – Knud Ejler Løgstrup, Regin Prenter, and Gustaf Wingren – went back to Martin Luther, yet indirectly rather than directly, *through* Grundtvig.<sup>3</sup> Theologians who work in the trajectory of Scandinavian creation theology today focus on

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<sup>3</sup> See Niels Henrik Gregersen, Bengt Kristensson Uggla and Trygve Wyller, “Reconfiguring Reformation Theology: The Paradigm of Scandinavian Creation Theology,” in *Reformation Theology for a Post-Secular Age: Løgstrup, Prenter, Wingren and the Future of Scandinavian Creation Theology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen,

systematics and ethics, spelling out the significance of theology for contemporary life, both outside and inside churches. *The Common Good* allows them to trace why the founders of Scandinavian creation theology were interested in the public in the first place. Historically, the impact both of theology on the public sphere and of the public sphere on theology in Scandinavia can be traced by taking Grundtvig as a point of departure. In Germany, the doctrine of the two kingdoms – God reigning with two hands, one churchy hand and one not-so-churchy hand, so to speak – that was developed by Lutheran theologians, has been blamed for the lack of theological resistance against the totalitarian interpretation and terrorist instrumentalization of “the people” in the 1930s. But Scandinavia has a different and distinctive story to tell. As Korsgaard argues, “The concept took a very different path in Denmark, thanks not least to Grundtvig” (45), who suggested a democratic rather than a dictatorial semantics of “the people.” Through “his insistence that in the last resort the aim of all *folkelighed* was universal” (45), he articulated a criticism of the Germans who “equated the particular with the universal,” which led to “the expansive and exclusive nature of German nationalism” (46). Systematically, then, Grundtvig’s politics presents a compelling case study in public theology. What runs through the political philosophy and the political practice presented in *The Common Good* is a concern for the common good that draws on all available sources, theological and non-theological. Grundtvig, then, could be considered a public theologian *avant la lettre*.

However, his public theology is not a bilingual theology that translates the religious into the secular or the secular into the religious. Grundtvig speaks not with two tongues – a religious one (understood only inside churches) and a non-religious one (understood only outside churches) – but with *one*: his mother tongue, Danish. What *The Common Good* suggests, then, is that the terms of the debate about secularity have to be redefined. Of course, Grundtvig worked and wrote in a context where church and culture converged. Lutheranism characterized both the church and the culture of Scandinavia. Yet what might be hidden here is the treasure of a theology that allows scholars to reflect on the secular *as* the religious and the religious *as* the secular in view of theology’s public and political rami-

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Bengt Kristensson Uggla and Trygve Wyller (Göttingen: Vandenoek & Ruprecht, 2017), 11-34.



fications. *The Common Good* should be required reading for anyone interested in the role of religion in politics, precisely because religion comes up only indirectly rather than directly – subcutaneously, so to speak.

Although I run the risk of sounding like the pedantic Germans that Grundtvig mocks – “Gentlemen, in most places people work for a whipping! And in Germany, they think hard work is a virtue that should be pursued for its own sake. Indeed, they think they become ‘purer’ the less [...] pleasurable their work is!” (121) – I would suggest that information about the rationale for the selection of Grundtvig’s writings would have been helpful for scholarly engagements with his work. Moreover, the pedantic (German) scholar would have benefitted from more footnotes expressing and explaining the Danish words that Grundtvig employs, precisely because Broadbridge’s translation is so excellent and elegant that one forgets that it is not the original. Broadbridge transformed long and long-winded sentences – Grundtvig’s “torturous prose” featuring sentences that “approach 300 words” (165) – into an English full of verve!

In the conclusion of *The Common Good*, titled “Grundtvig’s Political Legacy,” Korsgaard traces the use of Grundtvig in politics, both from the left and from the right. He points to a speech by Barack Obama, then President of the United States, linking Martin Luther King to the legacy of Grundtvig. In this speech, Obama suggests that Grundtvig’s plans for a People’s High School

spread, including here to the United States, where Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., was a student at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee [...]. I might not be standing here were it not for the efforts of the people who participated in the Highlander Folk School. (356)

Obama, then, puts Grundtvig into the footnote by Charles Taylor that I mentioned above: “Were Martin Luther King’s secular compatriots unable to understand what he was arguing for when he put the case for equality in biblical terms?” Grundtvig’s historical and political writings might allow scholars, theologians and non-theologians alike, both to ask and to answer Taylor’s question by redefining the terms of the debate.

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