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# Experience and Faith: The Significance of Luther for Understanding Today's Experiential Religion

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# BOOKS IN REVIEW

## *EXPERIENCE AND FAITH*

*The Significance of Luther  
for Understanding Today's  
Experiential Religion*

**WILLIAM HORDERN**

Augsburg, 1983, 160 pp.

What does the young Luther's spiritual problem have in common with much that is evident in contemporary, born-again evangelicalism? From out of his own experience, what might Luther say today to proponents of various liberation theologies?

William Hordern presents the views of a now mature Luther who sees real dangers inherent in an improper emphasis on experiential religion. It seems part of the human dilemma to be tempted to assume that one's own, particular, subjective experience of God is normative for all. Such personal faith, though often meaningful to the believer, lacks objectivity and completeness from God's ultimate truth.

Hordern thus poses the question — "How does one evaluate Christian experience?" Since Luther struggled with this very issue for himself his insights can be highly instructive.

The born-again believer; the charismatic; the black American Christian, the Third World convert and the modern woman newly sensitized to how church structures have oppressed her sex over the years — all of the above persons (and many others) are being caught up in experience-centred religion. People read the bible afresh and find deliverance in deeply meaningful, personal ways today. But religious experience is subjective and can never provide an ultimate basis for authentic awareness of God.

As Luther contended with the Anabaptist theologies of his time he began to discover the inadequacy of building a biblical hermeneutic on one's subjective experience. He said, 'It doesn't really matter how we feel about God. It does matter how God feels about us'. When everyone considers his or her own experience of the truth to be normative, spiritual confusion reigns; communication is prevented and the truth is not served. This led Luther to propose that something must stand outside the self as the basis of ultimate truth. He posited the holy scriptures as that which serves to evaluate all subjective experience.

While Luther continued to own and affirm his experience he could no longer point to that experience as self-authenticating. On that basis, Hordern suggests a new responsibility for theology in our time. We must learn from the many particularist theologies of our day. But movement must be from particularity to the universality of

truth since insights from each can inform and unite all. The scriptures facilitate and judge this process.

Hordern's book is timely because it provides a significant counter to the modern propensity to make central and exclusive one's own perceptions of the faith. Luther helps us to see that the problem is not a new one and the challenge of 'divine objectivity' continues the same. Contemporary Lutherans are able to evaluate the meaning of their own faith through an appropriation of lessons learned through the struggles that have shaped our theological heritage.

But Hordern does not attempt to answer the next logical question. Do the scriptures alone provide ultimate resolution to the problem? Does the bible, in fact, ultimately speak with one voice? Are not the scriptures also enveloped with the particularisms that envelope us? Can the searcher for ultimacy find there the answer? This question is asked, rhetorically — but I believe the Catholic dimension of the argument must be noted. What is the role of the church and of tradition in the hermeneutical endeavour? *Experience and Faith* does not venture into these ecumenical waters.

Hordern serves Lutherans well by focusing the question as he does and by allowing Luther to speak to our modern condition. The study concludes — Mature faith must look outside the self to God who helps to bring all experience into perspective through Himself.

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