

The “Old Testaments” of the peoples. Grundtvig’s discernment of life’s true order (human first, Christian next) and its relevance for the new eco-recognition of ancestral bonds in time and space

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Abstract

The intellectual distinction between Jews and Gentiles, Christians and Pagans is a division between true and false religion. Danish theologian N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) refuted this binary when he “matchlessly discovered” that pagan simply denotes a natural, pre-Christian human, created in the image of God. Inborn and cultured spirits of life simply convey a people’s “Old Testament,” which may also be treasured as independent sources of pride, cultural knowledge, community, and historicity. In this article, I approach Grundtvig’s discovery as method, and discuss its potential to teach a climate sensitive age kinship with a particular lineage of dwellers (nomads, peasants, Sami, Vikings, moderns), a specific landscape, and with spirit as breath and sensory belonging to a larger-than-human community. It will include a brief reflection on how native Christian scholars treat this problematic, how gendered rereadings of Norse mythology may still enlighten the present, and how new ecological concerns about deep entanglements may open Norwegian memory to its first migrants: nomadic hunters and gatherers.

KEYWORDS

animism, eco-spirituality, Grundtvig, Norse mythology, Old testaments of the peoples, paganism, Scandinavian creation theology

With Christendom, we inherited a cultural and intellectual distinction between Jews and Gentiles, Christians and Pagans—which, in effect, is a distinction between true and false religion.¹ Because tradition ascribes it to Moses and the monotheistic prohibition to worship images or “other gods,” the binary has become known as the “Mosaic distinction.”² Inspired by the romantic-philosophical movements of his time, the Danish theologian N.F.S. Grundtvig

(1783–1872) refuted this binary and suggested that pagan (or “heathen”) simply “denotes the old, natural, pre-Christian human being.”³ This person is not abandoned by God, and inborn or cultured spirituality is not “false,” only preliminary.⁴

Drawing on the Genesis narrative, Grundtvig constructed a universalistic history and proclaimed that all humans were created, and continues to be created, in the

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image and likeness of God (Imago Dei). The image was damaged in the fall but not destroyed. Otherwise, no communication would be possible between God and humans and salvation incomprehensible. This also applies to the lives of pre- and non-Christians. Thus, Grundtvig's program "Human comes first, and Christian next, for that is life's true order"⁵ was not a program for a separate secular culture, but a recognition of the "order of life" and of the living interaction between creation and culture. Furthermore, embeddedness in local culture, speaking "its living words" in the spirit of its mother-tongue was understood as a precondition to hear and receive the "living word of God" (Christ). Spiritually, culturally, and historically this competence—both in the person as well as in the people/society—constitutes its own specific Old Testament that, according to Grundtvig, "can be imagined to have existed before the coming of Christianity."⁶ Grundtvig's main reference to this famous claim was his own comprehensive knowledge of early medieval Norse religion and culture (pre-Christian Viking Age), as represented in Snorre Sturlason's compilations of Norse mythology, sagas, poetry, and wisdom literature.

This take on theology, and the living interaction that is imagined to take place also with long dead predecessors and the not-yet-born descendants, framed Grundtvig's ecclesiology—or the other way around: the Bible and well-informed scriptural interpretations are not constitutive of church; the core liturgy of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the words of institution for baptism and holy communion are. Thus, Christ is present in the midst of the assembly when his words, as remembered in the Creeds and in the New Testament, are sung or read aloud.⁷ This privileges the category of ritual as constitutive of the event, and of ecclesia, as *open and inclusive* public space (or temple) for its core mystery: Christ's presence/renewal of life.⁸

1 | METHOD AND FOCUS

Scandinavian Creation Theology is a school of theology that developed around Grundtvig's cultural agenda. Its primary aim is to re-read Luther in the context of Grundtvig's theology.⁹ My concern, however, is hermeneutics. In what sense may Grundtvig's theological method be of relevance to the spiritual yearnings of the contemporary, with its ecological concerns in regard to a larger-than-human world, and attempts at recognizing ancestral bonds in time and space?

Grundtvig was convinced that human longings for life eternal, for life beyond the grave, was an innate human trait and therefore also constitutive of pre-Christian spirituality. Bonds of community with predecessors were important to truly sense this desire or longing.¹⁰ Our time is certainly marked by a longing for lasting life, if not

individually, then collectively. Its mark is climate change and fear of possible extinctions. Human responses are concerned with non-death and a fuller life. Attempts at re-establishing living relations with both the past and the future, including by cultivating a new sensibility with the created world as "alive" and endowed with "spirit" is explicit in eco-activism.¹¹ It implies acknowledgement of certain porousness between human and other-than-human elements, and between human and animal life.¹² While theology is going green, sociological and anthropological studies also take up new interpretations of "animism" and "assemblages."¹³

This is my pitch for this article. To explore it, I will look at lines of connection to cultural predecessors (the "Old Testamenters") in my own Norwegian context, and inspired by Grundtvig ask: What can we still learn from our Viking predecessors? Why is ritual vital as "connective space" to a specific plurality of traditions? Who counts as human predecessors in Norway? May we include nomadic populations and what is usually conceptualized as "animist" beliefs? I will start with theology to give a larger context to Grundtvig's program.

2 | PLURAL OLD TESTAMENTS

Paganism is a normative, not a descriptive concept in theology. The church inherited the notion "pagan" (denoting commoners, superstitious, country dwellers) from both Jewish and Greek traditions, and it always stands for the opposite of what "we" represent. From an ancient Israelite point of view, paganism included both polytheism and idolatry. Since the priests of the Israelites eventually stopped acknowledging the existence of gods other than Yahweh, this meant that the people who continued to invoke Baal or Astarte worshiped empty images (both symbolic and real), and were therefore deceived, not least by the demons.

The legacy of the Greeks is more complicated, as they simultaneously represented polytheistic cult and a philosophical critique of the same. Already in the sixth century BC, Ionian philosophers had reduced the Greek pantheon to allegorical interpretations of the four elements or of a first mover. And from 300 BC onwards, an interpretation took hold that worship of gods was nothing but ancestor worship.¹⁴ The gods were perceived as ordinary mortals, elevated by descendants because of unique heroic deeds, while the demons were popular hypostases of disease, suffering, and evil.

The Greek philosophical critique of religion and the Greek popular doctrine of demons were annexed and further developed by a number of Christian apologists as rhetorical weapons against the "the others" beliefs and

rituals. Among a majority of the fathers, the terms *idolum* (idol), *simulacrum* (image) and *daemones* (demons) simply came to sum up the delusions of the Gentiles. During the Reformation, this critique of religion was also turned against the Christian tradition itself, profiled by Luther as a question regarding worship of a true or false god. The person or thing we trust, and from whom we expect everything “good,” was simply defined as “our true God.” To expect the “good” from the pope or prescribed penances meant having idols and being no better than the Gentiles.

Grundtvig was certainly not the first theologian to enter into dialogue and appreciation of his own ancestry. In Nicolaus Cusanus’ constructed dialogue “On the Peace of Faith” (1453 AD) (which takes place in heaven), the first article of faith is taken at face value: If God is One and the Father of all, and “the one who gives every human father the ability to be a father,” this One, creative, God must be active in all cultures, and in reality be the object of all human faith and worship. Although God is worshipped under many names and worshipped in different ways through a variety of rites and customs, it does not alter the fact that faith *de facto* must be common: it has its origin in one (Fatherly) God.¹⁵ Cusanus also argued for the benefit of interpreting the biblical texts in light of people’s local non-Christian cultures and narratives since it would make the gospel easier to understand. In this way, Cusanus helped to redefine “paganism” as a necessary background horizon for the gospel, albeit tentative and incomplete in itself.

3 | NATIVE OLD TESTAMENTS

Cusanus’ and Grundtvig’s kind gestures toward pagan traditions were historical and pedagogical: the traditions were long dead in terms of cultic practices and lived on merely as embodied custom or symbolic discourse. Nobody claimed or confessed *to being* both pagan and Christian (although some were accused hereof). Contrary to this are the tasks of post-colonial, native theologies in Africa and North America. Their pagan traditions are alive and well and dual practices is a real option. Post-colonial theologies therefore perform triangulation of the relationship between Christian faith, local pre-Christian religious tradition, and theological hermeneutics. Should, for example, traditional African religion be rejected as a delusion, “contain[ing] no preparation for Christianity,” as the World Mission Conference concluded in Edinburgh in 1910, or should the pre-Christian experiences of Africans be called “*praeparatio evangelii*,” as suggested by Kenyan theologian John S. Mbiti?¹⁶

According to Mbiti, the missionaries did not bring God to Africa, they “merely” brought Christ. God the Creator

was already known through traditional African religiosity and the fact that they were human. Most people therefore experienced continuity and not a break between a Christian interpretation of life and the living cosmologies of “culture and custom.” Mbiti’s view received wide support, although he was also criticized for defending oppressive customs (such as polygamous African family structure) as expressions of divine order.¹⁷

In North America, Episcopalian bishop Steve Charleston (of the Choctaw tribe) also talked about Native People’s Christian theology. His solution was neither to reject the Semitic tradition nor to return to pre-Christian religious practice, but to redefine what constitutes a tradition as “Christian.” Is it true that God, through history and up to the time of Jesus, spoke only to the Israeli and the Jews and that “he” revealed himself exclusively through the Semitic “Old Testament”? Or is it conceivable that the myths and tales of the American Indians, be it on creation, human existence, or cosmos, may be grounded in the experience of God too? Stevenson said “yes” and suggested the term “The Old Testament of Native America” to describe this relationship in his context.¹⁸

Robert Allen Warrior (of the Osage tribe), professor of American Literature and Culture, disagreed strongly with hermeneutics à la Charleston. In a much-discussed article published in *Christianity and Crisis* in 1989, he had argued that Native Americans had nothing in common with the Semitic “Old Testament” people, but rather with the Canaanites. According to the biblical accounts, the Canaanites, just like the Native Americans, were captured, colonized, and forced to assimilate by a new ruling power that simply legitimized itself under a new, authoritarian ruler God.¹⁹

In his book *God is Red. A Native view of Religion*, Vine Deloria Jr. seemingly solved Warrior’s concern by offering Native American spirituality as superb alternative. He faulted Christian theologians for their inability to think in terms of space, non-reverence for the earth, fear of death, and lack of deep and place-based communities.²⁰

4 | HOW MUCH MAY WE REMEMBER?

As Grundtvig insisted, all peoples of the earth have a place in a divinely created “world order.” But for each group to gain a sense of belonging and develop a joint identity, people must become self-aware.²¹ Self-awareness is cultivated by being grounded in tradition and in deep historical time, both in the past and in the expected future. Mbiti, Charleston, Warrior, and Deloria represent such self-awareness. Consequently, an “inner connection to our parents and descendants” is just as important as the mother-tongue’s fluency.²²

In a Pentecostal sermon (May 27, 1822), Grundtvig said “Every Heathen People also has a kind of Old Testament,” in which the truth about being human is conveyed.²³ Such a testament is composed of living language, poetry, history, and mythological imagery. It tries to explain created realities. Since the early 1800s, extensive research literature has attempted to interpret the literary heritage of the Viking Age (or better, early Medieval Norse culture) to understand ancestral beliefs and practices. Grundtvig was highly recognized for his professional contribution to this work and for his many translations.

In the preface to *Nordic Mythology* (1832), Grundtvig presented his current interpretation of Norse mythology and called it “images in the vernacular” of the struggle for life, against death, in a distinctive Nordic way. It represented a solidly valid interpretation of human life and its conditions.²⁴ Not unlike Cusanus and Mbiti, Grundtvig believed that the “deposits of myths” were part of the internalized, cultural background with which Norse people had been able to hear, understand, and receive the Christian gospel. They could therefore rightly be called a “kind of Old Testament.” Grundtvig’s contribution was unique, not least because of his development of the concept of “living interaction”—which assumes that folk religion and Christianity may mutually influence each other.

Archeological and textual research materials, unavailable to Grundtvig, show that Christian and pagan communities existed peacefully in the Nordic countries for more than 200 years.²⁵ Only after the ruling monarchic power found it useful to monopolize and promote the Christian religion for political reasons did forced mass baptism become reality. With the church rising to power, peaceful co-existence was not an option. Non-Christians could not be Norwegians.²⁶

5 | COSMOLOGIES IN THE VERNACULAR

What are examples of “images in the vernacular” in Norse mythology that continue to speak in the contemporary? In her book *Eros and death in Norse myths*, the Norwegian historian of religion, Gro Steinsland, interprets how our predecessors possibly experienced created life, including relationships to animals and elements.²⁷ Cosmos was perceived as dynamic and stretched between two polar forces in constant erotic *embrace* and parting, primarily symbolized as feminine and masculine. Embrace/parting was interpreted to mean that the sexes must be separate but still be together. In particular, their embrace seemed integral to the more extensive spiritual work of the Old Norse through which they helped preserve the cosmic order and keep chaos in check.

On the other hand, all Norse living beings were said to be made from the joint work of the *cow* Audhumbla, and the androgynous *jotne* Ymir, both created directly from the elements: by the heat from the south, which *embraced* and mingled with the cold from the north. The first humans, Ask and Embla, were created thus: The sub-terrain dwarfs made two lifeless figures by modeling a piece taken from Ymir’s body (the earth). The figures were then washed ashore, on a beach. They were found by the gods who gave them life by blowing life force, spirit, and thought into their bodies. In this narrative, the humans were visualized as a crossing between *jotne*, cow, and god, kindred to all. Through this imagery, Steinsland believes she is evoking an eco-realist narrative with regard to human possibilities and limitations that is fully on par with Judeo-Christian creation myths.

In Nordic mythology, the gods (in plural) represent an immanent, cosmological perspective on the world. They also reflect a diversity of types, characters, and gender variables, whose purpose may be to create both insight and acceptance of life as it is. Or as Gro Steinsland puts it, and quite in line with Grundtvig, paganism has no theology. It expresses itself through a plurality of myths that reflect a common life orientation, common anthropology.²⁸

6 | GENDERING NORSE PREDECESSORS

What else can be learnt from the gendered society of our Viking predecessors? Did it make any difference to women’s status in the community that religion (or “custom,” as it was called) was polytheistic and that both female and male gods were worshipped?

British folklorist Hilda Ellis Davidson has argued that goddess worship was widespread and complex in the Nordic cultures, and that the goddess Freya, for example, was very popular.²⁹ The god Frey and goddess Freya were also closely linked to social functions, in particular to the obligations of husband and wife. Norse society had a gendered division of labor between “innenstokks” (inside-the-house and its yard) and “utenstokks” (outside-the-house and its yard). The wife ruled “innenstokks.” The couple had joint responsibilities for the house cult and was seated together at the banquet table, side by side, between the high seat posts, just below the house gods. The wife could also function as a priestess (*gydje*) outside the farm and lead public cult at “sacred sites,” but only if the gods belonged to the Vanir lineage.³⁰

For the Norwegian historians Else Mundal and Ingvild Øye, it has been essential to show why gender models borrowed from ancient Greek philosophy and Southeastern European patrilineal kinship ideologies cannot explain

gender in Northwestern and Old Norse societies.³¹ According to Mundal, the family systems of the European Northwest and Southeast were contrary. From ancient times the Greeks were patrilineal while Old Norse was bilateral. Bilateral means that both parents were believed to contribute formative material to the development of the fetus, and that the child (girl and boy) belonged to and inherited both the maternal and paternal lineages. According to Greek patrilineal code, and as articulated by Aristotle, the father's semen alone produces the child. The woman's uterus is passive soil for the man's seed. The mother merely nourishes the fetus' process of growth after its creation. Thus Aristotle, Cusanus, and the authors of Genesis 1 & 2 are in full agreement on the location of the principle of conception or creation: it is Divine; Fatherly; a trait of the male form (body).

Mundal argues that Christianization led to a weakening of women's position, first and foremost through ecclesial efforts at implementing the Aristotelian theory of conception. Luckily for Norse women and men, most communities simply continued "to lag" when it came to subjugating their lives under this full-blown, patriarchal template.³²

7 | TRIBAL, FOLK, CHRISTIAN, OR ANIMIST?

How can we relate "tribal" or "folk" religion to an eschatological religion like Christianity? According to ritual studies scholar Catherine Bell, in countries where Christianity reigns, we must operate with an analytical and typological distinction between *inherited* "tribal" or "folk" religion and a *chosen* "religion of salvation"—both to understand our own practices, and to produce new knowledge.³³ Bell argues that while "tribal" and "folk" religion primarily is concerned with celebrating the social/cosmic community and maintaining the course of the family, a religion of salvation, like Christianity is not worried about family or fertility but lifts the individual out of this perishable, earthly framework. Therefore, in western societies, there will be several parallel ritual (and religious) traditions, not least visible in life passage rites.

For this reason, Bell proposes that we analyze (at least) two ritual institutions in any empirical field. They will partly be intertwined but most likely also follow separate ritual courses, as can be observe in a relatively new custom such as confirmation. The first part of the final, celebratory phase of this rite of passage (the blessing) will take place in the Church of Norway, the second part in the family. The house ritual is constituted on the remains and reinterpretations of the Old Norse banquet, with all guests participating in its community-building celebrations through gift exchange, toasting, and feasting. In modern confirmation,

foods, toasts, and gifts are still of outmost importance, with the confirmand seated in the symbolic place of "king" or "queen."³⁴ Seated, they receive speeches and songs about how marvelous they are, the challenges of adulthood, and blessings and bits of advice for the future.

According to the Norwegian church historian Oskar Skarsaune, the bedrock of Norwegian folk-religion is not Norse mythology but rather a Christian-modified *animism*. To be able to discover it we are advised to make an analytical distinction between "temple" and "synagogue."³⁵ The temple category represents public cult and invites celebrations of events but does not require any credo at the front door. The synagogue category represents the opposite: a congregation of believers. Skarsaune's point is that to understand folk religion, both historically and present, we must preserve the temple category. Temple religiosity is linked to ritual and the popular. It allows for the manifestation of religiosity in culture-specific objects and forms, as well as in the belief that things (especially natural ones) have life and can be communicated with "as persons," a practice commonly named "animism." He assumes that the people's (Lutheran) *Church of Norway*, houses both temple and synagogue.

8 | HOW FAR BACK MAY WE REMEMBER?

How do we know the genesis of our predecessors? When and where did "our people" begin? Who belongs? Grundtvig perceived the formation of "a people" based on how a community is connected to a geographic area, with specific lifeways and customs cultivated over time, and speaking a local language in the spirit of mother-tongue. Yet, when did "a Nordic people" actually begin to form?³⁶

Grundtvig's horizon was inclusive but still limited. Regarding "Nordic cultural heritage," it stretched between the early Viking period (700 AD) and his modernity (1900 AD), with skilled historical emphasis on literary sources such as Snorre Sturlason's works. Yet, our ancestral lineages are much older. Migration up North did not start 1500 years ago; it began 10,000 years ago. Its first colonizers were small groups of hunters-and-gatherers (nomads) who traveled the coast when the glacier melted and the last ice-age came to an end.³⁷

Thanks to modern archeology and genetics, and their advanced technologies, we know more about the so-called pre-history than what was available to Grundtvig. We know that the Paleolithic nomads were the first to set their marks on the land.³⁸ Not peasants, not pastoralists, and certainly not the much later medieval Vikings and their warrior kings. Does this knowledge make a difference? Are we obliged to listen differently? In the following, I will

briefly narrate ancestral lineages to the landmass called Norway to get a sense of Paleolithic dwelling and crossing, and why this prolonged lineage matter.

9 | NOMADS: FIRST MIGRANTS

The first migrants to “Norway” came when the ice melted 10,000 years ago. They came in three huge “waves” and have left a myriad of imprints and traces in the landscape, including funeral sites. They migrated in two directions: from the northeast via Russia and Finland into Finnmark in northern Norway; and from the southwest via Denmark and Sweden into Østfold and the Oslofjord.³⁹ Archeology can unearth, discover, and analyze aspects of their life over time.

During the Stone Age (8000–4000 BC, the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods) all migrants were nomads. They lived in small groups of hunters and gatherers and hunted large animals such as reindeer, moose, and possibly wild horses, as well as shellfish and fish from lakes and rivers. They dwelled in small hunting teams of four to five people, constantly moving about, either on foot or using small canoe-like boats. The agricultural revolution (4000–1800 BC, the Neolithic period) came to Europe with migrants from the Middle-East 6000 years ago. Thus, farming and a new way of settled life was brought about by a new populous, including up North. The old hunter and gatherer population slowly blended with the agriculturalists. Whether they became their serfs or their equals we do not know.

What was characteristic of the nomadic worldview? We mainly know this from studies of contemporary nomadic groups, although the British anthropologist E.B. Taylor already in the early 19th century coined the term *animism* to describe how so-called primordial people attributed “life” and “soul” (or “spirit”) to all things, living and non-living. In this way, “life” as such was linked to the sublime powers of the sacred, to spirit itself.⁴⁰ The rationale for “ensoulment” was related to the group’s seemingly deep dependence on the aliveness, fertility, and successful “collaboration” with their environments. Ethnographic studies have confirmed that in contemporary nomadic groups, it is common to relate to the other-than-human world in kinship terms (it constitutes a *precondition* to the human group’s livelihood and flourishing).⁴¹

Furthermore, since “animism” implies a form of co-life between humans and animals and with organic life as such, a unique form of anthropomorphism may develop. Some animals, on certain occasions, may be seen as both animal and human. According to the famous 2004 ethnographic study of the Siberian Yukaghirs by Danish anthropologist Rane Willerslev, this particular interpretation could frame a specific hunting process.⁴² Certain large

animals were perceived as part of human society in their capacity as non-human *persons*, apparently only “dressed up” as animals in their external bodily form, but with a veiled inner life (or personhood) quite similar to humans. Thus, in the hunt, an animal might be said to give up its life for the benefit of humans. This form of kill is not regarded as a sacrifice but as a gift. The inner logic of this form of “gift-giving” from animal to human implies a human obligation (on the hunter side) to share (the gift) with all members of the community and to return bones and leftovers to the animal flock.

In the academic field known as *new animism*, animism or “relational ontologies” is perceived as a fundamental challenge to Cartesian science’s subject-object divisions.⁴³ Since animism is not a phenomenon that can be relegated to a previous period in human history, Bruno Latour has suggested a new “symmetric anthropology.” It refers to the task of subjecting modern life to cultural studies from the perspective of “relational ontologies” and to use premodern categories to conceptualize the hybrids that increasingly inhabit our world.⁴⁴ Consequently, animism today, writes religious studies scholar Graham Harvey, “is typically applied to religions that engage with a wide community of living beings with whom humans share this world, or particular locations in it.”⁴⁵

10 | PEASANTS: SECOND MIGRANTS

Strong weapons for the hunt and strict intra-human gift exchange did not develop until the Neolithic revolution, which meant agriculture, farming, and more permanent settlements. The peasant residencies were steady, and outfields were cultivated for food to humans and domestic animals. The new farming populations won social hegemony, and developed a more hierarchical and warlike society. Those who did not assimilate may have continued their nomadic life style.

Inside the new farming societies, communities based on tribe, clan, and chieftainship evolved. Its hierarchies affected worldview and thinking, and worship of anthropomorphic gods and goddesses evolved. Society became more stratified, with increased specialization and ranking of human beings from king to serf. The farm itself came to symbolize an entire microcosm, hedged in by poles functioning as a fence. A prosperous farm would have its own burial mound, where the dead lived on in a magical shadow state and continued to be ritually fed. Agricultural societies also employed more media such as priests. They developed regular cult sites, either with the house/farm, at certain places in nature perceived as powerful, or at the (later) thing/assembly. An effect of this slow development from nomadic to a permanent farming settlement is that

the whole Norwegian landscape is covered in place-names, some of which are related to personalized entities. Still, there are 50,000 farm sites with personal names in Norway, and many are more than 2000 years old.⁴⁶

11 | SAMI: NORWEGIAN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

The Sami population reminds us of the first migration to Norway, since large groups still practice aspects of a semi-nomadic livelihood in connection with their reindeer husbandry. When the Sami today are legally named an Indigenous people, it is not because they were the first to occupy the landmass we call Norway.⁴⁷ It is because they are the direct descendants from “the people who lived in a geographical region to which the country belonged when the present state borders were established, and who have retained all or some of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions.”⁴⁸ They maintain a way of life that is older than the modern nation state and its structures, and this gives both southern and northern Sami individuals and clans status as indigenous people to Norway. The descendants of the Norse Norwegians did not hold onto their old institutions but embodied the emergence of the modern nation state and modern society.

12 | INSPIRED BY “RELATIONAL ONTOLOGIES”? UTØYA’S MEMORIAL SITE

Grundtvig did not operate with any distinction between pre-Norse animism and the mythological landscapes of Norse gods and goddesses. Knowledge of prehistoric Nordic societies was not part of his kit. Nature was of course a rich resource, both experientially and metaphorically, to Grundtvig’s romantic poetry and praise. Yet, by convention, and in his essays, he wrote of humans in relations to animals and the greens in asymmetrical terms.

As an effect of climate change, there is new interest in simpler forms of social life as, for example, represented by hunters-and-gatherers and their perceived state of interrelatedness with other lifeforms. Some of these groups may have formed in pre-historic times and later transformed into resident farmers. Yet, as narrated above, some groups and tribes continue to practice versions of their inherited nomadic lifestyles in the contemporary. Thus, “reskilling” to live a more “relational” life seems a possible option also to modern seekers. It may even include “spiritual simplicity,” as if going back to profound questions equals beginnings. The new interest in what academically is termed “new animism” may thus be understood as a wish to learn

to pay respect to other-than-human-life “as if” it had personhood, and “as if” it mattered deeply to human social life.

This trend is also manifesting in smaller formats, reminding Norwegians of their inherited “close relationship” with “nature.” Let me give an unexpected example. Breivik’s terrorist attack on Norway on July 22, 2011, included the death of 69 young political summer-campers at the Utøya island. How to design a proper memorial to remember this kill? Not memorial as a monument set in stone, but as an inclusive and living *memorial site*. It came as a surprise to some that Utøya, the campsite for leftist youth, wanted a memorial open and inclusive of the spiritual. Utøya announced: “No matter what social, cultural or religious affiliation, you can feel welcome here.”⁴⁹ The *3RW Architects*, commissioned to design the memorial, suggested a design open both to mourning and to new beginnings. Instead of navigating the complicated religious history of the Norwegians, they imagined instead a design that could both hold “memory” and point to “new beginnings.” The architects took inspiration from the archeological remains of circular campfires found at the campsites of the first migrants to Norway 10,000 years ago. A small flock of hunters and gatherers were imagined to have gathered around the fire for protection, warmth, and community.⁵⁰ Inspired by this pattern, a unifying steel ring was carved at Utøya, dispensed from the trees, and the memorial site itself called *The Clearing* (in the woods).⁵¹

13 | THE CLEARING MEMORIAL SITE

The Clearing memorial site (Figure 1) represents the full circle, including with names and ages of all the dead carved into the steel. In the grasses around the circle, perennials to attract butterflies are planted. The flowers, the grasses, and its buzzy life are literally meant to cover up stains of blood, memories of the killing acts, and help heal human grief by its own pure beauty and aliveness.

In this instance, the natural landscape is both spiritually and physically called upon as healer, protector, and collaborator in the healing process. Thus, the design may be perceived as inspired by “relational ontologies,” which again may be associated with “once upon a time” practices imagined to have been carried out by the first, vulnerable migrants to the land.⁵² The memorial also hints at the land’s aliveness and layered inclusion of all beings. It does not proclaim a “new gospel,” but a possible new take on its “preconditions:” a new form, custom or ethic to help remember the interconnectedness of life. To some, the memorial might also invite further reflection on the concept of religion, including “what is Christian?”⁵³



FIGURE 1 *The Clearing* memorial site at Uøya island, Norway, in memory of the 69 young people who were shot and killed face to face by AB Breivik on July 22, 2011, in his brutal terror attacks on Norway. Photo: Jone Salomonsen [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

A new memorial culture that traces not just Norwegian, but people's, ancestry back to the messy "beginnings" of a long-forgotten Paleolithic past (and neither to *Moses & the Book of Genesis*, nor to *Snorre & Early Medieval Norse mythology*) may come as a surprise, including to Scandinavian creation theology—although it reminds us of the historicity of theology itself. We may, however, interpret the contemporary desire for an "all-inclusive built space" as an invitation to renew the Grundtvigian method and theological address, not least in relation to ecclesiology. If we follow this (perhaps) trans-religious pursuit, we may need Charles Taylor's concept of a (pre-modern) *porous self* in order to fully grasp what an "all-inclusive ecclesiology" might refer to (in a post-modern, eco-sensitive era), and the radical vision of church it might entail.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The research for this article was funded by the Norwegian Research Council through the REDO project *Reassembling Democracy. Ritual as Cultural Resource* (2013–2017) <https://www.tf.uio.no/english/research/projects/redo/>, and by the NOSHS (The joint committee for Nordic Research Councils in the humanities and social sciences) through the exploratory workshop project *The Politics of Creation (POLCRE) A Nordic Model for Rethinking Radical Recognition in Public and Ecclesial Space* (2019–2022) <https://www.uio.no/for-ansatte/enhetssider/tf/aktuelt/aktuelle-saker/2020/skapelsesteologi.html>.
- ² Assmann, Jan. (1996). "The Mosaic distinction: Israel, Egypt, and the invention of paganism." In *Representations* (Vol. 56, pp. 48–67).
- ³ Grundtvig, N. F. S. (2020, 1851). "The people, the people's church, and popular belief in Denmark." In: Edward Broadbridge (Ed.), *Human comes first. The Christian theology of N.F.S. Grundtvig* (pp. 198–212). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- ⁴ Grundtvig's take on the question of how to judge (or validate) the "pre-Christian" is of course and unapologetically coming from a Christian perspective. Grundtvig's historical context and authen-

ticity will be respected, including this premise. Inter-religious or trans-religious hermeneutics is another task.

- ⁵ Broadbridge, Edward (Ed.). (2015). *Living wellsprings. The hymns, songs and poems of N.F.S. Grundtvig* (song 123). Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- ⁶ Grundtvig, N. F. S. (2020, 1868). "Inborn and reborn human life." In Edward Broadbridge (Ed.), *Human comes first. The Christian theology of N.F.S. Grundtvig* (p. 329).
- ⁷ Iversen, Hans Raun. (2020). "Introduction to Basic Christian Teachings." In Edward Broadbridge (Ed.), *Human comes first. The Christian theology of N.F.S. Grundtvig* (p. 236).
- ⁸ Salomonsen, Jone. (1999). "Rite og religion i norrøn, jødisk og kristen tradisjon (Part I)". In *Riter. Religiøse overgangsriter i vår tid*. Oslo: Pax forlag. See also Trygve Wyller's article in this issue.
- ⁹ Gregersen, Niels Henrik. (2020a). "Church and culture in living interaction – Grundtvig the theologian." In Edward Broadbridge (Ed.), *Human comes first. The Christian theology of N.F.S. Grundtvig* (p. 52). See also Bengt Kristensson Uggla's article in this issue.
- ¹⁰ Grundtvig, N. F. S. (2020, 1847). "A people's identity in relation to Christianity." In Edward Broadbridge (Ed.), *Human comes first. The Christian theology of N.F.S. Grundtvig* (p. 195).
- ¹¹ Cf. Pike, Sarah M. (2017). *For the wild. Ritual and commitment in radical eco-activism*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Zuber, Devin P. (2019). *A language of things. Emanuel Swedenborg and the American environmental imagination*. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press.
- ¹² Cf. Taylor, Charles. (2008, September 2). "Buffered and porous selves." *The immanent frame*; Bennett, Jane. (2016, August). Whitman's sympathies. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(3), 607–620; Gregersen, Niels Henrik. (2020b). Resilient selves: A theology of resonance and secularity. *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 59(2), 1–10.
- ¹³ Cf. Harvey, Graham (Ed.). (2013). *The handbook of contemporary animism*. London: Routledge; Tremlett, Paul-Francois. (2020, November 9). "Rhizomes, assemblages, and religious change." *The Religious Studies Project*, Podcast www.religiousstudiesproject.com (accessed April 25, 2021); Latour, Bruno.

- (2005). *Reassembling the social*. Oxford: Open University Press.
- ¹⁴ de Vries, Jan. (1967). *The study of religion. A historical approach* (p. 9). New York: Hartcourt.
- ¹⁵ Cusanus, Nicolaus (1983, 1453). *Dialog om trosfreden (De pace fidei)* (p. 36). Oslo: Solum forlag (translated from Norwegian by me).
- ¹⁶ Mbiti, John S. (1970). *Concepts of God in Africa*. London: SPCK.
- ¹⁷ Bediako, Kwame. (1995). *Christianity in Africa. The renewal of a non-Western religion*. Edinburgh Press & Orbis Books; Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. (1993). "A critique of John Mbiti's view of love and marriage in Africa." In J. K. Olupona & S. S. Nyang (Eds.), *Religious plurality in Africa. Essays in honour of John S. Mbiti*. New York & Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- ¹⁸ Charleston, Steve. (1996). "The Old Testament of Native America." In James Treat (Ed.), *Native and Christian. Indigenous voices on religious identity in the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge.
- ¹⁹ Warrior, Robert Allen. (1996, 1989). "Canaanites, cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, conquest and liberation theology today." In: James Treat (Ed.), *Native and Christian. Indigenous voices on religious identity in the United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge.
- ²⁰ Deloria, Vine Jr. (1992). *God is red. A native view of religion*. CO Golden: North American.
- ²¹ Grundtvig (2020, 1847, p. 195).
- ²² Grundtvig 2020, 1847, p. 196).
- ²³ Thodberg, Christian. (1988). *N.F.S. Grundtvigs Præstø Prædikener. Bind 2*. (250). København: Gad forlag.
- ²⁴ Grundtvig, N. F. S. (1832). *Nordens Mythologi eller Sindbilled-Sprog historisk-poetisk udviklet og oplyst*. Kiøbenhavn: J.H. Schuboths.
- ²⁵ Steinsland, Gro. (2000). *Den hellige kongen. Om religion og hersker-makt fra vikingetid til middelalder*. Oslo: Pax forlag.
- ²⁶ Steinsland, Gro. (2000).
- ²⁷ Steinsland, Gro. (1997). *Eros og død i norrøne myter*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- ²⁸ Steinsland, Gro (2000).
- ²⁹ Davidson, Hilda Ellis. (1998). *Roles of the northern goddess*. London: Routledge.
- ³⁰ In Old Norse society, a priestess was called "gydje," a priest "gode." The deities were represented according to two linages: the Æsir gods (Odin, Tor, etc.) and the Vanir gods (Frey and Freya, etc.).
- ³¹ Mundal, Else. (2001). "The double impact of christianization for women in Old Norse culture." In Kari E. Børresen (Ed.), *Gender and religion*, Rome: Carocci Editore. Øye, Ingvild. (1999). "Kvin-ner, kjønn og samfunn. Fra vikingetid til reformasjon." In Ida Blom and Sølvi Sogner (Eds.), *Med kjønnsperspektiv på norsk historie. Fra vikingetid til 2000-årsskiftet*. Oslo: Cappelen Akademiske.
- ³² Some will use this fact to explain why gender equality has evolved into such a strong norm in the Nordic countries (part of the so-called "Nordic Model"), at least when compared to other Western Democracies.
- ³³ Bell, Catherine. (2001). "Ritual Tensions: Tribal and Catholic." *Societas Liturgica* (Congress XVIII, 14. August, 21 pp).
- ³⁴ Monclair, Hanne. (1995). *Forestillinger om kongen i norsk middelalder gjennom ritualene og symbolene rundt ham*. Oslo: Norges forskningsråd (KULTs skriftserie nr. 44).
- ³⁵ Skarsaune, Oskar. (1993). "Overveielser om norsk folkere-ligøstet." *Halvårsskrift for Praktisk Teologi* (2/93).
- ³⁶ I will not go into the nuances of Grundtvig's conceptualizations of "a people," nor how he understood the history of Christianity through seven elect peoples, just side with those who deny that he was a (blood and race) ethno-nationalist.
- ³⁷ Margaryan, Ashot, Daniel J. Lawson, Eske Willerslev et al. (2020, September 16). Population genomics of the Viking world. *Nature*, 585, 390–396.
- ³⁸ Fuglestedt, Ingrid. (2012). The pioneer condition on the Scan-dinavian Peninsula: The last frontier of a 'Palaeolithic Way' in Europe. *Norwegian Archeological Review*, 45(1), 1–29.
- ³⁹ Fuglestedt, Ingrid. (2012).
- ⁴⁰ Tylor, Edvard Burnett. (1929, 1871). *Primitive culture*. New York: Putnam's Sons.
- ⁴¹ Ingold, Tim. (2000). *The perception of the environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge.
- ⁴² Willerselv, Rane. (2004). Not animal, not not-animal: hunting, imitation and empathic knowledge among the Siberian Yuk-aghirs. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 10(3), 629–652.
- ⁴³ Stengers, Isabelle. (2012). Reclaiming animism. *e-flux* (36), July, 12 pp. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/36/61245/reclaiming-animism/> (accessed April 27, 2021). Hornborg, Alf. (2006). Ani-mism, fetishism, and objectivism as strategies for knowing (or not knowing) the world. *Ethnos*, 71(1), 21–32.
- ⁴⁴ Latour, Bruno. (1993). *We have never been modern* (p. 134). Cam-bridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- ⁴⁵ Harvey, Graham. (2005). "Animism – a contemporary perspective" In Bron Taylor (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of religion and nature* (p. 81). New York: Continuum
- ⁴⁶ Gansum, Terje. (2018) "Norwegian perspectives." In J. Glauser, P. Hermann, & S.A. Mitchell (Eds.). *Handbook of pre-modern Nordic memory studies. Interdisciplinary approaches Vol 1*. Berlin: DeGruyter. Their modern Norwegian descendants typically also hold on to old personal names, often associated with Norse gods and goddesses. The very common double name for a male, "Tor Kristian," represents, for example, a combination of Christ and the Norse deity Tor. Most Norwegians do not consider this naming custom to have anything to do with paganism, solely with tradition, and will argue that the person merely has a Norwegian (Tor) and a Christian (Kristian) name. When the name is confirmed at the baptismal font, this argument is of course the only valid.
- ⁴⁷ Malmström, Helena, Gilbert, M. Thomas P., & Thomas, Mark G. (2009, November 3). Ancient DNA reveals lack of continuity between Neolithic hunter-gatherers and contemporary. *Current Biology*, 19(20), 1758–1762. See also Sigurd Ohrem's and Thorbjørn Webber's articles in this issue.
- ⁴⁸ regjeringen.no (2020). Hvem er et urfolk (Who are an indigenous people)? www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/urfolk-og-minoriteter/samepolitikk/midtspalte/hvem-er-urfolk/id451320/ (accessed February. 9, 2021).
- ⁴⁹ <https://www.utoya.no/minnested> (accessed June 29, 2020).
- ⁵⁰ Findings from the excavation of one of the oldest Paleolithic camp sites in the Oslo fjord (Paular by Larvik, 11000 years old) docu-mented that both sleeping areas and fire pits were built on the principle of the circle. Cf. Fuglestedt, Ingrid (2012).
- ⁵¹ <https://www.archdaily.com/770709/the-clearing-memorial-at-utoya-3rw-arkitekter> (accessed June, 29, 2020). The picture of the memorial *The Clearing* is taken by Jone Salomonsen.

- ⁵² For more on the memorial, cf. Salomonsen, Jone. (2020). “The ritual powers of the weak. Democracy and public responses to the 22 July 2011 terrorist attacks on Norway.” In G. Harvey, M. Houseman, S. Pike, & J. Salomonsen (Eds.), *Reassembling democracy. Ritual as cultural resource* (pp. 143–161). London: Bloomsbury
- ⁵³ Cf. Tremlett, Paul-Francois. (2020). *Towards a new theory of religion and social change*. London: Bloomsbury.

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