



# History and Theology: The Mormon Connection A RESPONSE

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**P**rofessor Gaustad's paper is an excellent one. I think he informed us, challenged us, entertained us a bit, and presented all of his information in a very gracious and tolerant manner. I appreciate very much his willingness to come to Utah and share these ideas with us. What I have to say in response will be in two parts: some general comments about the nature of this subject and then a few suggestions on some of the points that Professor Gaustad has made.

This section of the symposium is on the relationship between theology and history. By theology I mean the systematic study of the nature of God and his relations with man, and by history I mean the systematic study of man's past based primarily on the inductive method, empirical evidence, and the desire for perspective. The first question that I had in reading Professor Gaustad's paper is: "To what extent is there and to what extent ought there to be a meaningful connection between theology and history?" Can the two fields really be compared and connected in meaningful ways? Both, in the final analysis, are acts of faith, as Carl Becker and Charles Beard pointed out some decades ago. But theology, I think, requires a great deal more faith than history does. Both theology and history are relative rather than absolute, because there are no generally agreed upon values in either—at least not over time. Both are very ancient disciplines, going back at least to the Greeks, but history

was not a very sophisticated one until the nineteenth century. Both theology and history are, however, finding less and less relevance in modern society. I think the main reason for this decreasing relevance is to be found in the process of secularization—but that is another subject.

If there are similarities between theology and history there are also differences. For a historian—particularly a modern historian—the primary intellectual effort is based on an imminent rather than a transcendent perspective, on the rational rather than the religious. The historian is more comfortable with evolving truth than with revealed truth, with men more than providence. In short, history is fundamentally secular and non-religious. As a consequence, there is a growing current of both official and popular thought among those who are religious which is not only suspicious of historians but sometimes hostile as well. Many of these religious people fear historical relativism almost as much as they fear heresy, and most would probably agree with Aldous Huxley's graphic statement: "God isn't the son of memory: He's the son of Immediate Experience."<sup>1</sup>

So what is the connection between history and theology for Mormons? I would suggest that, for the professional historian at least, the connection is very tenuous and fraught with difficulties. This is not because Mormon historians have trouble relating to theologians or under-

standing their methods. On the contrary, historians and theologians speak the same basic language, were often trained at the same institutions, and share many of the same doubts about the religious enterprise generally. The problem is that there are no *Mormon* theologians; there are only General Authorities. These authorities do not (for the most part) have advanced theological or historical training, nor do they speak the language of the scholar. Almost to a man they come from the business world rather than from the university. More importantly, their primary purpose is to build faith in a given set of "revealed" religious postulates, rather than to push back the frontiers of knowledge by asking questions and conducting experiments. I do not mean this to sound condescending. I respect these men, for the most part, and recognize their goals as quite legitimate. But their reli-



virtually all Mormon historians to be quite uncritical of contemporary Mormon prophets. It is almost as if they were "off limits" to historical analysis and historical criticism. This is particularly true, and understandably so, of those historians who are employed by the Church. I am moreover informed that from time to time whole subjects have been specifically declared off limits to them. "Don't write about the Blacks and the priesthood," they were told some time ago. "Don't write about polygamy," was advice given at another time. Today it is said, "Don't embarrass the Brethren."<sup>2</sup> This observation obviously cuts both ways. There are perhaps equally as many historians at secular institutions who downplay their religious sentiments in order to be accepted by their secular peers.

Turning to another point, I particularly appreciated Professor Gaustad's comments about the egocentricity that we find in our culture and in our faith. Those who assert exclusive and proprietary rights to salvation, those who wish to limit it for their own group alone, are manifesting more atavism than understanding. I think those outside the fold are fully within the bounds of good theology to say that salvation and exaltation are not just for Mormons alone. But this is a diversion and a theologi-

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gious goals are different from and sometimes antithetical to the historian's more secular purposes.

Now a few comments about Professor Gaustad's paper. One of the difficulties of connecting theology and history I have been describing is to be found on page one where Professor Gaustad says that "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself." That is a theological statement, not an historical statement. Historians can say very little about the actual relationship between God and Christ, since there is virtually no historical *evidence* to deal with. All historians can do is to analyze what people say they think of that relationship. The same problem exists in the quotations from Herbert Butterfield. When Butterfield mentions the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection, he is in the realm of metaphysics and well beyond the realm of history. One deals with these sorts of things on the basis of faith, not on the basis of empirical data. One asserts their ultimate truth, one does not calculate their probabilities.

There are of course both disadvantages and advantages to being a faithful, believing historian. An insider often understands many things that an outsider does not and his historical judgments can be more empathetic. But I believe that on the whole mixing one's religious beliefs with one's scholarly commitments sooner or later will compromise one or the other. A few examples will illustrate this point. There is a tendency, I think, among

cal rather than an historical judgment.

Professor Gaustad has said that history is taken seriously within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and I think that is true. But it is true only up to a point. There are, as I have said before, whole areas that have been and are today deliberately avoided by those who work for the organization. There are other areas allegedly considered too sacred for discussion, such as issues that relate to the temple ceremony. If an empirically minded, rationally minded, non-theistic historian were to discover, for example, that the Masonic and Mormon temple rituals are to a substantial degree indistinguishable, he would feel no compunction about examining the topic thoroughly.

I suspect that Mormons take their history seriously up to the point where it begins to undermine their faith. As with learning in general, it is considered good to be informed about the past so long as one's testimony is preserved—but no further. For most Mormons, testimony takes precedence over conflicting knowledge as faith surpasses reason. Historians are therefore potentially dangerous because they raise doubt-producing questions, expose contradictions in doctrine, uncover questionable behavior in the leadership, or simply tell people more than they can digest comfortably. This is why some of our most informative, most significant historical documents have been suppressed. Two notable

examples of this suppression are the journals of George Q. Cannon, which even the Church's own historians are not permitted to see, and B. H. Roberts' lengthy and provocative manuscript on problems with the *Book of Mormon*, which has just surfaced after having been kept out of sight for nearly 50 years.<sup>3</sup>

Professor Gaustad suggests that Mormons can contribute to a wider understanding of the history of the Western Hemisphere, because the Mormon time-line does not begin in 1830. I doubt that Mormons have contributed much to our historical understanding of pre-Columbian people in America, for I do not know a single non-Mormon historian who takes Moroni's account seriously. This is precisely the problem I am describing: there simply is no connection between historical fact and theological assertion insofar as the *Book of Mormon* is concerned. Non-Mormon historians do not take the book seriously because there is no historical evidence that Lehi and his descendants ever existed. After 3,500 years of time, millions of people, scores of cities, and a dramatic visit by the very Son of God one would think *something* should have survived. All kinds of historical evidence exists for the actual existence of biblical people. Why is there none for

the revered purposes of objective historical inquiry.

There are also many secular, non-Mormon historians who see religion as the "enemy." Many agree with Hume that religion is a hindrance, and with Kant that we can have no insight into the world of God. More than a few equate doubt with intelligence, religion with intellectual slavery, and progress with secularization. Few of these historians believe in sin, that there is any ultimate knowledge beyond experience, or that there is any design in the universe. Many historians at the better universities believe that religious involvement is incompatible with high scholarly productivity and that intellectual autonomy must be valued above religious obedience. If secularism and scholarship are natural bedfellows and tend to reinforce one another, if a "restless and probing intellect" is essential to any significant scholarly work, then an academic who is deeply committed to organized religion, they believe, is not very likely to be remembered for his or her high scholarly achievement.<sup>5</sup>

If religious commitment and scholarly commitment tend to be mutually exclusive perspectives, then the connection between theology and history must inevitably be a tenuous one. Nor will it be surprising if, at the poles,

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*Book of Mormon* people? There can be no dialogue between *Book of Mormon* apologists (of whom there are many) and historians on this issue because, for historians at least, there is no evidence to discuss.

My final comment relates to Professor Gaustad's suggestion that Mormon history should be lengthened in time and broadened in scope. I enjoyed this part of his paper the most. Professor Gaustad is certainly correct when he says that Mormons find authentication chiefly in their own limited experience, that they seldom read non-Mormon authors who write about Mormonism, and that altogether too many of us are excessively suspicious of our own people who have more than amateur knowledge of the Mormon past. I particularly appreciated Professor Gaustad's suggestion that history ought to be a corrective to Mormon theology, if for no other reason than to keep our leaders honest when discussing the Mormon experience. But I think the reverse is also true. Theology can be a necessary corrective to the increasingly secular tendencies in history. There is ample evidence that some Mormons, including some General Authorities, see history as an "enemy" and deliberately manipulate the past in order to build testimonies. Elder Benson's advice to institute and seminary teachers to "always defend the faith" and never "offend the Brethren" is in this vein.<sup>4</sup> Whatever its theological value, such advice when carried to this length is completely alien to

some hostility regularly exists between the two. But if *truth* is ultimately superior to both theology and history, then both can be engaged in the common enterprise, and both can make a contribution to understanding. In this sense not only can history be a necessary corrective to theology, as Professor Gaustad suggests, but theology can be an equally valuable corrective to the excesses of history, of which there are many. If both are the servants of truth, neither need feel threatened by the other. It is in this cooperative spirit that I join Professor Gaustad and express appreciation for his contribution.

#### NOTES

1. Aldous Huxley, *The Genius and the Goddess* (Bantam Books: New York, 1956), p. 4. For an analysis of the suspicious attitude of Mormons toward their own historians see Mark P. Leone, *The Roots of Modern Mormonism* (Harvard Press: Boston, 1979), Chapter 8.

2. For a frank and forthright statement on using history to build faith see Ezra Taft Benson, "The Gospel Teacher and his Message," address given on Temple Square, September 17, 1976, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah; and the same writer's Twelve Stake Fireside address, March 28, 1976, B.Y.U. Library.

3. The Cannon journals are under the direct control of the First Presidency. The B. H. Roberts manuscript, "Book of Mormon Difficulties" (454 pp.), is now available in the Special Collections section of the Marriott Library at the University of Utah.

4. See Elder Benson's remarks cited in fn. 2.

5. Those who wish to pursue this subject further might read: Michael F. Faia, "Secularization and Scholarship Among American Professors," *Sociological Analysis*, 37 (Spring, 1976): 63; Rodney Stark and Charles Glock, *Religion and Society in Tension*, (Rand McNally: Chicago, 1965), especially Chapter 14.

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