GOD AND MAN IN HISTORY

RICHARD D. POLL

As a discipline, history is often concerned not only with facts and interpretations of facts, but also with philosophy. Can the study of history produce a personal philosophy that will be satisfying — or should one even look for such a philosophy in history? Can one find a basis for value judgements in history? Is there, or should there be, such a thing as a Mormon philosophy of history? The Church, of course, takes no position on such an ambiguous question, and neither does the Mormon History Association, but each Mormon historian usually develops his own philosophy based on his own understanding of both history and the Mormon faith. One such scholar is Richard D. Poll, a past president of the Mormon History Association. Here he shares his thoughts, based on years of experience as a teacher and writer of history, on the relationship between God and man in the ongoing historical process. "God and Man in History" was the presidential address delivered at the Mormon History Association Meeting in Los Angeles, California, in April 1970.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sees both God and man in a temporal, that is, historical, context, but it has developed no authoritative, systematic statement of the philosophical implications of historical relationships. It has no *official* philosophy of history. What follows, therefore, are simply reflections on some problems which relate to the religious affirmations of the L.D.S. people and a tentative approach to my personal philosophy of history.

By "philosophy of history" I mean a central conception of what history is about. What does the process add up to? Does it have meaning? Is it going anywhere? If so, where? Is it going up, or down, or around in a circle, or up and down like a roller coaster? What are the purposes being served? What are the ultimate ends toward which history is moving?

In the doctrines of Mormonism there are, of course, many statements about God, man, time, matter, space, intelligence, law, choice and other subjects which are highly relevant to these questions. However, the integration of these affirmations into a comprehensive and internally consistent philosophy of history has not yet been accomplished. I am not now attempting to perform that service for the Church, but rather to explore a few problems that must be resolved by whoever undertakes that task.

There are many variant philosophies of history to which people have given intellectual, emotional and even activist commitment over the centuries. The late nineteenth century found many Americans committed to what might be called a straight-line progress philosophy; each generation, standing on the

shoulders of its predecessors, was seen as moving toward a more ideal society. The twentieth century shattered many of the philosophical assumptions of inevitable progress, giving rise to such cyclical theories of history as the secular cycles of Oswald Spengler and the religiously-oriented cycles of Arnold Toynbee. Deterministic philosophies like Marxism see social laws leading us inevitably in certain directions, while theologically based neo-Calvinism predestinates the historic process according to God's will.

A fashionable trend at present is to deny history and philosophy. To some, life really adds up to nothing. It started as an accident and has been a combination of accidents — or "happenings" — ever since. Ultimately it ends with neither a bang nor a whimper. This notion of life as essentially absurd — without fundamental meaning — is found in some versions of existentialism.

While Latter-day Saints can find some basis for associating with any and all of these philosophies, we have not, as a Church, identified clearly with any of them. And yet, the L.D.S. way of looking at life contains the ingredients for a philosophy of history. The concept of dispensations lends itself to a cyclical idea, or perhaps a cyclical spiral, with some repetitions from dispensation to dispensation, but with each building upon its predecessor. This cumulative conception of progress, however, must be set off against the concept of a Golden Age at the beginning of the human story. Some years ago the Priesthood studied a book based upon the notion that the beginning phase was the best phase; it was followed by a series of apostasies and partial restorations by which man is gradually working his way back to the level of the beginning.[1]

The concept of the miraculous in Mormonism has implications for a philosophy of history. It can support the idea of theological determinism — that God is actively directing the historic process and doing whatever is necessary to accomplish His purposes, whether making the sun stand still for Joshua or raising Lazarus from the dead. Occasionally, however, one encounters testimonies of miracles which suggest a whimsical quality about divine interpositions, like the ancient Greek philosophies of history in which the Gods are directly involved but seem to be playing pointless games with men as pawns.

A mechanistic determinism can be derived from the idea of irrevocable laws according to which things happen. Even the Lord is bound by these laws. We do certain things and certain results occur; they may be blessings or penalties, but they are built into the system. However, many aspects of Mormonism resist such a deterministic conception. The affirmation that man is a free agent — that he has the capacity for real choice — serves as the basis for an indeterministic philosophy of history. Some read it as an indeterministic progress theory — man as a free agent is going somewhere; others suggest that man is merely biding his time, trying to avoid worldly transgressions until the millennial end comes.

Why has the Church developed no systematic philosophy of history — no unifying conception about the historical process? For one reason, in our approach to our religion we Latter-day Saints display little sense of history. Apart from the veneration of certain idealized episodes from the past — the first visions, the martyrdom of the Prophet, the crossing of the plains — we have forgotten our past. And as far as such features of that past as plural marriage are concerned, some of us would appreciate not being reminded of them.

Not merely the events of the past, but the concept of the past as a process

influences current L.D.S. thought very little. The significant legacy of the past is seen as a body of revelations, of encapsulated and uncontested truths which are of equal validity and relevance in every generation. The rest of the historic record is nonfunctional in terms of the quest for exaltation and so, the counsel of Section 88 of the *Doctrine and Covenants* notwithstanding, the body of historical knowledge and experience is not brought to bear on the decisions and value judgments of the here and now.

Let me illustrate this and certain other propositions with some findings from a survey made at Brigham Young University in December 1969. A group of more than fifteen hundred students in my American Heritage class answered a series of propositions designed to discover what they "*really* think about their educational experience and some of the issues which are periodically discussed" at the university. They responded on a "strongly agree — strongly disagree" five option scale. The same instrument was used with several other groups for comparison purposes. Two of the propositions illustrate what I believe to be the case — that the typical L.D.S. approach to life today is not tied to an awareness of yesterday.

One of the survey items concerns perceptions of the secular past: "The United States is a less virtuous nation today than it was a century ago." Sixty percent of the survey group, almost all Mormons, agreed, while twenty percent were undecided and only twenty percent disagreed. The apocalyptic doctrinal view of the last days requires a framework of moral deterioration of society, and even exposure to my mildly optimistic interpretation of the American heritage did not override the historical image which millennarianism almost requires. If one recalls that "a century ago" means the period of the Tweed Ring, Southern Reconstruction, child labor and the anti-Chinese riots on the Pacific Coast, one is not surprised to note that only one of fourteen graduate students in history who were surveyed and only two of sixteen history professors at B.Y.U. agreed with the proposition.

The second proposition concerns historic process within the Church: "Some L.D.S. doctrines have changed since Joseph Smith's day." Forty percent agreed, while twenty percent were undecided and forty percent disagreed. By contrast, only three of the graduate history majors and one of the history faculty members disagreed with the proposition. To the extent that the oracles from the past are perceived as unchanging, the processes of change — of continuous revelation — within the Church today are likely to be resisted, overlooked, or rationalized away.

Let me comfort this gathering of Mormon historians by suggesting that the American Heritage survey does not confirm the occasionally voiced suspicion that the study of history leads to apostacy. None of the propositions used in the survey is, in fact, an authoritative Gospel concept, although some of them have dogmatic advocacy among Latter-day Saints who feel some need to define Church positions in areas where the voice of revelation is silent. Rather, the results of the survey seem to confirm that general truth about the hazards of intellectual inquiry once aptly stated by the dour British ecclesiastic, Dean Inge: "The acquisition of each bit of knowledge drives us from some Garden of Eden."

Having thus paid respects to the explanation that we Latter-day Saints have no systematic philosophy of history because we have little sense of the nature and relevance of history, let me argue next that, to this date, the Church has

no systematic philosophy. The philosophy courses in the institutes and at the Church schools, for example, discuss the nature of time, evil, knowledge, man, truth and reality; but one finds therein no set of systematic propositions which may be followed by the phrase, "Thus saith the Lord." The addresses and writings of the General Authorities offer a number of excellent precepts for living and some ideas about the nature of life that give meaning to those precepts. They also contain affirmations about the remote past and the remote future, but they can be fitted into a wide range of philosophical systems. One need only live for a while on the B.Y.U. campus and hear ultimate reality defined in a half-dozen different courses by a half-dozen different professors, some of them professional theologians and all of them committed Latter-day Saints, to discover a range of philosophic preferences which approaches anarchy.

This lack of consensus was reflected in the American Heritage survey, in which one item invited agreement or disagreement with the proposition: "Man is by nature evil." Among the fifteen hundred undergraduates, mostly freshmen, 68 percent said "No." Among the recently returned missionaries, 51 percent said "No," while more than 80 percent of the graduate students and history faculty were in the negative, apparently preferring the "as God once was" to the "carnal, sensual and devilish" theme in Mormon teachings about man.

Latter-day Saints have difficulty with such basic conceptions as the nature of time and space, the ultimate stages upon which the historic process unfolds. Most of the talk about eternity and infinity simply proceeds from the assumption that man is here on a planetary piece of matter, moving through God's universe. We are at the center, time going infinitely forward and backward and space going endlessly in all directions from this point. For the serious and perplexing implications of such concepts as eternity and infinity, there is little concern. We have as much time and space as anybody else, and the important question is what we are doing with them.

Certainly when it comes to the fundamental conception of the relationship between God, our Heavenly Father, and time and space, one finds a wide range of opinion. The topic, "God and Man in History," is consistent with Mormonism in suggesting that God is *in* the historic process. This is in contradistinction to Catholicism and certain other theologies which hold that God, by very nature, is outside the time and space context; all things are simultaneously present with Him and the passing of time is only with us. Yet many Mormons want both the security that comes from the concept of a Supreme Being who is apart from the temporal process and the feeling of kinship that comes from a Heavenly Father who is involved somehow in the same process as man — who in some way *was* once as we are now and who *is* now as we may someday become. The ostensibly authoritative discourses on this subject convey a strong suggestion that in this matter we can eat our cake and have it too.

On the American Heritage survey the highest degree of consensus was achieved on a proposition relevant at this point: "God is all-knowing, all powerful and unchanging." In the total class sample, 85 percent agreed, with returned missionaries two points higher. Yet among seniors in the sample the affirmative percentage was only 80, while 110 seniors in the Honors Program registered 70 percent. What of the history faculty? They divided nine to four for the *negative*, with three undecided; for the majority of this sample of L.D.S. professionals in history, God is *in* time with them.

This basic question of the relationship of God to time is crucially related to the question of His relationship to prophecy. Is the future to God as the future is to His children, or has the future already arrived as far as He is concerned? In what sense does God know the future? Raised in any Priesthood quorum, this question may receive as many answers as Priesthood bearers present. Is the future absolutely present, absolutely certain, in the mind of the Lord? Or is the future known to him because, as an earthly father knows what his children are likely to do, so our Heavenly Father is able to look ahead, diagnose and predict? Does the Lord, in fact, foresee the future on the basis of superior predictive knowledge, or is His knowledge of the future absolute because he has a different relationship to that future than we do? Again, there is no consensus among Latter-day Saints.

So, too, with a closely related question, fundamental to an approach to history: Is the future fixed for anyone? Some scriptures state that the end is known from the beginning and that some of the prophets saw the end from the beginning. Yet we are also taught that what happens today can affect what happens tomorrow; we are not just role playing but making choices, and our choices make a difference.

Almost every Mormon will accept the proposition that what an individual does has a bearing on his own personal salvation. But that is a different thing from saying that what one does not only affects his own future but bears on the outcome of the whole enterprise in which we are collectively engaged. A fairly prevalent view sees the Lord so closely managing this world that no individual choice affects the larger process; the erring soul will be left with the consequences of a mistake, but the total story of mankind will proceed to exactly the same foreordained end as if the sinner had not taken the wrong turn in the road.

On this crucial question, the Saints range as widely as it is possible to range. Some cherish a hard-shelled Calvinistic theology which makes man little more than a pawn who has the illusion of choice but in fact does what he has been foreordained to do. Such Mormons reject the wicked word "predestination" but accept the content of the word because it satisfies the yearning for historical certainty. Some express their tendencies toward authoritarianism and their yearnings for an unchanging God in conceptions of history almost Catholic. Other Church members espouse liberal ideas of historical progression through meaningful human choices. Their emphasis on a social gospel makes free agency a key not only to individual exaltation but to the outcome for mankind in this telestial world. Still others become so harrassed and bewildered that they talk in strong pessimistic terms: What happens does not make much difference, really. We are just muddling up the Lord's program; may He soon cut short the whole painful business!

In such perplexity and diversity lies grist for much interesting if rarely rigorous discussion, but nothing which emerges can appropriately be represented as *the* Church philosophy of history. No Latter-day Saint Thomas, Bossuet, Hegel or Marx has made an acceptable synthesis, nor does the lack of such a synthesis cause much concern.

The conclusion of this commentary on the theme, "God and Man in History," does not attempt an institutionalized Mormon philosophy, then, but merely presents some thoughts on how one L.D.S. historian handles some of the ques-

tions of faith which stem from his vocation. Let us look at first things first.

God seems to me to be present in history in these ways:

In the first place He organized the enterprise out of whatever was there before — ideas, intelligence, energy, matter — and He involved us in it. He understands the process and the goals, and He defines those goals to us to the extent that He can get through to us and we to Him. There is, then, purpose in the process; history *is* going *somewhere.*

Further, the Lord directs and influences the outcome of that process. This intervention, however, is not analogous to one of those clocks which, when they run one second fast or slow, are automatically corrected by some mechanical or electrical means. The intervention of our Heavenly Father is not that coercive or continuous; it is sufficient to keep the process related to the goals. Suppose a prophet misses his calling, leaving an important task undone. Somehow the job will get done. But there may well be some slippage in the process; the task may not be done quite so neatly and expeditiously if ground has to be recovered.

Divine intervention is to be expected at points where that intervention is indispensible for God's purposes to be fulfilled. The key intervention is the atonement brought to pass through Jesus Christ, a historical event in which something that had to be done and could not be done otherwise was miraculously done. There are other key areas in which the conditions have required it, such as the opening of dispensations. (For purposes of this analysis, consideration of private miracles is omitted, though their relevance to some points in the discussion will be apparent).

With regard to the relationship of God to the future and the outcome of the historic process, they are known to Him only in generalized terms because, in fact, they are being worked out in the time context. This seems to me inescapable. If the historic process is, in fact, being worked out by meaningful choices — if something that happens can make a real difference in what happens next — then the ultimate outcome can only be clear in general terms to anyone — God or man — who functions within that process.

I will not argue with the proposition that the Lord *can* direct events so that at every point He will be in command of what is happening and it will come out exactly right. For reasons to be considered presently, I do not see this as the way God has defined His role. But even if He were to give such close and coercive direction, it would not be based upon a detailed knowledge of the end from the beginning but upon the possession of sufficient power to relate decisively to the unfolding sequence of events. ~~For if He is, in fact, living in time — if He is in any sense a progressing entity — then the future is ahead for Him. He masters eternity as He uses knowledge to master the historic process, which is eternal.~~

This concept of God's relation to history helps to explain the inefficiency of the historic process as perceived by the historian. Given the power which is the Lord's, there ought to be a better way of saving men, if reaching the foreordained end were the only goal of life. There is too much wasteful loss of human effort and potential, not from the sins that contribute somehow to learning and possible growth but from the pointless evil — the mountains that slide down and bury scores of school children before they have a chance to savor the opportunities of life. ~~Mormons handle such problems of gratuitous~~

evil in different ways, but it seems to me that involved here is the centrality of freedom in the historic process, to which our Heavenly Father is committed partly by His nature and partly by His will. Bound by His temporal nature and by the laws of the space in which He functions, God further restrains the arbitrary use of His knowledge of these laws in order that man may grow by learning those same laws and making wise choices based upon them. That is one reason why the historic process cannot be precisely plotted and why it is as inefficient, painful and pathetic as it is.

This view of God in history also helps us to understand the relationship between prophecy and history. When reading the language of recorded prophecy, one finds some that reads almost like history and some that does not. He finds also that the prophecies with the most specific and clearly identifiable referents deal with the prophet's own day and time, while those which relate to the remoter future do so in more generalized terms. If a hundred years hence is as clear to prophetic insight as a hundred years ago, this should not be the case.[2]

The point can be illustrated by any number of prophetic foreshadowings of the last days, not only in the Old and New Testaments but also in the other L.D.S. scriptures. Graphic in imagery and warning, they defy precise identification with unfolding events while tantalizing scriptorians of every generation to make the attempt. Also illustrative is the prophecy (Doctrine and Covenants, Section 87) on the Civil War, often cited as an example of Joseph Smith's inspired gifts. Written in 1832, it begins with specific allusions to South Carolina's rebellion against the tariff and Nat Turner's slave rebellion, both then in the news, but as it looks farther ahead the language becomes so broad that it cannot yet be confidently said to what extent it has come to pass. In 1861 Brigham Young said that the prophecy was being fulfilled with the pending destruction of the Union; by 1865, the Civil War being over, he had come to another conclusion.

A plausible, and to me persuasive, explanation of this aspect of prophecy is that the future cannot be described with complete precision because that precision depends upon what happens between prediction and fulfillment. The combination of circumstances from the time that Isaiah foresaw the coming of Christ down to the time when John the Baptist saw it with more immediacy and to the time when the post-meridian disciples wrote what had happened conditioned what each *could* write. The farther one looks into the future, even under divine inspiration, the more generalized he must necessarily be, because the future is not yet fact.

This is the way one historian with a Latter-day Saint commitment handles the problem of the relationship of God to the historic process. It is a directing and ultimately controlling participation, but one which is limited in part by the nature of our Heavenly Father himself and partly by his commitment to the free agency of man.

Which leads to the question of the role of man in history.

The initial assumption is that man, as a free intelligence, is co-eternal with God and so is a meaningful part of the whole historic process. He can easily cast himself in the role of an enemy, but he is meant to be a partner with the Lord. What he does makes a difference in the outcome of history.

For one thing, what man does affects the timetable of revelation as far as the

Lord is concerned. We are repeatedly reminded that one of the reasons we do not receive more light is that we are not making much use of the light we now have. If we were to do so, it would have real bearing on what God would be contributing to the historic process.

In the second place, what we do significantly affects the timetable of progress. Both in the meridian dispensation and in the dispensation of our day, the prophet-leaders who opened them up were optimistic about how much time it would take to complete the work. This is a possible explanation for the statements by Joseph Smith and some of his associates, as well as some New Testament prophets, that were interpreted by members of the Church as meaning that the Second Coming was in immediate prospect. The prophets were overwhelmed by the manifestations of the power of God and the beauty of the Gospel; surely no one could resist. But the capacity of man to resist the counsel of the Lord is depressingly apparent in every dispensation. So it takes more time than the prophets hoped, and as a rather wry fact of the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times, most Mormons in this generation are less confident of the immediacy of the Second Coming than were Joseph Smith's contemporaries.

L.D.S. diversity on this point is graphically revealed in another item from the American Heritage survey. To the proposition: "The millennium will begin within the next fifty years," 50 percent of the large class agreed, 40 percent registered indecision and 10 percent disagreed. Among the experts (our historian sample) the crystal ball was also clouded, but a clear majority were undecided or answered in the negative. I suggest that some of the ambiguity with which we Latter-day Saints relate to the problems of our secular society stems from this indecision about the temporal implications of the phrase, "the latter days."[3]

Under the circumstances, some people legitimately think that certain things need to be done — an acceptable amount of preaching of the Gospel, of work for the dead, of building temples, of gathering, and of various kinds of good deeds — as conditions for the Second Coming. A certain amount of trouble is also foreseen, but any reading of history presents sufficient calamity in every generation, including our own, so there need be no stirring up of woe to fulfill the gloomier prophecies of the pre-millennial finale. The tempo of events, in any case, is not decreed.

By this conception of the role of man in the historic process, man not only saves or loses himself by his acts, with the indispensable assistance of Christ, but has influence on the timetable and the details of the larger story. Into this context fits the scripture, "The day and the hour no man knoweth, not even the angels in heaven, but my Father only" (Matt. 24:36). Some people say this means that the Lord is keeping it a secret from everyone, but it can also be read as meaning that, within certain tolerances known only to God, it could go one way or another. If all men would repent and really act repentant, the story could be concluded in a few years. Or perhaps H-bombs could be used to create an environment that would make the finale indispensable. The conclusion is the same: We do have something to do with the apocalyptic schedule — the point at which and the circumstances in which this phase of the historic process ends.

The sum of the matter for this L.D.S. writer is that the history of humanity is not already written, not even for the Lord Himself. What we are presently

engaged in is not a drama without a point, or a fortuitous comedy of errors, or a foredoomed tragedy, or a fully-scripted pageant in which we are all mimes. Fundamental to this concept is the conviction that God is the producer and Christ is the central actor in the play, but what happens on the stage depends significantly upon the choices of all members of the cast.

The study of the past is thus profitable for Latter-day Saints and commended by scripture (D & C 88:79). Study of the record of our forebears' deeds may help us better to discharge our responsibilities toward that chapter of the eternal saga being written by our own generation. As John F. Kennedy put it in his inaugural address: "With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forward to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help but knowing that, here on earth, God's work must truly be our own."

[1]Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel Through the Ages* (1945).

[2]The observable differences between Old Testament and Book of Mormon prophecies with regard to the coming of Christ may, it is suggested, be attributed at least in part to the fact that the latter-day translator of the Book of Mormon prophets knew, on the basis of historical information, some of the things which had happened in the interim and so could relate the prophecies rather specifically to events which satisfied their terms; hence Christ comes through much more clearly in Alma than in Isaiah. No comparable differences are found in the way the two scriptures deal with the still-future millennial dispensation. (This interpretation is based on the further assumption that Joseph Smith's translating went to the meaning of his sources rather than to the individual English equivalents of ancient symbols.)

[3]That there is nothing like an L.D.S. consensus on major social issues of today is graphically demonstrated in these responses on the American Heritage survey:

Proposition	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*
Peaceful coexistence between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. is possible.	49%	16%	35%
The war in Vietnam is an immoral war.	27%	23%	50%
The Supreme Court ruling against required prayers in public schools is wrong.	49%	17%	34%
A capitalistic economic system functions best when it is regulated by government.	44%	31%	25%
Sex education does not belong in the public schools	41%	18%	41%

The impression conveyed by these responses (December 1969) is of an opinion configuration more conservative than that likely to be encountered in other large universities, but hardly of a doctrinally-imposed unanimity. No correlations were run between strength of millennial expectations and views on contemporary public issues, but the survey responses as a whole support the not-surprising conclusion that among Latter-day Saints, as in many other religious groups, theological fundamentalism is associated with political conservatism.