

A GODLY CONTEMPLATION: PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS,
by Hans Nielsen Hauge, edited by Lars Walker, translated by Brian
Lunn et al, Upsala, MN: Pontoppidan Press, 2024. 256 pages. \$20.00.

For the many American Christians and congregations who are linked to Hans Nielsen Hauge—and even now there are many fellowship-halls in which his picture hangs, and an endless number of congregational histories in which he appears in the introduction—the two grand challenges in connecting to him are that of accessing his works and conquering the language barrier that often accompanies them. In the absence of a living connection, it is far too easy—and all too common—to cram Hauge into a drawer of personal choosing. Often, he becomes a Norwegian Billy

Graham, a schismaticist who would want the congregation to separate itself from the world and/or its denomination, the inspiration for clerical distrust and denominational suspicion, or even a social radical who would take issue with the current economic and political arrangement. We hand historical figures our own desires and troubles because it is easier and far safer to find a dead champion than a living one—the disconnect means Hauge can never disappoint us—but in doing so, we rob Hauge of his own unique voice in the ongoing conversation of faith. Hauge was an unabashed Lutheran who argued that through Scripture, “the Augsburg Confession is easy to defend with great strength” (211), he was critical of abuses amongst the clergy and institutional failings but remained a member of the Church of Norway, and he lived in an age which will seem both wildly strange and oddly familiar to an American reader.

A Godly Contemplation attempts to quell the challenges of language and accessibility and aims to bring the reader towards understanding the man for who he was and the age in which he lived. Brian J. Lunn and Lars Walker have edited the first full-fledged anthology of Hauge’s works in English. The last notable, and widely read, Hauge translation was Joel M. Njus’s “Autobiographical Writings” in 1954 which included Hauge’s diary and famed “Testament to His Friends.” With this in mind, *A Godly Contemplation* is a welcome addition to the English Hauge canon.

The work opens with a concise introduction to the man and his times. The author ends by referring to it as a “Hans Nielsen Hauge 101.” This is a fair assessment—although I take issue with referring to Østfold (Hauge’s home county) as “an Iowa-like region,” (7) but maybe I have just visited and lived in the wrong parts of Iowa. The first section of the work is an assortment of prayers and devotions; these primarily come from Hauge’s “The Conversation of the Children of God,” published in 1803. Additionally, a prayer published while Hauge was imprisoned and two letters are included. The second section of the work is comprised of six “meditations” which span from the beginning of his ministry (1796) to mid-way through his imprisonment (1808). These address an array of topics and reveal anxieties common to the day. Nothing from the last 16 years of Hauge’s writings is included; this absence begs for further translation and publishing. *A Godly Contemplation* ends with a “devotional biography” by James L. Johnson and an extensive bibliography of works on Hauge in English.

Devotional literature is hard to evaluate, what illuminates one may not illuminate another. Additionally, although it’s collection and configuration are modern, *A Godly Contemplation* is historical devotional

literature which brings with it other difficulties. Given the nature of this genre and my interest in Hans Nielsen Hauge, a sentiment which will likely be shared by the average reader of *A Godly Contemplation*, my evaluation was based on three questions: Does the work bring me closer to understanding the age in which Hauge lived and served? Does the work bring me closer to understanding the man who exists often in myth alone? Does the work bring me closer to God? It is possible that the editors had no intention of attempting the first two, but the nature of this genre makes these standards unavoidable.

The work was a success on all three fronts. Part of any reformers work is addressing the issues plaguing contemporary society, Hauge is no different and at times addresses the challenges and shortcomings facing his people, church, and nation. According to the editors, Hauge “wrote just like he talked,” (14) which allowed me to connect in such a way that I found myself being upset along with him. Previous works have addressed Hauge’s economic and historical legacy—this work aims to address and expand his spiritual legacy. Many of the included works reveal the man behind them as well as his oft overlooked nuances. The prayers and meditations were of varying spiritual effect, but here this is a rather subjective standard. Of special interest, and effect, were the meal time devotions that Hauge wrote. Each devotion was tied with a hymn that the family was encouraged to sing together. As a conduit of Haugeanism’s historical faith practices, this portion was a moment that the work ceased to be “historical” and simply became devotional.

The “Meditation” section contained some of the most captivating and thought-provoking works—I would have loved to see this section expanded. I have never encountered a “devotional biography” before and am unsure how to evaluate it—as the name may imply, it was a biography swirled with personal reflections on



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the part of the author. Contextually, the biography fit. The extensive bibliography of English works on Hauge is praiseworthy and will be appreciated by future students of the man and his ministry.

A *Godly Contemplation* should be in the library of anyone interested in Hans Nielsen Hauge. The translators and editors should be encouraged to continue their work in making Hauge accessible to a wider audience. He has a place in our living conversation and can affect more than the introduction to our congregational story. As the team continues, I would recommend more works presenting Hauge's contact with Enlightenment era ideas as well as those that display a deeper theological conviction. Hauge lived in a time far closer to our own than is often considered; the historic churches were in decline and the average Christian, by way of the Enlightenment, was dealing with radically new ways of thinking—ones that challenged traditional thought about God, the role of the Church, and the grand scheme of History. It was uncharted territory, a term that may resonate with many modern American Christians and pastors.

The most splendid aspect of devotional literature is found when we, the reader, are given a window into a heart that wrestles. In several of the "Meditations", we are given a glimpse into Hauge's heart as it wrestles with the changing religious landscape. While he does, I would wish that the editors would simply—as my confirmands tell me—"let him cook." My concern centers around a footnote in the final meditation, "The Right Way," in which Hauge wrestles with "errors" on the part of the Gospel writers. The editor notes that they personally disagree with the notion of the Gospels containing errors and redirects the reader back to a conversation about inconsistencies in the Augsburg Confession. The comment and redirection detract from Hauge's greater point—that the church, Scripture, and faith are built on the foundation of Jesus Christ and that no imperfection on the walls' part can detract from Christ Himself. Hauge uses his own belief in regards to Scripture's "errors" as an illustration to defend his chosen confession, and in doing so taps a larger vein.

To borrow Hauge's own ideas, we are pursuant of "True Faith," that rare thing that exists somewhere between "Denial" and "Superstition." The idea that a man can say Scripture, even the Gospels, have errors yet maintain such a resilient faith is edifying and justifies Hauge's place in the modern conversation of faith. We live in a world increasingly polluted by Denial and Superstition, a world needing what Hauge found in a farm field in 1796, a world needing true faith in Christ Jesus. As the translators move forward, I would recommend that they allow Hauge to wrestle as

he will even as he challenges our own convictions because doing so will allow us the reader to wrestle with our own.

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