

# THE INCIPIENT BREAKDOWN OF THE HUMANIST-CHRISTIAN CULTURAL SYNTHESIS IN DENMARK

BY LEIF GRANE

At the beginning of the 19th century, Denmark was, of course, an absolute monarchy allowing only a limited freedom of expression. The unfortunate involvement in the Napoleonic Wars led to the loss of Norway in 1814, preceded the previous year by the national bankruptcy. Not until the 1830s did the liberal movement, which was demanding a new constitution, begin to gain any significant influence. Until then, the status of the king and government was only subject to modest criticism. Before this time, intellectual circles in Copenhagen were mainly concerned with aesthetical and philosophical questions, just as in Germany, whence most of the inspiration still came. Most of the population still lived in country districts or in small towns and mainly – if at all – learned of the changing cultural climate from the local pastor, who was an authority in both spiritual and many secular matters. For the first third of the century, these representatives of God and the King normally bore the mark of the 18th-century Enlightenment. The same was true of the Faculty of Theology in Copenhagen, in many respects the most influential part of the university in that over half of all students read in that faculty. The professors of theology were long unaffected by the Romantic movement and the new, idealistic philosophy, which was otherwise attracting the attention of some small intellectual circles in the city. Just as elsewhere in Europe at this time, the Romantics reacted against the Enlightenment and placed their emphasis on history as opposed to the intellectualism of the Enlightenment.

The new sense of tradition, which for instance in France led to the so-called ultramontane movement with its strong emphasis on the alliance between "throne and altar", also exercised a certain influence on the Lutheran countries of Scandinavia. In reaction to the new historical interpretation of the Bible, which had started with the theology of the Enlightenment, and which cast doubt on the doctrine of a divinely inspired Bible, certain pastors sought to return to the Lutheran confessionalism from the

period prior to the Enlightenment. At the same time revivalist movements arose among ordinary people opposed to the rationalist preaching of the clergy. But apart from these obvious signs of renewed religious energy, a general tendency towards a more conscious relationship with the church also seems to be asserting itself, a relationship which only a few decades earlier would have been quite inconceivable. Even hardened rationalists began to think more in biblical terms than they had ever done previously. So it is not surprising that, as was the case abroad, many people began to believe that a new age was beginning to dawn for the Church.

In 1821 a young man by the name of Henrik Nicolai Clausen was appointed to the Faculty of Theology. He had heard the Romantic philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher in Berlin. There, he had received impressions that distanced him from the rationalism that otherwise characterised the faculty. Four years later he published a weighty and learned book on *The Governance, Teaching and Rites of Catholicism and Protestantism*. A few days later, however, this significant work was overshadowed by a brief reply written by Pastor Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (fig. 70).

Grundtvig was born in 1783 in a country parsonage. As a student, like most others, he subscribed to rationalist views, but after his ordination in 1810 he turned towards the old Lutheran orthodoxy and broke with German idealism, first and foremost Schelling's philosophy, by which he had been influenced for some time. As a promising poet and author, he had for a brief period mixed in the best circles in Copenhagen, but before long he was considered a hopeless fanatic, losing all contact with people who counted for anything in the Copenhagen of that time. For many years he made a meagre living as a publisher of periodicals and historian until 1821, when he was appointed pastor in Præstø. Already the following year he achieved his objective, a pulpit in the capital, Copenhagen, on becoming perpetual curate in Our Saviour's church. Until 1825 he was,

with some justification, thought of as orthodox Lutheran, engaged in a constant struggle against rationalism and German idealism. This he did in the name of the Bible, as he constantly sought to discover the right criteria for deciding what Christianity really is. After several failures he made what he considered a "matchless discovery". Both the ways in which he sought to apply his discovery and the order in which he used them, are typical of him: First he propounded his thoughts in sermons preached to his parishioners, and then he published them in the form of pamphlets, and finally they were given precise formulation in the guise of poems, i.e. hymns.

Clausen's book gave him the possibility of reaching the second stage. In the name of the Church, Grundtvig declared Clausen to be a false teacher who had voluntarily placed himself outside the Church.

His main objection to Clausen – which, incidentally, could apply to almost all contemporary theo-

gy – was this: As a Protestant, Clausen makes the Bible the foundation of the Church and the sole source of revelation, but on the other hand, as a modern, critical theologian, he sees the Bible as lacking in clarity. Consequently, he must leave it to reason to decide what the content and meaning of the Bible are. Grundtvig maintains that the result of this view is harmful to the Church: Christians would in this way become dependent on scholars. In other words: The Roman papacy would be replaced by an exegetic papacy run by the professors. Grundtvig finds ridiculous and impossible the idea that the Protestant Church should thus have a direct and immediate access to Revelation. "How", he says, "do we then come to Christ and the Scriptures except by flying through the air on a broomstick if we deliberately ignore the intervening history, which is the only real path through the ages?"

In Grundtvig's eyes, to overlook the historical existence of the Church means that faith loses its foundation. A faith in Christ as God's revelation, which is not based on the present witness of the church, dependent on that of previous generations, would be nothing but a castle in the air, and acceptance of the Bible's authority would be completely arbitrary. In opposition to what he believes are Clausen's constructed, airy and home-made ideas about the Church, Grundtvig places the Church as established with its confession and its sacraments before the theologians even made a start on their studies. The real Church is the congregation, gathered together in common faith around Baptism and the Eucharist, the congregation that replies to the Gospel with its creed and its praise. This is the Church, says Grundtvig, for only here is God Himself present with His Spirit and His Word. So Grundtvig sees his conflict with Clausen as the difference between the living congregation and a theory of the Church to be established by dint of professorial wisdom.

Although many conservative theologians were similarly irritated by Clausen's book, none of them supported Grundtvig. Just as in the case of the leading circles in Copenhagen, their reaction to his attack on Clausen was one of surprise and scorn. One of the most important theologians in Copenhagen was Jakob Peter Mynster, who was a close friend of the most prominent poets and scientists of the day. He



FIG. 70. Constantin Hansen (1804-1880): *Portrait of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig*, c. 1852. Encaustic painting on terracotta. 44 x 28.8 cm. Frederiksborg no. 7558. Frederiksborgmuseet, Hillerød. Inv. no. A 7206.



became one of Grundtvig's most determined adversaries, and in matters of Church questions, his word was decisive for all who really meant anything. Almost everyone of any note in the Copenhagen of that day sat beneath Mynster's pulpit every Sunday. But Grundtvig's being condemned in the parlours of the influential was not all. He was also taken to court and found guilty of libellous statements about Clausen. Not only did he have to pay fines, but far worse was the fact that his writings were now placed under censorship. Grundtvig felt this to be a denunciation of what he himself had considered to be his duty as a pastor, and he took the logical consequence and resigned. He now once more lived for many years without permanent employment. Not until 1839 was he again appointed to a post as pastor in Copenhagen.

For most of the professors, civil servants, theologians and poets who had any influence about 1825, the relationship to Christianity was fairly uncomplicated. Many of them viewed it as part of culture, something with which cultured men and women had a kindly, but not too enthusiastic relationship. It was the zealotry in Grundtvig and other opponents of rationalism of which they disapproved. In their eyes, extremism of any kind was in bad taste, also when it concerned Christianity. With the prominent position which many of them held by reason of their contribution to society, they were happy with the social order, to which the Church undoubtedly belonged, but they viewed negatively any tendency to allow religion to become the object of conflict or antagonism. The main trend in the Danish Enlightenment, as in Lutheranism in general, had not been anti-clerical. It would be truer to say that the Enlightenment brought about a change in religion. At the beginning of the 19th century it was no longer rationalist views that predominated in intellectual circles. The historical awareness of the post-revolutionary age, with its emphasis on tradition and authority, had also given religious thinkers a more "biblical" colouring, but they agreed with the previous generation or with their own youth as part of it, in refusing to allow religion to get in the way of their cultural interests. Meanwhile, the organic way of thinking which they had learned from German idealism convinced them that classical education and a traditional form of Christianity could well live side by side as long as

unpleasant fanatics like Grundtvig or the orthodox Lutherans were kept in their place.

For the more attentive, however, there were signs suggesting that the harmony could not persist. The turmoil surrounding Grundtvig did not come to an end, but on the contrary grew worse as time passed. But the peace was also disturbed from another direction. In 1824 and 1825, some of the best intellects in Copenhagen allowed themselves to be provoked by a doctor, F.G. Howitz, who, as a result of treating mental patients, had dared raise doubts about the question of freedom of the will. This was of course completely unacceptable to a generation that had been strongly influenced by its reading of philosophers such as Kant and Fichte. They even appealed to Christianity in their attempt to combat this notion of determinism which was so dreadful to them. For it would mean the end of the Christian humanist conviction concerning the blessings of education and the formation of character. Howitz died in 1826, and with him the controversy came to an end for the time being. Calm again seemed to reign everywhere, with the exception of Grundtvig's unruly friends and the revivalist movement of the day. In these areas there was no hope that the problem would only be temporary. On the contrary, the confusion was growing ever greater in the eyes of those who wished to preserve the former state of harmony.

Grundtvig did not take much part in the struggle after 1825, but the number of his adherents grew quickly, and many young theologians now also began to listen to him. Their support for Grundtvig cost several of these latter their chance of being appointed to the university. Among them was Peter Christian Kierkegaard, the brother of Søren and eight years older than he. He was a gifted student and soon a promising young scholar, but he spoiled any chance he had by letting his sympathy for Grundtvig become publicly known. In 1836 he submitted a dissertation to the Faculty of Theology, the contents of which were to demonstrate the theological brilliance of Grundtvig's views. As it was naturally only possible for Kierkegaard to demonstrate this by rejecting and criticising the way in which the professors of theology understood their tasks, it was undeniably a somewhat foolhardy project. The Faculty shook its head at it, but he was allowed to defend his thesis, presumably in the expectation that it would be pos-

sible to put him in his place during the defence. Perhaps the professors did not know the nickname given to him by German theologians in Göttingen and Berlin while he was studying in those two cities: "Der Disputierteufel aus dem Norden". Kierkegaard performed brilliantly in the disputation, and it was impossible to deny him the degree of Licentiate, which gave him the right to lecture in the faculty. And so he did, with great success, but the path to a professorship was still closed to him. After some years he became a village pastor, and in 1857 he was appointed Bishop of Aalborg, obviously in order to get him out of the way so that he did not end in a Copenhagen parish (fig. 71).

Grundtvig's adherents were thus for the time being excluded from influence on academic theology, but his ideas made considerable progress in the Church in this age of political awakening and the liberation of the peasantry. Peter Kierkegaard used his wide knowledge and unusual dialectical abilities to influence the debate among his fellow theologians. The bishops and the Faculty of Theology continued to refuse to take Grundtvig seriously, as did the Copenhagen intellectuals. His experiences from the struggle with Clausen had clarified Grundtvig's thoughts on the State Church. It was soon obvious to him how un-Christian it was to apply force and the law in spiritual questions. He now became an uncompromising champion of religious freedom taking the consequences of the excellent principle of allowing his opponents the same freedom as he himself demanded. To avoid hypocrisy he wanted to free up the liturgy in the Church. Around 1830 he spent three long summers in England, where he was impressed by the energy and restless activity he experienced, but also by the spiritual freedom which made possible a free competition between the Church of England and the nonconformist churches. His "matchless discovery" – his thoughts on the Church and its rootedness in tradition which he had first expressed in his polemic tract opposing Clausen – had enabled him to view the human condition on its own premises. If Christianity was God's gift, given to us through the presence of Christ in the congregation through Spirit and Word, it meant that we could devote all our energy to human questions. Therefore it became necessary for him to understand mankind, not as an abstract idea, but as something tangible,



FIG. 71. Peter Christian Kierkegaard. Photo, 1875. The Royal Library, Copenhagen.

fashioned by common language and common history. It is in thoughts such as these that we find the foundation for Grundtvig's proposal for a Danish folk high school – distinct from the classical learning offered by the grammar schools and university.

Grundtvig's ideas spread wide in the 30s and 40s, but still without receiving recognition from official Denmark. The Faculty of Theology had little to offer those who still wished to maintain the harmony between Christianity and culture, but who were not unaware that the difficulties had become ever greater. Then a new star arose in the theological firmament. One of those who had really understood that the 1830s were a time of change, was the poet Johan Ludvig Heiberg (see fig. 6, p. 14). He had undertaken the task of convincing his contemporaries of the truth in Hegel's philosophy, but without any great success. He did not hide the fact that in his view only philosophy could provide educated people with a relationship to religion. He seems to have believed that those who went to church in the traditional manner, or worked in it as pastors, either must be hypocrites or intolerably foolish. Not only some of the learned clerics, but also the two professors of philosophy in the univer-



sity, F.C. Sibbern and Poul Martin Møller, took exception to his point of view. But then the situation changed within quite a short space of time. In 1841, Heiberg thought he had reason to note that his apparently lost cause had now been changed to a *causa victrix*. The champion of Hegelian philosophy to whom Heiberg ascribed this victory, was the theologian Hans Lassen Martensen (fig. 72).

Romanticism and German idealism had discovered the inner world of Man, self-awareness, as the area from which the unity of all things should be viewed. It was felt as an incredible expansion of experience that not only reason, but also feeling and conscience provided an awareness of God. It appeared to be here that philosophy and theology were to meet. Only this meeting was not without its problems, as Heiberg was well aware during his attempt to win adherents for Hegel. Heiberg maintained that the age in which he lived could not be satisfied with any faith unless it was based upon thinking. It was this very question Martensen took up in his dissertation for a doctorate in theology. His book – written in Latin – was called *On the Autonomy of Human Self-Awareness in the Dogmatic Theology of Our Age*. Martensen examines two possibilities: either human understanding must be subjective, or it must be the centre of the universe. According to Martensen these two paths have their special representatives in Kant and Hegel. Martensen seeks to follow Hegel in that like him he aims at a speculative cognition. Only on one point, but a rather important one, does he criticise the great philosopher: Hegel has not understood that faith must be the means of achieving this objective. As soon as he has made faith the starting point for both philosophy and theology, Martensen can once more throw in his lot with Hegel.

Like Hegel, he understands the Bible and the entire history of theology as a series of “moments”, all of which have their significance for progress and thus for speculative theology. The historical critical method is thus replaced by the Hegelian, dialectic approach. This means that Martensen had his own solution to the problems which since the Enlightenment theology of the 18th century had been the dilemma of Protestant theology: What happens to divine authority if the Bible is a human document that is to be studied and analysed applying the meth-



FIG. 72. Emil Bærentzen (1799-1868): Portrait of Hans Lassen Martensen. Litography after photo. 1845. The Royal Library, Copenhagen.

ods of historical criticism? Martensen's reply is: Let that not worry you, for speculation will find a place for every moment in the process of development.

Shortly after defending his dissertation, Martensen was appointed to the Faculty of Theology and immediately began to formulate his speculative dogmatics on the basis established in the dissertation. His lectures were – in the words of Harald Høffding – “some of the most keenly attended and admired in the history of the university”.<sup>1</sup> The death of Poul Martin Møller provided Martensen with a new audience, as he was asked to give lectures in philosophy for all students. This new teaching had an intoxicating effect on the young people. There seemed to be no end to their enthusiasm. However, it soon became clear that some of his listeners were more interested in the introduction to Hegel than in his own heavenward flight. They continued their studies of Hegel and joined the Hegelian left wing. Others, who remained loyal to Martensen's intentions, used Hegelian language without any deeper understanding and thereby made not only themselves, but also speculative theology look ridiculous. It was in this environ-

ment that Søren Kierkegaard completed his theological studies. There is every reason to believe that his subsequent anger at “the system”, i.e. Hegel's philosophy, was to a very great extent provoked by the arrogance and foolishness he encountered in many of Martensen's adherents.

The great expectations many had placed on the potential of Martensen's theology for providing a conclusive answer to the question of the relationship between faith and knowledge, soon gave way to disappointment. Martensen's speculations were attacked in particular from two sides: from the left-wing Hegelians and from Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonyms. In 1849, when Martensen published his *Christian Dogmatics*, the storm broke. He had been so shocked by earlier attacks that he had quite considerably muted the Hegelian tone in this book. The conservative features in his thinking came to the surface. The polemics contained in this book on dogmatics were only sharp where they entailed no more than a limited risk, for instance when aimed at Grundtvig.



FIG. 73. Johan Vilhelm Gertner (1818-1871): Portrait of Jacob Peter Mynster, 1842. Oil on canvas. 26 x 19 cm. Frederiksborgmuseet, Hillerød. Inv. no. A 2101.

Søren Kierkegaard, who in previous years had ridiculed views like those of Martensen's, received only a superficial mention.

Grundtvig and his friends could naturally find nothing of interest in this book. They had long ago lost all respect for “German theology”, as they called it. The reaction came especially from those who were under the influence of Søren Kierkegaard. An entire mini-library of polemical pamphlets was published. Søren Kierkegaard's weapons were, apparently, very well suited to fighting Martensen, but, as Peter Kierkegaard commented, there was something strange in Søren finding disciples. What Søren had to say, thought Peter, was a protest in the name of life against all theory, but such a protest lost all credibility if some people only supported it in order to make use of it for polemical purposes.

The battle raging around Martensen's dogmatics left the theological world in a state of confusion. The days had gone when people went about in the happy conviction that the world was calm and harmonious, God was in His heaven and the most intelligent of his children were on earth and absolutely capable of showing their less gifted contemporaries how splendidly faith and knowledge worked together. A new theological periodical intended to oppose the Grundtvigian movement was launched in 1853 with the melancholy words: “The high seat of speculation, from which philosophy, though in Christian garb, sought to rule the teachings of faith, has fallen low; instead of the formal unity of faith and knowledge has come an absolute contradiction between the two”.<sup>2</sup> The publisher accused Søren Kierkegaard of having a negative effect, driving people away from the State Church and into the embrace of the sects or the Roman Catholic Church. The theology of cultural unity saw itself threatened by disunion on all sides.

There is reason to believe that only a small number of those engaged in the conflict appreciated the link between this disunion and the current breakdown of the absolute State and its Church that had begun with the national and political revival in the 1830s and 1840s and continued under the 1849 June Constitution. Perhaps some of the conservatives were those who best understood it, for instance Bishop Mynster (fig. 73), whose pessimism towards the end of his life was considerable. In his old age he even



saw himself compelled to oppose one of his oldest friends, the physicist Hans Christian Ørsted, who in 1850 published a book entitled *The Spirit in Nature*. As the title suggests, Ørsted was still under the influence of the Romantic philosophy of identity which had inspired him and his friends in the years immediately after 1800, but he could naturally only maintain the unity of nature and spirit on conditions prescribed to him by his own scientific experiences. It entailed no difficulty for him to identify the spiritual character of nature with its divine source, but this had to be a God who revealed Himself solely in nature and reason, but not in history. It was thus not only the Hegel-inspired synthesis of Christianity and philosophy that broke down in the middle of the century, but also the Romantic, pre-Hegelian philosophy. At the same time it became clear that the overwhelming dominance of theology at the university was finished. The liberal view of society which now dominated public opinion could not in the Church – and thereby in theology – see anything but a “sphere of interest” alongside others. It was in this connection important that the Grundtvigian component in the national and political awakening was suspicious of academic theology as an element in the old power structure – as was the more materialistically inclined part of the peasantry. During this time, people were perhaps more eager to take part in church life than ever before, but among intellectuals, the status of Christianity as an essential element in the common culture had, to put it mildly, been shaken.

In this situation, Søren Kierkegaard's attack on official Christianity and the Danish Church was like pure dynamite. It infuriated him that in his funeral oration Martensen dared to call Mynster, who had received every conceivable decoration and honour, a “witness to the truth”. It was the signal Kierkegaard needed to start his attack, but the foundations had otherwise been laid beforehand, that is to say in the whole of his oeuvre. By contrasting clerics in their secure and well-paid positions in society to the New Testament, he concluded that the Christianity of the New Testament did not exist. He did not himself lay claim to the name of Christian, but of the clergy he demanded that they at least should make the admission that they were not living in accordance with the New Testament. In all his brilliance and giftedness,

Kierkegaard never tired of ridiculing the clergy. As he demonstrates not least in the books published under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, he had clearly seen that historical studies can never create certainty in religious questions, and he believed he could see alienation from human responsibility as a consequence of the new science. In other words, he was aware that he was living in an age that was determined by cultural revolution. While many of his contemporaries chose to tread the path of historicism to the bitter end, or to allow science to dictate mankind's goal, Kierkegaard sought to challenge established society, both secular and ecclesiastical, by letting his understanding of true Christianity reveal the unreal and ugly face of the modern world. The reaction was what was to be expected: Kierkegaard was rejected and his struggle subjected to psychological explanations that were intended to take the sting out of it.

The church battle lasted a little over a year. Kierkegaard spent the remainder of a sizable fortune on publishing his periodical *Øieblikket* (The Instant), in which his condemnation of the clerical estate and the traditions of the Danish Church were expressed with an inventiveness so dazzling that all anti-clerical polemics in Denmark right to the present day have had resort to them. Many theologians were genuinely shocked at Kierkegaard's accusations. Some tried to follow his path – and ended by completely turning their backs on Christianity. Among the more influential, such as, for instance, the new Bishop, Martensen, and his friends, the attack was rejected with the facile explanation that Kierkegaard had unfortunately gone mad during the last period of his life. There were others who did not find it so easy to push him aside. Some of them survived spiritually speaking by keeping to the second half of this passage from *Filosofiske Smuler* (Philosophical Fragments): Subjectivity is untruth, and therefore subjectivity is truth. That is to say, precisely because truth cannot be attained through knowledge or personal experience, truth can only be grasped in an existential decision. For many theologians this point of view underwent a complete transformation. By subjectivity they simply understood personal experience. The way was thereby opened to the personality religion of which we have so much evidence at the end of the 19th century and

beginning of the 20th. When Søren Kierkegaard in this way was turned in an idealistic direction, he ceased to be dangerous, indeed, he became quite acceptable.

Grundtvig's so-called “matchless discovery” of 1825 and Kierkegaard's attack on the established Church in the name of New Testament Christianity have in this essay been used as the starting point and finishing point in a discussion of an age that was undergoing change. Grundtvig was rejected by the upper strata of society because he seemed to deny the cultural harmony which in 1825 was considered by all of any significance to be the foundation for all human activity. He was kept outside as one who would disturb the peace, but his points of view became important in the following decades during

the religious, national and political awakening, and they made a considerable contribution to the necessary revaluation of the cultural structure of a society in transition. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, who was 30 years younger, undertook to reveal the weaknesses of people and society in a world characterised by confusion and dissolution. He did so with a dialectic and psychological genius that could not fail to distance him from most of his contemporaries. In his interpretation, Christianity became a formidable weapon crushing all attempts to create cultural harmony. What – with Grundtvig – began as a gap between Christianity and classical culture ended – with Kierkegaard – as an acute crisis for both culture and Christianity.

*Translated by Glyn Jones*

1. Harald Høffding: *Danske Filosofer*, Cph. 1909, p. 141.

2. Ugeskrift for den evangeliske Kirke i Danmark I, 1853, p. 7. Edited by J. M. L. Hjort together with J. F. Hagen, P. E. Lind and C. Rothe.