



# The Georg Sverdrup Society

## NEWSLETTER

### Rev. Robert Lee to Speak at GSS Annual Meeting

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#### Georg Sverdrup

- Born to Pastor Harold Ulrich Sverdrup and his wife Caroline Metella, nee Suur, at Balestrand, Sogn, Norway, on December 16, 1848.
- Died on May 3, 1907, in Minneapolis, MN, and buried in the Lakewood Cemetery

Rev. Robert Lee, no stranger to members of the Georg Sverdrup Society, will be the featured speaker for the 2017 Annual Meeting of the Georg Sverdrup Society. The meeting will be held **October 14, 2017**, at the Hans Nielsen Hauge Chapel on the campus of AFLC Schools. Since 2017 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, the Sverdrup Society has chosen “Sverdrup and the Reformation” for this year’s focus. In keeping with this theme, Pastor Lee has chosen “From Luther to Sverdrup” as the title of his presentation.

Lee served as President of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations from 1992 to 2007. Since then, he has been on the faculty of Association Free Lutheran Theological Seminary and Association Free Lutheran Bible School where his primary teaching focus has been Church History. During his sabbatical this fall, Lee has begun writing the history of the AFLC.

Lee was elected to the first board of directors for the Georg Sverdrup Society in 2003 and served as editor of the first *Sverdrup Journal* (2004). Always an interesting speaker, Lee has been the

featured speaker at the Society’s Annual Meetings twice before. In 2009, he spoke on “Sverdrup’s Plan of Pastoral Training for the Congregation,” and again in 2011 his topic was “Georg Sverdrup vs. Gisle Johnson: Lay Preaching and the Augsburg Confession.” We look forward to hearing from Pastor Lee again this year.

Because of scheduling difficulties, this year’s program will begin at 12:30 instead of the usual 1:00. The luncheon will also start a half hour early (11:30) in the basement of the chapel. The cost for the meal is \$12.

The traditional “Sverdrup Songfest,” led by Mrs. Marian Christopherson, gives those attending a chance to share in the singing of hymns sung in the days of Sverdrup and Oftedal. The Seminary Chorus led by AFLC Schools Music Director, Mr. Andrew Hanson, will also perform.

On the agenda for the 2:00 business meeting will be elections, discussion regarding future topics for the journal, and general business. Plan on being there on Saturday, October 14, and bring a friend.

—Loiell O. Dyrud



Rev. Robert Lee

#### Georg Sverdrup Society 2017 Annual Meeting

Saturday, October 14  
12:30 p.m.  
Hauge Chapel  
Association Free  
Lutheran Seminary  
3134 East Medicine  
Lake Boulevard  
Plymouth, MN 55441

Lunch: 11:30 a.m.  
(Cost: \$12.00)

## Haakon the Good, Reconsidered

### By Larry Walker

How did Norway become Christian? It's not entirely clear.

The traditional narrative is simple: Norway was a stubbornly heathen country until two kings named Olaf (Olaf Trygvesson and Saint Olaf Haraldsson) came in with fire and sword, humbling the heathen and forcing the true faith on them.

That narrative also mentions an earlier Christian king, Haakon the Good. But he's dismissed as a failure, possibly an apostate.

There are reasons to question that story though.

In 1995 a book was published, edited from the posthumous papers of Fritdtjov S. Birkeli (1906-1983), bishop of Stavanger and Oslo in Norway. The book is called *Tolv År Hadde Kristendommen Vært i Norge* (Twelve Years Had Christianity Been in Norway). Sadly, the book has never been translated into English, but I'd like to share some of its arguments here.

The book's title comes from a famous rune stone, the Kuli Stone, found at Kuløy, Sunnmøre, Norway. The scholar who deciphered it originally dated it to the tenth century, based on the forms of its runic letters (the runes changed over time, and from place to place). But when he translated the text, he revised his date to the eleventh century. He did this because the inscription (as he read it, some scholars dispute this) said, "*Tore and Hallvard raised this stone in memory of Ulv(ljot) . . . Twelve years had Christianity been in Norway.*" Since everyone knew that Christianity came with Saint Olaf in 1015 AD, he reasoned, it must have been carved twelve years after that date.

Bishop Birkeli wasn't convinced. He thought the inscription might well refer to the work of the much-maligned Haakon the Good (ca. 920-961). He had archaeological and

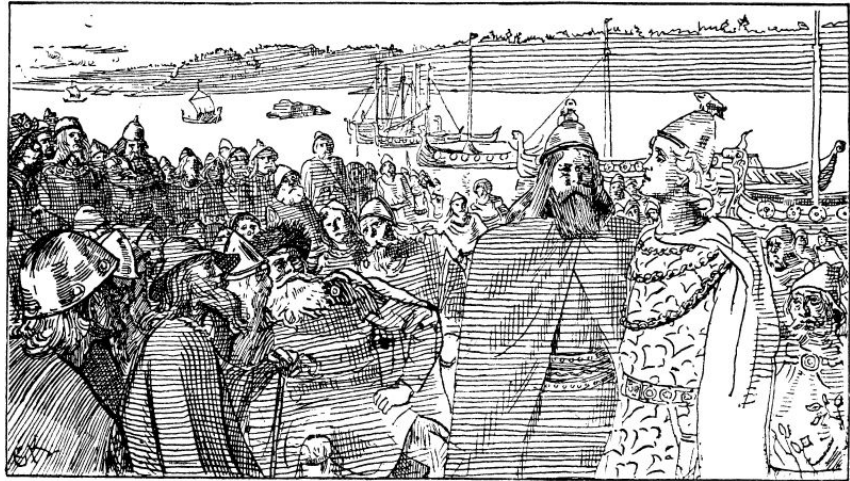


Illustration by Christian Krogh from *Haakon the Good's Saga*.

scholarly reasons for this opinion.

Haakon was the son of the king traditionally credited with beginning the unification of Norway as a single kingdom, King Harald Fairhair (ca. 850-ca. 932). Harald established diplomatic relations with King Athelstan the Great of England and sent his youngest son, Haakon, to be raised in his court. He must have been aware that Haakon would be baptized and raised as a Christian in that cultured environment.

Shortly after the death of his father, Haakon sailed to Norway with English blessing, and with English priests. According to the Icelandic sagas, he was determined to convert Norway to Christianity. He quickly drove out his older brother, Erik Bloodaxe, and was accepted as the new king.

However, according to the sagas, his Christian faith provoked strong opposition. The chieftains expected their king to preside at heathen sacrifices. Finally, they forced Haakon to participate in a limited way, and he went away furious, vowing to come back and destroy the heathens.

But at that moment, a threat appeared. Erik Bloodaxe's sons approached with a fleet, intending to

kill Haakon and take back their father's kingdom. Haakon was faced with a choice—make peace with the heathen Norwegian chieftains to get their support in resisting the invasion, or see those chieftains side with Erik's sons. He chose to compromise and (according to the sagas), his missionary work ended there. One saga even reports that he died a heathen.

However, a survey of the evidence led Bishop Birkeli to a different conclusion.

First of all, Birkeli noted that all the scenes of Haakon's failures take place in one region—the Trondheim region, which remained heathen a long time. What about other parts of the country, especially the southwest?

He noted that in *Vestland*, the southwest of Norway, a number of Viking Age stone crosses are found. These crosses resemble crosses found in Britain. Such crosses do not exist elsewhere in Scandinavia. That's one clear sign of the early influence of the English church in Norway.

He points to the "Gula-Thing

(cont. on page 3)

## Haakon the Good, Reconsidered (cont.)

Law,” the ancient law that governed Vestland. There’s some dispute as to the age of many of its laws, but he cites scholars who believe that “the observance of Sunday was enacted in the 900s, possibly along with the great holidays, Christmas and Easter.” He also quotes a scholar who suggested that an ordinance in the Gula-Thing Law “concerning the annual emancipation of slaves, shows the influence of Anglo-Saxon missionaries” and may be attributed to Haakon’s influence (p.82).

He also cites archaeological evidence that burial practices began to change in the tenth century, with Norwegians abandoning heathen customs and adopting Christian ones (p.87).

He quotes *Ágrip*, an old Icelandic book of sagas, which says that “in [Haakon’s] day many turned to the Christian faith because he was so well-liked. . . . He

built churches in Norway and installed learned men in them” (p.79).

According to Birkeli’s scenario, Haakon the Good had considerable success as a missionary in Norway—and by peaceful means. The Anglo-Saxon church of that time (he argues) believed in gentle persuasion, and Haakon would have followed that model (p.71). Norway became a “pluralistic” society, with Christians and heathens living side by side in relative peace—but Christianity was making steady gains.

After Saint Olaf’s martyrdom and canonization in the eleventh century, saga writers were motivated to enhance his reputation as a successful missionary king. They portrayed Norway as more heathen than it really was—so stubbornly heathen that Olaf had no alternative but to force it to convert through torture and warfare. Under that scenario, there was no place for

the story of Haakon’s peaceful successes. He must be painted as a weak Christian whose mission failed entirely.

Today, historians are questioning that view. The Swedish historian Anders Winroth, in his 2014 book, *The Conversion of Scandinavia*, argues (for different reasons than Birkeli’s) that the conversion was in fact a pretty peaceful affair.

P. H. Sawyer in *Kings and Vikings* (1982) writes, “Olaf owed his sanctity to his death, not to his life, and had Christianity not been so deeply rooted, his merits as a saint would not have been so quickly or so widely recognized” (p.140).

It’s comforting and encouraging for evangelical Christians to consider the idea that peaceful persuasion and virtuous living had as much (or more) to do with Norway’s conversion than officially sanctioned violence and force.

*Athelstan the Great, Haakon’s godfather.*

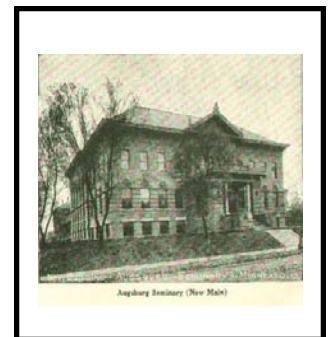


## A Tale of Two Portraits



The picture on the left is the most commonly reproduced image of Norwegian lay revivalist Hans Nielsen Hauge. It is, however, purely imaginary, based on a bust carved in 1871 (nearly 50 years after Hauge’s death) by artist Thorstein Fladmoe for a ship’s figurehead.

The image on the right is a painting discovered in Copenhagen at the end of the nineteenth century. It was inscribed “Hans Nielsen Hauge” on the back. Members of Hauge’s family believed it to be an authentic portrait of the preacher. (Source: *Nybrottsmannen frå Tune*, Ola Rudvin, 1971, Lunde Forlag, Oslo.)





## THE GEORG SVERDRUP SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

1016 Spruce St.  
Hagerstown, MD 21740-71217  
georgsverdrupsociety.org

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## Ordet Blev Kjødt

*(The Word Became Flesh)*

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### Directors

Martin Horn, President  
Kevin Borg, Vice President  
Tim Larson, Secretary  
Larry Walker, Editor  
Alex Amiot  
Marian Christopherson  
Lloyd Quanbeck

Prospective members are invited to contact the Membership Secretary, Kris Nyman, at the above address.

The Georg Sverdrup Society was organized in December 2003 and is open to anyone interested in the life and work of noted Norwegian-American theologian Georg Sverdrup (1848-1907). The society is registered in the State of Minnesota as a 501 (C)(3) nonprofit corporation. Its activities, which are guided by a seven-member board of directors, include:

- Promoting the study and understanding of the New Testament congregation as understood and explained by Georg Sverdrup;
- Endeavoring to advance the ideal of “free and living congregations” as envisioned by Sverdrup;
- Seeking to foster further translation of Sverdrup’s writings into English;
- Encouraging the study and application of the “Fundamental Principles” and “Rules for Work” as used in the Lutheran Free Church and as continuing to be used in the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations;
- Enlarging the interest in Sverdrup’s works by organizing discussion groups and providing speakers on request;
- Operating a **Sverdrup Society** website linked to <[www.aflc.org](http://www.aflc.org)> for members of the Society and others interested in the life and work of Georg Sverdrup;
- Maintaining a current bibliography of Sverdrup’s translated work as well as a current bibliography of materials written about him;
- Publishing a newsletter for members that provides information on the Society’s activities as well as general information about Georg Sverdrup;
- And encouraging research and study of Sverdrup’s life and work by publishing an annual **Sverdrup Journal**.

## The Haugean Movement and Democracy

*In 1926, a book in memory of Hans Nielsen Hauge, edited by O. E. Rolvaag and M. O. Wee, was published by Augsburg Publishing House. It was called Mindebok om Hans Nielsen Hauge. It includes the following quotation by P. J. Eikeland from Dr. A. Christian Bang’s Hans Nielsen Hauge og Hans Samtid (1910).*

This Haugean Movement was, at bottom, a *Christian* understanding. It contained elements tending to a democratic view of the world. It is well known that the power structure of the [Dano-

Norwegian] Union bureaucracy was unaccustomed to contradiction from the people. Even when the officials did not have the law on their side, but were enforcing only improvised rulings, they seldom met with vocal opposition. The people’s inborn respect for authority, their distinct loyalty, led them to submit. . . . But suddenly people all over the country turned on the officials. The bonders who had formerly been so compliant now flouted authority and set their own ideas above the pronouncements of “their betters.” They preferred to go to jail—would rather be martyred—than conform to the edicts of officialdom. When one reads the official depositions in the

Hauge affair, one cannot avoid the impression that the entire official class stood trembling and confounded in the face of the movement. Their authority, their very existence as the Union establishment, stood in jeopardy. Only thus is it possible to explain the fury of contemporary officialdom towards Hauge and his revival. This is of particular interest as the first widespread example of a collision between the absolutist view and a more independent order of things in our country.

—*Trans. by Larry J. Walker*