Ruptures

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In the world of faith and the gospel, leaping has to be done! But in the world of earthly reality, which politics for instance is, leaping is an impossibility ... so when political system-creators or ideological politicians nevertheless seek to leap via revolutions, then they destroy the natural development and effectively molest and tyrannize the humans. (Krarup 1987, 14; translated by the author)

So goes a telling citation from Conservative Essays, one among a number of books published over the last 30 years by Søren Krarup, a former Lutheran priest and a retired MP for the Danish People’s Party, who is widely considered to be the leading intellectual and political figure of Denmark’s national-conservative right. What Krarup is suggesting in the citation, with explicit reference to the nineteenth-century Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s notion of ‘leaps of faith’, is that in Christianity there can be only one kind of rupture, namely the ‘inner revolution’ needed to re-enter the kingdom of God of which Man was originally an inseparable part, but from which he has since been evicted and detached. Any attempt to change or improve this primordial fall or rupture in the form of progressive reforms, let alone political revolutions, are not just utopian and totalitarian but evil and ungodly. For the same reason, as Krarup argues in the chapter ‘The Anti-Totalitarian Kierkegaard’ (1987), there is a direct relationship between existential leaping and reactionary politics:
The conservative rejection of leaping within a temporal duration is a consequence of the necessity of leaping in the religious or eternal world, where God cannot be known but only be an object of faith, and where no human has direct or natural access to the divine and truth. Since God is not of this world, you are in this world not supposed to relate to society and politics in a god-like and absolute way. Or with reference to [Kierkegaard’s] expression, it is just because the relationship to eternity demands leaping that leaps do not belong to the dimension of time. (1987, 14; translated by the author)

This chapter is based on fieldwork within the small but highly influential Danish Lutheran movement Tidehverv (in which Krarup and others from his family have for several generations played a central role), as well as a historical genealogy of Danish concepts of freedom (frihed) in nineteenth-century theological and cultural political discourse. By combining ethnographical and historical perspectives, I show what it means to subscribe to and practise a doggedly Lutheran and explicitly Kierkegaardian form of Christian faith, which celebrates the existential ‘leaps’ (spring) that are induced from sudden and always unexpected encounters with God. Crucially, these ruptures must take a strictly interior and existential, and not exterior and political, form. Thus, from the perspective of my interlocutors it is not just immoral but downright sacrilegious to try to bring about any human progress and societal development in the world, especially change couched in and executed in the name of political revolution (i.e. of the sort discussed by Humphrey and Rowlands et al., this volume). My ambition in what follows is to unpack some of the historical processes and cultural dynamics that undergird this peculiar combination between a theology that celebrates inner rupture and a politics, which is all about resisting outer revolution. Precisely how and why is it that ‘Christian leaping’ becomes anathema to societal progress and a precondition for ‘genuine conservatism’? And what are the wider lessons gained from the case of Tidehverv not just for influential anthropological work on Christianity and ethics/freedom (Robbins 2004; Keane 2007; Laidlaw 2014), but also the burgeoning literature on ethno-nationalism and conservative identity politics in Denmark and elsewhere in Europe (Gullestad 2006; Hervik 2011; Gingrich and Banks 2006; Thorleifsson 2016; 2017; 2018; Kublitz, this volume)
'What is old, is good'

In spite of its explicitly anti-revolutionary and self-proclaimed reactionary discourse, Tidehverv is an apposite choice of study for the anthropology of rupture. Indeed, rupture features in the name of this Lutheran movement. Thus, the Danish word *tidehverv* is derived from a *fin de siècle* German journal called *Zeitwende*, a term that denotes a ‘rupture between two eras’ (Larsen 2006). Established in 1926 by four male theology students in reaction to a time they lamented to be ‘too modern to respect the elementary human’, Tidehverv for the first decades of its existence fought its battles with other branches of the Danish Protestant church. Its original arch-enemy and *raison d’être* was thus the ascetic Inner Mission that had risen to prominence in various parts of rural Denmark and deprived inner-city Copenhagen areas as part of the pietistic awakening that had swept across Protestant Europe in the late nineteenth century (Bramming 1993).

Indeed, the fathers and families of several founders were devoted followers of the pietistic lifeways portrayed in Danish novels and films such as *Babette’s Feast* or *Breaking the Waves*. In that sense, it could be argued, the bigger societal rupture lamented by Tidehverv’s founders was ironically replicated on the smaller level of family via their separation from their Inner Mission background. But crucially (also for understanding the role of fathers and their offspring in Tidehverv today), this cut was done in a way that was intended to be respectful to these fathers and to continue the patriarchal social, cultural and moral order more generally. This notion of a benign, productive and necessary ‘interior’ rupture can also be detected, as I shall now demonstrate, on a more theological and existential level.

Conservatism is a word that one hears all the time in relation to Tidehverv. Its many theological critics as well as left-wing politicians and commentators frequently accuse the Krarup family for being ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘reactionary’. What these critics seem to fail to understand is that, among Tidehverv adherents, being old-fashioned is a badge of honour. Søren Krarup and other Tidehverv figures like to call themselves ‘genuinely’ (*ægte*) conservative as opposed to what other national-conservatives like to sarcastically dismiss as the ‘so-called Conservative Party’. As he rhetorically asks in *Conservative Essays*,

> But progress must happen, mustn’t it? We need to develop and move ahead ... The only thing that is given for time and development surely is that they take care of themselves ... Rather than saying, along with 1968 ideology, that everything that is old is wrong, we need to say, in tune with people’s experience [den folkelige erfaring]: what is old, is good! (Krarup 1987, 126–7)
As I will show, this arch-conservative injunction is taken quite literally by certain participants in the annual Tidehverv summer meeting, a week-long event of theological and cultural political talks, debate and gossip that is held at a folkehøjskole (‘people’s high school’ for adult learning) located in Southern Jutland close to the German border.

The obligatory after-dinner psalm-singing session was over, and groups of attendants were clustered around the dozen sofa tables scattered around the open fireplace that occupied the centre of the højskole study. Steaming hot black coffee and lavish servings of old-school Danish pastries were being consumed as the conversation slowly reached its usual menacing level, interspersed as it was with frequent outbursts of loud laughter and occasional swearing. At one table, an MP from the Danish People’s Party was engaged in a heated theological discussion with a female pastor from a rural parish; at another, two prominent members of the Society for Freedom of Speech (Trykkefrihedsselskabet) were bantering and gossiping with a young nurse, a retired professional musician and a civil servant from a major provincial town. As for myself, I was still at this early point still trying to figure out which table, and conversation, I should try to join for the rest of the evening. Judging from my experiences from the two previous evenings, there was every reason to assume that it was going to be a long night. But above all, I realized, I was in urgent need of a drink and, perhaps, a cigarette; for although I had stopped smoking years before, there were still certain rare moments that I experienced with such intensity that they compelled me to make an exception. This was one such moment. After all, I had reached (and ‘survived’) the third day of my first Tidehverv summer meeting, an event that over recent years has been widely hailed (or feared, depending on how one sees things) as the intellectual heart of Denmark’s ascending national-conservative right, and which for several decades has exercised an extraordinary influence among not just Danish theologians but also on Danish national politics (Grosbøll 2007; Pedersen 2017). There was too much new ethnography, and too many epistemological and ethical quandaries, for me to process.

So (heeding the lesson I had picked up the previous evening from watching other, mostly male meeting participants), I grabbed the Tuborg beer that I had already purchased before the psalm-singing began from the impromptu kiosk selling beers, cheap wine and other necessities, and went outside. As is usually the case at Tidehverv gatherings, several groups of smokers were huddled under the thin overhanging roof that was providing at least a measure of cover from the summer drizzle. Most of these groups of men and women were engulfed in heated discussions, so I went up to three young gentlemen who were occupying a corner for
themselves, with shy and somewhat quizzical expressions on their stern-looking faces. I had already noticed them the previous day; indeed, they were hard not to take notice of. They seemed to be constantly keeping together in tightly knit groups of almost identically looking young men, dressed in what might be described as the standard uniform of Danish national-conservative intellectuals: sharply pressed suits or neat tweed jackets accompanied with ties or bow ties, as well as freshly polished and shining formal leather shoes. All them were smoking, two of them cigarettes, the last one what looked like an expensive pipe. ‘Excuse me, do you have a light? (undskyld, har du ild)’, I asked as I walked up to the group with a polite smile. The tallest and most dapper of the three young men looked straight at me and shot back, with a friendly but nevertheless serious tone, ‘Do you mean the tinderbox (fyrtøjet)?’ Here, I could not help laughing (indeed, I thought he was making a joke), enquiring: ‘The tinderbox? That’s a rare word to use!’ At which point the man pulled out a Ronson lighter, lighting my cigarette while lecturing me (accompanied by nods from the two others): ‘Well, no reason to use a new word when there is an old one that works perfectly fine, is there?’

Not all men at the annual summer meeting are dressed in suit and tie (although a fair number of the younger male theology students are), and I have never experienced anyone else making an issue out of the fact that smokers in Denmark and elsewhere in the world tend to use disposable plastic lighters instead of more old-school technologies for making fire. Nevertheless, while the above example can be described as an extreme outlier and therefore not representative of Tidehverv as such, it does, I think, capture the very explicit manner in which ‘being conservative’ is something that is celebrated in formal and informal discussion and is also practised at Tidehverv events. In many situations, this constant highlighting of ‘conservative’ ideas and deeds takes the form of criticism and ridicule of norms and values associated with the so-called ‘cultural radicals’ (left-wing progressive artists and intellectuals, more on whom below). Preferences for ecological and organic food, for example, are referred to as ‘ridiculous’ (latterlige), as are all references to ‘climate-friendly’ and ‘green’ products and solutions more generally. As a female priest told me during an interview, giggling as she recalled what was clearly a fond memory:

Do you remember last year when a [recently employed] staff member from the kitchen introduced the menu for the final dinner, making a big thing out of the fact that all the vegetables were ecological? [Indeed, I did remember the situation all too clearly – it was
in fact one of the things I had jotted down in my notebook before crashing to bed that same night following another whisky and the-ology binge.] He [the staff member] was so surprised, I will never forget the confused look on his face when the entire room burst into laughter once he started bragging about ecological food. He just could not understand what was going on. I actually felt quite sorry for him, but it was also so funny!

Another issue around which the practice of ‘being conservative’ revolves is drinking and, perhaps to an even higher extent, smoking. While many other Danish Christians also drink (and smoke) when meeting for social and/or theological purposes, Tidehverv stands out for the sheer quantity of alcohol consumed and the proportion of people who at a given time of the day may be observed outside puffing on their cigarettes and/or pipes. As Agnete Raahauge, current editor in chief of the Tidehverv journal and de facto leader of this movement, concluded her traditional welcome address at the 2017 summer meeting:

One more thing: I have been again this year been instructed by our hosts that it is strictly forbidden to drink your own alcohol on the premises [laughter, of the knowing sort that indicates everyone knows that people won’t obey]. However, and in keeping with the procedure of previous meetings, our hosts have also on my request promised to procure large amounts of cheap wine, so that we shall be able to meet our often substantial needs for alcohol without going bankrupt [more giggling]. And finally, I have promised to make sure to remind you that smoking is strictly forbidden inside, so please remember to go to designated outside areas equipped with ashtrays when the need arises! [here Raahauge made a rhetorical pause, directing her gaze at the people occupying the front rows with a mock-stern expression]: I know that, until a few years ago, especially certain older members chose to ignore this smoking ban during especially late-night whisky-drinking sessions. But, seriously, we cannot have that any more! [grumbling sounds and reluctant nods].

As it happened, several middle-aged men did turn out to have brought their own single malt whisky to the gathering, which was revealed with much bluster and beaming expressions at every night at some point after midnight, which was also when a few daring individuals started lighting up cigarettes inside in defiance of the rules.
Elsewhere (Pedersen forthcoming), I have discussed how this ‘obligation’ to drink and smoke is part of a wider ‘ethics of anti-piety’ undergirding Tidehverv's theological project, and how this ethics can be traced back to the pietistic theology professors (as well as in several cases, fathers) against whom the four Tidehverv founders had revolted. For present purposes, however, let me point to the two most significant and political ‘others’ in opposition to whom my interlocutors worked so hard to define themselves, namely Islam and ‘cultural radicals’. From a Tidehverv vantage, as I have also described elsewhere (Pedersen 2017), Islam and left-wing green progressives have more in common than what separates them. Notwithstanding the fact that Muslims believe in a God whereas cultural radicals proclaim not to do so, what unites them is the shared notion that it is possible for human beings to better themselves by adhering to explicit and normative rules or rights. And precisely for this reason – because Islam is a ‘law-religion’ (lov-religion) and because progressives have ‘elevated human rights to their religion’ – both are ideological abstractions that disobey God by infringing on his territory by either (in the left-wing atheist project) announcing His death and replacing Him with ‘totalitarian human rights’ and other ‘abstract humanist universals’, or – in what some would see as the opposite thing but from the Tidehverv vantage amounts to just the same sacrilegious moralism – by formulating religious laws for how to believe in Allah and to be a pious Muslim, as if one, anyone, could second-guess God’s intentions.

Yet, as my interlocutors keep telling themselves in publications and seminars, as well as over coffee and lunch and not least those intense late-night drinking sessions, God’s will cannot be known by man, for He is forever removed from and eternally distant from the sinners He created, and later manifested himself through an act of unfathomable divine grace and love, so it is only by succumbing to the irresolvable paradoxes of a human, all too human, existence full of impossible choices and endless suffering that one can obey God and be a slave of His will, without ever fully knowing how, when or indeed whether one succeeds in doing so. This, then, is why seemingly pedestrian and profane issues such as ecological good and anti-smoking campaigns take on such an inordinate importance. Along with pursuing a wealth of other ‘genuinely conservative’ practices, things and ideas, which taken together constitute a distinct and fine-masked system of signification that Tidehverv members learn to master, every element of their personal and theological being is invested 24/7 in the fight against cultural radicals, Islamists (well, all Muslims really) and other forces of political revolution and social rupture.
A genealogy of Danish freedom

But how did political revolution and societal progress become anathema to Tidehverv, and why is it that ‘Christian leaping’ and other forms of inward-oriented ruptures are not just permitted but required for the Christian subject, according to so many adherents of this Lutheran theological movement? To address these questions, we need to go back into history. Accordingly, in what follows, I shall make a foray into the genealogy of the modern Danish nation state, with particular focus on concepts of individual agency and more specifically freedom (frihed). This will involve a discussion of how three concepts of frihed map onto three different Danish cultural-cum-theological/political movements, whose origins are frequently traced back to three prominent nineteenth-century intellectuals, but are still vibrant and influential in contemporary Denmark. I am referring to the movements Grundtvigianismen, Tidehverv and Cultural Radicalism. These are associated, respectively, with the priest, poet and politician N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872), who, among other things, is celebrated for his psalms and is credited for sowing the seeds for the Danish co-operative movement and pedagogic tradition; the philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), who (alongside his part-contemporary, Grundtvig) had lasting influence on the Danish Protestant church, including Tidehverv itself; and literary critic and public intellectual Georg Brandes (1842–1927), father of the Modern Breakthrough and so-called cultural radical movement, which (to the regrets of conservatives, and in productive tension with some Grundtvigians) has dominated Danish arts, culture and education ever since (as illustrated, for example, by the contribution from Stine Krøjler on Danish left-radical politics in this volume). Since literally hundreds of books have been written on Grundtvig, Kierkegaard and Brandes, and given that all three were extremely prolific writers, I have neither the space nor the expertise to engage with their authorships and specific influence in any comprehensive manner. Instead, I shall attempt to provide a more general overview of the broader nineteenth-century intellectual, political and theological landscape from which first Grundtvig, then Kierkegaard and finally Brandes arose to fame, by homing in on the specific ideas about agency, subjectivity and freedom that more or less implicitly may be said to undergird their thinking.

According to Webb Keane (2007, 49–50), a key theme within the Protestant Reformation ‘was the idea of restoring agency to its proper subjects. To reveal more directly the ultimate divine agent meant liberating
individuals from the domination of illegitimate clerics and their rituals, and restoring people to their own principled agency.’ However, as Keane also stresses,

the point here is not that Protestantism introduces agency, or even individualism, into a world that had formerly lacked them … But … Protestantism … foster[s] particular kinds of self-consciousness about agency and the possibilities for human action – for instance, what may or may not be accomplished by human agents, what by divine ones. (2007, 52–3)

This observation captures a central preoccupation of nineteenth-century Danish theological and political-philosophical discourse as well as my Tidehverv interlocutors, namely how ‘principled agency’, to use Keane’s term, is optimally fostered. Still, there are subtle as well as not so subtle differences between the specific ways in which these ‘particular kinds of self-consciousness about agency and the possibilities for human action’ have been promulgated and played out in different Protestant ethnographic contexts. Denmark is a case in point. Here, I suggest, competing vernacular politico-theological theories of virtuous agency rub off against each other in the three freedom-notions of frisind, frimodighed and frigjorthed, which may be described as partly overlapping, part conflicting ideals about what it means to think, speak and act independently and virtuously as an individual and group/people/nation (cf. Laidlaw 2014). None of these three Danish concepts of freedom corresponds fully to standard Western ideas of political liberty, economic choice and political-economic security of the sort widely associated with the French, Scottish and American enlightenments (Rothschild 2011; Rose 1999; Pedersen and Holbraad 2013). Rather, frisind, frimodighed and frigjorthed are each imbued with distinct theological-cum-political moral inflections, which can be traced back to the nineteenth century, when a middle-sized Northern European empire in the course of a few decades was reduced to a monolinguistic and monocultural nation state; a process that led to the collapse of the alliance between conservatives and national-liberals and the birth of a more inward-oriented but no less muscular and romanticist identity politics (Østergaard 2004). Nowhere is this more clear than in the oeuvres of Grundtvig, Kierkegaard and Brandes, as we shall now see.

As Denmark’s folk hero number one, the poet, priest and politician N.F.S. Grundtvig is today celebrated for his lasting contribution to Danish arts and culture (he was, among other things, the author of
many of Denmark’s most popular Christian psalms), and for the broader theological, cultural, nationalist and indeed pedagogical movement (Grundtviganismen) that he spurred (Allchin 1997; Buckser 1996). Thus, Grundtvig is celebrated for having planted the seeds for two lasting institutions emerging from the national awakening and quest for self-organization among Denmark’s farmers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; namely, on the one hand the cooperative movement (andelsbevægelsen) and on the other the high school (højskoler; vocational schools especially for young adults of the same kind where the annual Tidehverv meeting takes place) with a unique pedagogic tradition (Michelson 1969). But Grundtvig also had a profound impact on Danish Christianity as a whole (Allchin 1997, 80–3). Indeed, faith and nation are inseparable for Grundtvig, for whom a full love of God and trust in God requires a full love of and trust in the people (Backhouse 2011, 81; see also Vind 1999). In keeping with the Lutheran celebration of emotions as a vital source of spiritual rapport with God, this is precisely what Grundtvig’s emphasis on collective singing during sermons and in the community more generally is all about: a fusion between the Holy Spirit and the spirit (ånd) of the people: ‘The spirit of the people is the necessary presupposition for living Christianity … Only when Christians everywhere make common cause with the natural person [Natur-Menneskene] in this respect, only then will Christianity and Popular Culture [folkelighed] generally, and especially in Denmark, come into their original, free and only proper natural relationship’ (cited in Backhouse 2011, 81). Thus, according to Grundtvig, ‘*man*, apart from the nation to which he belongs, is an abstraction’, and the Danish *folk* is imbued with a unique capacity but therefore also unique responsibility in this respect. For ‘[w]here the German gift to history was an awareness of the need to preach Christianity, it now falls to the Danes to give life to the Word by fusing the historical-cultural with the spiritual … Denmark is the place where the “Christian” and the “Human” will be united’ (2011, 88).

So, Denmark, as Grundtvig summarized his fatherland’s predicament in characteristic florid language, is nothing but ‘history’s Palestine’. From this national-theological perspective, the Nordic peoples, and especially the Danes, had emerged as not just the vanguard of humanity but as the second incarnation of God’s chosen people, only now in the landscapes of Scandia inhabited by noble savages with Viking blood and vibrant warrior lore. In the words of Steven Backhouse, ‘[h]istory, says Grundtvig, ha[d] now developed to a point where there [was] a need for “a people” whose task it is to demonstrate to the world authentic
Christianity. It was to the Northern peoples [and] to Denmark, Queen of the Northern races, that the Divine mission to the world falls’ (2011, 69). ‘It is for this reason’, as Backhouse goes on to explain, ‘that Grundtvig was thankful for the 1848 war with Prussian Germany and the Slesvig-Holsten crisis, for it helped to awaken a sense of hitherto dormant Danishness’ (2011, 83, 85). This was a notion that really struck a chord in war-fatigued nineteenth-century Denmark, as evidenced from the fact that a saying with the same message, *hvad udadtil tabes skal indad vindes*, is now part of the general historical knowledge and cultural repertoire of most adult Danes.

Let us now turn to Søren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher and theologian, who, along with his part-contemporary Grundtvig, was to have a lasting influence on the Danish Protestant church and theology, including Tidehverv. Now Kierkegaard respected and was well acquainted with Grundtvig’s work, but he was also a vocal critic of his cultural-cum-political project. In fact, Kierkegaard’s entire theological oeuvre was arguably a reaction, if not to Grundtvig in particular, then to the peculiar Hegel-inspired amalgamation of Protestant pietism and muscular national-liberalism, which occupied a dominant position at Copenhagen University and the city’s intellectual salons in the mid-nineteenth century. At issue was not just what Kierkegaard dismissed as the self-righteous and hypocritical pompousness of the clergy, or the moralism and self-pity to which the well-trodden path to piety could lead. More than anything else, Kierkegaard’s problem with Grundtvig revolved around his ideas about Christian faith and subjectivity. For whereas ‘Grundtvig prioritizes a person’s “culture-relation” over their “God-relation”, and thinks that “man”, apart from his nation, is an abstraction … Kierkegaard forcefully maintains that the abstraction occurs when one defines the individual as a mere component of a transgenerational cultural herd – which is the vision Grundtvig seems to hold’ (Backhouse 2011, 90). Indeed, from a Kierkegaardian perspective, Christian faith can only be located at one scale, namely that of the individual, whose relationship to God is autonomous from and bypasses whichever social and cultural group, community or nation to which he or she may happen to be part.

We recognize here Kierkegaard’s existentialism, which has been the subject of so much philosophical and theological (and, of late, anthropological) work. This is a project that could be characterized as radically individualist, in that the single human (*hin enkelte*) is posited as the ultimate ground and arbiter of not just moral judgement but also faith. For Kierkegaard, unless moral and religious thinking, actions and feelings
are not based on individual acts of daring decisions, then such thoughts and deeds do not qualify as truly ethical let alone Christian. For the same reason, ‘Christian faith … requires a terrifying inward struggle’ (Evans 1989, 348). Or as Nigel Rapport summarizes Kierkegaard’s project:

human truth, Kierkegaard felt, the truth of the individual human situation, possessed a moral quality. To submit to majority opinion, to what was merely conventional, was an act of cowardice, and a consequence of a lack of respect for one’s own integrity. Similarly, positing abstract entities such as ‘humanity’ or ‘the public’ was a means merely of eschewing and absolving individual responsibility for what was done, thought or said. At all costs one ought to resist the comforting temptation of according abstractions a separate reality … It was morally incumbent on one to draw forth notions of the individual and the subjective. (2002, 171)

In my discussion of Tidehverv’s micro-history below, I shall explore certain concrete ramifications of this radical individualism, especially with respect to the question of what constitutes true Christian ethical and moral action. For the time being, I wish to conclude my genealogy of Danish freedom by considering the so-called ‘Modern Breakthrough’ which reached its peak in the fin de siècle years around 1900, and its relations to the post-First World War period, which saw not only the rise of increasingly polarized social and political movements, but also significant turmoil within the Danish Church (Folkekirken) itself, including the birth of Tidehverv.

The origin of cultural radicalism can probably be traced back to the Danish literary scholar and public intellectual Georg Brandes as well as other figures associated with Denmark’s ‘Modern Breakthrough’ (which might just well be translated as the ‘Modern Rupture’), as it was instigated by an influential group of writers and intellectuals who explicitly revolted against what they dismissed as Copenhagen’s inward-looking and conservative cultural establishment. But to an even higher degree, cultural radicalism is associated with an influential constellation of left-leaning scholars, intellectuals and artists which reached its zenith of influence in the interwar and post-war period, but which has remained very present in intellectual, political and public debate ever since (Bay 2003; Jensen 1976; Seidenfaden 2005). According to Bredsdorff, post-war Denmark, with its rising anti-Soviet sentiment and its cold war paranoia, at this historical juncture was in dire need of
an alert and brave cultural radicalism; a mind-set built on respect for humanity, which is international in outlook and which is infested with [belastet med] a social conscience. There is a need, too, for a spiritual heresy [åndeligt kætteri] that exposes convention, hypocrisy, and all jargon and clichés; a spiritual openness that does not just restrict itself to the surface of things [ser på etiketterne] but adopts a firm stance towards the underlying realities. There is a need for an ethics set free from [frigjort; here meaning ‘liberated from’] the Church and from conservative convention. There is a need for an impatience, which does not wish to postpone progress until it has become a given or a regression. (1955, 57)

It is in formulations like these – in their unapologetically modernist and almost nihilist insistence on a violent break with tradition and (especially) with all religion, and in their radically humanist if not vitalist celebration of the autonomy and limitless potentiality of all human beings in their unique mental and bodily capacities – that the influence from Brandes and other figures associated with the Modern Breakthrough shows most clearly. It certainly is telling that one of Brandes’s most famous essays (an introduction to Nietzsche, which the latter praised as one of the best accounts of his work that he had come across) was entitled ‘Aristocratic Radicalism’ (2014 [1897]). As Brandes bombastically summarized the Nietzschean project (2014 [1887], 35), ‘without the ability to feel ahistorical, there can be no happiness’. Reminiscences of this ‘aristocratic radicalism’ can also be recognized in Denmark’s 1968 ‘youth rebellion’ and its aftermath, including the systematic critique of authorities, including university professors and the wider intellectual, artistic, literary and societal establishment. Just consider the following long passage, which is Brandes’s attempt to summarize Nietzsche’s problem with Bildung, one of the most central concepts of nineteenth-century German romanticist humanism (Bruford 1975) and closely related to its Danish sister concept of dannelse:

The culture-philistine regards his own impersonal education as the real culture; if he has been told that culture presupposes a homogenous stamp of mind, he is confirmed in his good opinion of himself, since everywhere he meets with educated people of his own sort, and since all schools, universities, and academies are adapted to his requirements and fashioned on the model corresponding to his cultivation. Since he finds almost everywhere the same tacit conventions about religion, morality and literature, and with respect
to marriage, the family, the community and the State, he finds it demonstrated that this imposing homogeneity is culture ... [Yet this] is not even bad culture, says Nietzsche; it is barbarism fortified to the best of its ability, but entirely lacking in the freshness and savage force of original barbarism; and he has many graphic expressions to describe Culture-Philistinism as the morass in which all weariness is stuck fast, and in the poisonous mists of which all endeavour languishes. (2014 [1897])

While Brandes and most of the other figures associated with the Modern Breakthrough were explicitly critical of religion in general and of Christianity in particular (Allen 2012), secular modernity has itself been described as a 'species of hedonism shot through with Christian ambitions for humanity' (Gray 2011, 25). For the same reason, I suggest we can conceive of cultural radicalism as a secular-humanist subspecies within Denmark's wider vernacular political theological landscape. As was found to be the case with the two explicitly Lutheran political theologies of Grundtvig and Kierkegaard, cultural radicalism is thus closely tied up with deep-rooted but largely tacit and undertheorized eighteenth- and nineteenth-century idea(l)s and assumptions about what makes someone a virtuous subject and a truly free and proper citizen in the Danish body politic. For as Brandes put it in his Nietzsche essay, with explicit reference to Kierkegaard (of whom he wrote another influential book), the key question with which the Modern Breakthrough was concerned was 'how to find oneself; how to dig oneself out from oneself' (2014 [1887], 21; emphasis added).

I have now completed my genealogy of modern Danish subjectivity. One key finding to emerge from this account is the three distinct concepts of freedom, which in crude terms can be mapped on to the key nineteenth- and twentieth-century politico-theological movements (Grundtvigianismen, kulturradikalismen and Tidehverv) and associated cultural heroes (Grundtvig, Kierkegaard and Brandes). Thus frisind ('open-mindedness'), following Grundtvig’s peculiar combination of nineteenth-century romanticism with ideals from the Enlightenment and liberalism, denotes a liberal openness towards the perspectives of other people, but also (and this is of utmost importance to many right-wing contemporary adherents of Grundtvig) a right and obligation to defend one's own perspectives and to stand one's ground. Like cultural radicalism, frigjorthed ('uninhibitedness') may be traced back to Brandes and the Modern Breakthrough. Owing to its close ties with the ideal of a cosmopolitan individual freed from the shackles of tradition, religion and
small-mindedness (*småborgerlighed*), it denotes generic tolerance and openness towards everything different, including the right and again the obligation to perpetually seek out and experience such new horizons in one’s own life with regard to literature, art, sexuality, pedagogics, food and so on. As for the concept of *frimodighed* (lit. ‘free daring’), it shares with the two other concepts of *frihed* the injunction to be true to oneself, but differs in the absolute and unforgiving way it is attainable only via continual struggle with various adversaries (*modstandere*) via which the freely daring person can fully become who he or she is. Indeed, *frimodighed* is celebrated by Tidehverv adherents, who associate it only with heroes (*hædersmænd*) with the integrity and guts to stand their ground and speak their mind, be that in the context of heated theological controversies (about gay marriage, for example) or pressing political matters (such as the current refugee crisis) that spark controversy in both private and public contexts (see Pedersen 2017; 2018).

**Inner revolution 1.0**

With these points about past and present Danish concepts of freedom and faith in mind, we can now turn more specifically to the question of rupture, and particularly the tension between outer political revolution and existential/spiritual ‘leaping’. To repeat the central question of this chapter: why is it that, according to my Tidehverv interlocutors, any notion of social progress and political revolution is not just utopian but sacrilegious? One answer, I suggest, can be found in the fact that Kierkegaard’s (and by implication Tidehverv’s) ‘fundamentally existentialist’ theological project can be understood as a radicalized form of pietism that takes its world-renouncing asceticism to its logical and necessary conclusion. To make this argument, I draw on the work of one of few anthropologists who have dared to pose big questions about what, for lack of a better word, might be referred to as modern European civilization. I am referring to Louis Dumont, who in *German Ideology* boldly suggested that:

German culture had already adopted individualism in … its first or ‘former’ advance … the Lutheran Reformation. The Reformation applied individualism to the religious level, while it left out the socio-political level. In eighteenth-century Germany, Lutheran individualism had developed and spread into what is called pietism, a purely internal individualism which left untouched the sentiment of belonging to the global cultural community. In the second half of
the century, pietism is confronted with what I would call the second wave of individualism, that of the Enlightenment, and later on of the French Revolution ... [T]he Reformation ‘immunized’ Germany against the Revolution, and Herder’s [work] may be seen as a counteroffensive of the German community, supported by Luther’s individualism, against the latter form of individualism. (1994, 10)

What Dumont suggests is that the French Revolution assumed a peculiarly involuted form in Germany; a process set in train both by the fact that its condition of possibility had already been established with the Reformation, and by the fact that the authoritarian political climate of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century Prussia was not conducive to explicit political discontent or overt revolutionary agitation and action. The result was the emergence of a counter- or perhaps alter-revolutionary subjectivity infused with both Protestant technologies of the self (introspection, guilt, etc.) and humanist ethical ideals (Bildung and other nineteenth-century German notions of self-cultivation and spiritual development) – or what Dumont aptly calls ‘a jealous interiority devotedly attended to’ (1994, 20). Thus, Dumont goes on to explain:

the German Enlightenment differed from its Western counterpart in that it was religious. The Enlightenment in the West, and, topping it all, the French Revolution, took a path from which Germany gradually distanced itself ... [I]n retrospect, it looks as if German culture, being outdistanced, had wanted to reassert itself and in so doing had produced in its turn an unheard-of development of the human mind ... [This] allowed the Germans to react in their own way to the secular Enlightenment of the West ... The Revolution was received in the mind, in the pattern set by the Reformation. (1994, 19–20; original emphasis)

In the spirit of Dumont’s macro-comparisons, and with a nod to scholars such as Kapferer (2010), Iteanu (Iteanu and Moya 2015) and Robbins (Robbins and Siikala 2014), who have spurred a renewed anthropological interest in his work, I propose that, sufficiently adjusted, Dumont’s analysis of the German case might be extended to the Danish one too. In fact, I shall go far as suggesting that both Grundtvig and (especially) Kierkegaard can be understood as extreme versions of the so-called ‘purely internal individualism’ that Dumont identified as a unique feature of Germany’s ‘religious enlightenment’. Beginning with Grundtvig, the analogy between the German and the Danish case is straightforward; after all, as
I described above, Grundtvig’s ethno-nationalist and romanticist cultural-theological project in many ways calls to mind similar philosophical and intellectual developments in Germany in the nineteenth century.

As for Kierkegaard, the comparison at first glance seems more difficult, for how to reconcile his radical individualism and anti-authoritarianism with what Dumont calls the dominant ‘community holism’ and spontaneous subordination to political and social authorities in the context of post-Reformation and post-Enlightenment Germany? One solution lies in the realization, already hinted at in these discussions, that Kierkegaard’s project itself was a reaction to the Enlightenment; only in his case it was a reaction to Grundtvig’s Hegelian (and thus German) Enlightenment. Thus understood, Kierkegaard’s theological and philosophical project emerges as a reaction to a reaction, which takes the form of what might be described as a double involution, namely not just the ‘inner revolution’ that Dumont identified in the German context, but also the inner rupture associated with Kierkegaard’s notion of the angst-ridden introspective self.

In that sense, then, Kierkegaard’s theological and philosophical project emerges as an extreme version of what Dumont called the German Enlightenment. At issue is a distinct subject-position, namely what might be described as a doubly involuted post-Christian subject, who has not just undergone the ‘inner revolution’ Dumont associated with German post-Enlightenment philosophy and cultural politics, but has been subject to a further inner revolution in the Danish context that has given birth to a radically introspective or, if you like, ‘fundamentally existentialist’ self.

**Inner revolution 2.0**

We can now answer the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, namely why all notions of political revolution and societal rupture are anathema to Tidehverv, and why existential leaps or ruptures are not just permitted but required of the genuine Christian believer. As should be clear by now, one plausible answer to this question can be found in the deeply Kierkegaardian underpinnings of Tidehverv; for it is precisely this double-involuted and radically introspective self that can be identified in Tidehverv’s theological, ethical and political project. What seems to be at issue is an (irreversible?) transformation from a dimension of extensive or ‘social’ relationships between different people and their spirits/gods to a realm of intensive relations between different perspectives or
‘voices’ within a self-relational subject. Much as with Christian conversion in Mongolia, Melanesia and elsewhere (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 246–63; cf. Robbins 2007), in the context of certain Danish Christians there is a strong emphasis on ongoing self-rupture. Indeed, as we saw, faith in Tidehverv is conceived as a sort of ‘inner leaping’; a mode of belief that must never cease to question itself lest it becomes sacrilegious. Counter-revolution, then, but as an involution of revolution, or to coin a term, inrevolution!

Tidehverv’s ‘truly Christian’ (and thus also ‘genuinely conservative’) subject thus emerges as someone who is obliged to be radically introspective and make himself subject to perpetual inner rupture; not only because this is his duty and only path to salvation, but also because it helps to roll back, via frimodige existentialist actions, all evil-cum-utopian attempts by socialist revolutionaries, liberal progressives and Islamist fundamentalists to institute rupture and leaping within the realm of political life. This does not imply that one should seek to refrain from being involved in politics, or societal affairs more generally. On the contrary, one is welcome – meant even – to partake in political infighting on several levels ranking from the local and the national to the international and global. The stakes, after all, could not be higher, for this is a struggle over not just our right and obligation to remain only human, all too human, but also over God’s sole right and responsibility to be our god. Accordingly, the purpose of politics is to ensure that it remains just that – concrete politics as opposed to abstract dream work by keeping us away from committing the ultimate sin of confusing ourselves with God, confusing the immanent plane of human politics, earthly life and natural law with the transcendental realm of eternal truth, ubiquitous love and divine grace.

To substantiate this point, let us delve a little deeper into the way in which certain late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theological and philosophical problems have continued to inform the Tidehverv project. Consider again Krarup’s chapter on ‘The Anti-Totalitarian Kierkegaard’ (1987). The reason why Kierkegaard, according to Krarup, was ‘pre-eminently anti-totalitarian’ is that his life:

from its beginning to its end revolved around maintaining the totality of God’s reign and possibility, with Man as a sinner facing God relegated to be a single individual given by his vocation and background [hun enkelte i kald og stand] … whose existence is framed by earth and temporality, and who is incapable of creating a totalitarian paradise in which perfection, truth and classless human happiness shall rule inhibited and eternally. (1987, 27)
This is why refusing to accept humanist conventions of political discourse shows superior faith and personal integrity. For only the ‘knight of faith’ has the ability, guts and character needed to pursue the socially and existentially challenging quest of ‘sinning boldly’, as the title of another of Krarup’s books goes (citing Luther). Or as Torben Bramming explains in his book about Olesen-Larsen (one of the Tidehverv founders and a noted Kierkegaard authority in the theological establishment):

During decisive moments of life even the greatest human is empty-handed facing God, who requires us to decide. This is a decision that is made by the single individual … It [involves] thinking in contradictions, but this thinking in contradictions does not merely have a rhetorical purpose; on the contrary it reflects the ambivalence of existence; indeed, one might say that it is the essential condition of the existing human which it lives out on a daily basis. (1999, 88–90; translated by the author)

Here, the Christian believers can never be certain (that would be too easy), but must face the paradoxes of being suspended between eternity and time, between the concrete immanence of mankind and the abstract transcendence of God. Only via constant leaps of faith is ‘the knight of faith’ able to momentarily straddle (but never overcome) the absolute ontological divide between God and man, between transcendence and immanence, eternity and time.

**Existentialist effervescence**

The question remains, of course, how is all this done in practice? What can humans do to ensure that they keep on ‘thinking in contradictions’? How does one go about embracing, with all the gusto expected from the ‘knight of faith’, the human, all too human, predicament of ‘bold sinning’? Elsewhere, I have explored this via ethnographic analyses of selected sociological, political and theological tensions surfacing in the annual Tidehverv summer meeting and in the individual biographies and political lives of key figures from this movement (Pedersen 2017; 2018; forthcoming). Let me, therefore, for present purposes and by way of conclusion, home in on one specific dimension of Tidehverv sociality that encapsulates what has been a central concern in this chapter. I am referring to the prominent role played by alcohol, drinking and drunkenness during the summer meetings as well as (judging from what
has repeatedly been emphasized to me) other and more private social gatherings amongst Tidehverv (and national-conservative) circles. Evidently, as we saw, drinking occupied a central place in the Tidehverv self-imaginary, including in the identity work that is constantly performed by my interlocutors in order to distance and differentiate themselves from ‘boring’ (*kedelige*) and ‘pious’ (*fromme*) religious groups, whether Christian or Muslim. To be sure, many other Danish Christian and/or political groups also drink when they meet, ‘but that’s different. Their discussions are boring and they are not serious like we are’, lectured a senior Tidehverv priest when I raised this objection. As one of the aforementioned young conservatives told me with a grin on his clean-shaven face during the 2017 summer meeting (which coincided with Roskilde Festival, the biggest, oldest and most famous Danish rock/pop music festival with up to 100,000 participants), ‘This place is the national-conservative Roskilde!’

But that is not all. In addition, I would suggest, there is also another and a deeper dimension to this emphasis on drinking and drunkenness in Tidehverv contexts. As I have already tried to convey in my introductory ethnographic vignettes, something more serious and, if you like, existential or even transcendental is at stake during these sessions of late-night boozing. More precisely, I propose, one reason why people find it to be so important to indulge in these five-, six- or seven-hour-long binges is that it makes them ‘become who they are’, to borrow an expression from one of my interlocutors (Pedersen 2018). Certainly, one is left with a clear sense (speaking here from personal experiences gained from what Fiskesjö aptly coins participant-intoxication (Fiskesjö 2010) that the participants of these intense micro-gatherings are working hard at being a particular kind of person. That is, they are striving towards being *frimodige* individuals, who are not afraid (in fact, find solace and a happiness in) disagreeing with and being contrary to others, including peers with whom they might have been in perfect agreement just before. While this obligation to disagree entails the risk that people may end up being more permanent adversaries (of which there have been several examples over the years), the ideal (and often the reality) is that, at some point well into the night or in some cases the early morning, all matters of concern (*anliggender*) that needed to be discussed and disagreed about (as well as all the wine and whisky bottles) have been depleted. At this point, and at this point only, the table of drinkers can break up and return to their individual quarters, having once again been lucky enough to experience a degree of freedom and self-completion, which according to many meeting participants is not surpassed in any other domain of their lives.
Might there be some kind of connection between this culture of collective drinking at the summer meetings and Tidehverv’s more general celebration of existential leaping and inner rupture discussed above? Embarking on a train of thought that shall here remain sketchy but that I hope to develop in future work, I would tentatively suggest that we are faced with a sort of extended or distorted ‘collective effervescence’. According to established wisdom, this arch-Durkheimian concept is used to denote social events characterized by an usually intense sense of unity and connectedness, which for the same reason is often associated with sacred and transcendental domains of human existence. Now on the face of it, the recurrent and ritualized after-dinner boozing sessions described above would fit this definition well. Also during these memorable summer nights, people seem to experience a beefed-up version of several social relations and social norms that they cherish the most. As such, perceived from the vantage of the ethnographic fieldworker, these events are marked by a dense social atmosphere where the most sociologically sacred Tidehverv values are made temporarily visible.

But we can take the analysis one step further. For is there not a sense to which a different, more introspective transcendence is also brought about during these bouts of collective effervescence? I would tentatively infer that, simultaneously with the intensification of social relations that is perceived to take place between participants at the intersubjective level, a concurrent intensification is also experienced to occur within each (or at least some) of them in form of what might be called ‘existentialist effervescence’. And that, I would further venture, is the ultimate and deeper, or dare one say ‘sacred’, purpose of all that drinking and debating during the summer meetings and other Tidehverv gatherings: the enactment, in the realm that could be referred to as self-relational or intra-subjective, of an almost spiritual and mystical ‘leaping into’ a complete version of the person that I ‘really am’ (that is, of the person that I would like to be). And, crucially, it is exactly this experience of ‘a jealous interiority devotedly attended to’ (Dumont 1994, 20) that can only be ascertained via repeated inner ruptures, but never any outer revolution.

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Note

1. While this term is commonly associated with Kierkegaard, it has been disputed whether he ever used it himself. He did, however, discuss ‘leaps’ (spring) on many occasions, including the ‘qualitative transition’ involved in becoming a Christian believer (McKinnon 1993).

References


