

Faithful History/Secular Faith

Melvin T. Smith

I READILY ADMIT that the topic of "faithful history" may gain more by praying for the demise of the debate than by trying to provide life-extending arguments or by seeking to resurrect it. However, I feel there are yet valuable points to be made for those believers who see themselves as Mormon historians and as serious students of Mormon history.

Two factors relate directly to the argument for continued dialogue on this topic. The first is that believers possess special insights into the faith and feelings of the people they write about. These insights permit important nuances of understanding and explication of their people's histories not readily achievable by nonbelievers.

Second, the believers' sympathetic posture allows them to use the whole substance of their historical witnesses' testimonies or statements. That is, believers assume that basically their witnesses told the truth. Such an attitude permits scholars to reach for insights and understanding at the extended limits of historical witnesses' statements.

If my meaning is not clear, let me express it from the position of the nonbeliever. Historians who do not believe in God or in divine involvement in human activity will not take seriously Joseph's claim to communication with God. Furthermore, they cut themselves off from the historical aspects of human experiences that claim some kind of transcendent qualities.

Understanding this rationale is not the solution to our "faithful history" problems; but hopefully, it can be a useful perspective from which to discuss them. I am suggesting that the faithful historian's search for truth is best served by keeping history and faith separate during the processes of research and investigation, so that each discipline can determine what it knows. Then, after the data are processed, useful evaluations and syntheses can be made.

MELVIN T. SMITH is the director of the Utah State Historical Society. This paper was originally presented at the Mormon History Association annual meeting, Omaha, May 1982.

I hope to argue persuasively three points: one, history is a finite discipline incapable of revealing divine nature or will; two, only God can witness to divine faith or to the infinite; and three, finding a meaningful religion or faith or theology will not be easy for believers; however, the rewards of such efforts will be greater if undertaken after the facts of history and the evidences of faith are in the believers' possession.

This paper hopes to suggest a useful rationale for believing Mormons and Latter Day Saints who desire to be professional historians and serious students of the Restoration movement. Such individuals generally agree that objectivity is a critical quality of good history and that such quality is very difficult to come by, even for very competent scholars and even when the issues are ordinary, human issues. When the debate involves the divine and perceptions of final truths, objectivity is almost impossible. What can be done to help, since believers are always involved emotionally on these basic issues and life values? I am suggesting a two-pronged answer: desensitizing history and accepting the nonhistorical elements and existence of faith. Hopefully, with such an approach, believers will be able to bring to their scholarly research both historical objectivity and their unique insights and understanding.

Let me next discuss some of the other problems I see for scholars in Mormon history. Nonbelievers tend *not* to believe their historic witnesses, at least on those very critical issues relating to faith. Nonbelievers possess biases that often work against their historical studies. Scholars who do not believe Joseph Smith actually had the supernatural experiences he claimed do not seriously consider investigating the historicity of transcendent phenomena. Instead, they try to deal with the matter by saying that Joseph Smith *claimed* he talked with God, which is accurate, but not complete, or they claim that his followers believe and accept as fact that he talked with God. Again accurate but not the whole issue. If historians assume that Joseph Smith did not talk with God because there is no God or some such other absolute, they then face the problem of deciding the essence of Joseph's historic witness about both history and the faith. He said he saw divine beings. By what historic methodology do historians discredit that claim? I raise the question again, why shouldn't he be believed?

We hear many irrelevant answers: "There is no god." "Joseph Smith was a liar." "God would not speak to such a person," etc. But can honest historians be selective in how they listen to their witness or in what they allow witnesses to testify of? How do historians know what their witnesses experienced? Can a serious historian claim that his/her witness could not have had such an experience, simply because the historian cannot comprehend it? I think not. So there remains for these scholars not just the issue of credibility in the historic witness but credibility in their own methodology as well.

On the other side of this coin we find the faithful, seeking through history to prove that Joseph Smith was God's prophet. When asked, "How do they know that fact?" we hear such answers as: "Through Joseph's own story," "the Book of Mormon," "three and eight witnesses," etc. Again, irrelevant answers. If someone should produce the plates from which the Book of Mor-

mon was translated, would that prove the contents are divine or that Joseph was a prophet? Admittedly, it would do a great deal to prove the historicity of the Gold Plates.

We have now arrived at the heart of the "faithful history" dilemma but also to its resolution, at least in part. Faithful history is not history written about a faith but rather history which in some way attempts to prove or disprove the things of God. On one hand Mormons have Joseph Fielding Smith's *Essentials in Church History*, certainly intended as a faithful witness. On the other are the writings of Gerald and Sandra Tanner, viewed by the Tanners as equally faithful witnesses. And in between are a plethora of faithful histories and commentaries by faithful brothers and sisters. I suggest here that history may be seen as a finite tool with which we sculpt an understanding of humanity. It is not a divine instrument through which we tune in eternity.

When we look at Joseph Smith's own experiences, we see the problems clearly. In his case, his historical witnesses have been challenged continually: his own story in all its variations, the Book of Mormon with textual changes, differing methods of translation, and challenges to its historicity; and his own life and character. An even more substantive point on the limits of faithful history can be made. In Joseph Smith's own story of God's speaking to him, it should be noted that only God's witness to Joseph could have been divine. Joseph's message to both historians and to the faithful is historical. What they scrutinize is the message's historicity, not its divinity. Thus historians can worry less about the faithfulness of their histories, and more about their accuracy.

If we desensitize our histories, historians are free to discover and to measure what they can about people, and to report unabashedly what they find without fear that their discoveries may be offensive to God. An open avenue to learning is absolutely essential to good history, and to all inquiry. Faithful historians must feel no restraints in their quest for knowledge and comprehension of all there is to know about humankind, about our mortal world and its terrestrial life. When scholars perceive all of this as a part of history, they open treasures of knowledge even greater than they are able to receive. I suggest that the most challenging fields of study and discovery today are not in faithful history, but rather in the sciences, with truly exciting new concepts, many of which are directly applicable to history, even faithful history. Students of history need to know what history (broadly defined as all of man's learning) can tell them. I suggest a few "for examples," which I believe have relevance to the Mormon history scholars.

For example, Adam Smith in *Powers of Mind* (1975) suggests that we measure knowledge through logical paradigms and syllogisms, but the mind has powers not subject to such rational scrutiny and harnessing. He cites the placebo impact of medicine or drugs or other expectations. We have all experienced reaching the top or bottom of a stairway, only to learn there was not another step there. The body, instructed by the mind to respond a certain way, does so, despite the reality of the physical situation. Perhaps these phenomena can enlighten us on some religious happenings.

Carl Sagan in *Broca's Brain* (1974) traces the history of science with its limitations and its self-correcting methodology. He notes its incredible achievements in discovering the universe we live in. He demonstrates that growth in human understanding requires relinquishing errors and shows how frequently scientific research has discovered unsoundness and false claims in religion. Both Richard Leakey in *People of the Lake* (1978) and Donald Johanson in *Lucy* (1981) use fossil remains uncovered in Africa to postulate explanations about the hominid ancestors of modern humans. Their methodology is complex, their conclusions tenuous but provocative. They raise questions of what makes us human? And what is basic human nature after all? These issues are debated by Robert Ardrey in *The Territorial Imperative* (1966) and Desmond Morris in *The Naked Ape* (1967). Admittedly these are not necessarily the most recent nor best authorities in the field. Most of us are familiar with David Attenborough's *Life on Earth* (1979), also a T.V. series. What is man? Not only a basic question for historians but always a fundamental issue for believers.

Morton Hunt in *The Universe Within* (1982) suggests that the human brain is the creature of the evolutionary process where the fundamental rule of life is survival. Thus, the brain has evolved not only with incredible capacities but with great sensitivity to qualities of order and predictability, both important qualities for survival. Hunt also suggests that the human brain may possess a sense of interdependence and cooperation. Some might see religious implications in these cerebral makeups.

Julian Jaynes in *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1977) suggests that with the development of language humans possessed a cultural data bank which fed information into the brain's independently structured right and left hemispheres, which processed separately those data and sensory information. As a result, answers from the different sides of the brain might not be the same. Jaynes postulates that in bicameral man during times of severe stress, messages may have passed from the normally silent right hemisphere of the brain to the "conscious self," where it was heard in the person's mind as verbal language, even as the "voices of the gods."

James Lewis Brain in *The Last Taboo, Sex and The Fear of Death* (1979) also sees language as the cultural data bank which imposes the biases, the memories and knowledge of previous generations onto each new one. Since most of these values relating to sex are very early imposed, they tend to become a part of the person's unexamined cultural baggage, and that baggage varies as widely as do the values and cultures of the people throughout the world.

I agree that my examples of "human learning" are inadequate and my syntheses limited. However, my purpose is to suggest the tremendous wealth of information available to us in our study of humankind if we are free to explore it. It is well to remind ourselves that most of the knowledge we bring to our scrutiny of life, of history, of our faith, comes from human sources characterized by human biases, human wisdom, and human ignorance, no matter whether we are believers or nonbelievers.

The professional historians' challenge is to examine as much of the human experience as possible and to produce objective and insightful histories. The better the product the historian provides, the more useful it is. It is by providing quality service that one reaches the status of professional historian.

I return now to my second point, namely, that only God can witness to the divine. I do not intend to tell you how to study or know divinity. My objective is to unburden believing historians who may still try to be witnesses to the faith.

If history is indeed only a secular or finite tool, then it is at best only a finite witness. However, when it is viewed as God's witness capable of witnessing to divine nature, it then provides a distorted basis or image from which believers, who look to history as the primary witness, build their faith. As a result, their faith is built on the tenuous truths and the shifting sands of history. This factor might be construed as the "arm of flesh" as it were; and when "faithful histories" are discredited, testimonies crumble and great is the fall thereof. Also, those who presume to reveal "God's purposes" with history may be creating the infinite in their secular historical images, which could be viewed as a way of "taking the name of God in vain."

Perhaps even more serious is the fact that having "faith" in history misleads faithful adherents, who then have historically biased images of God and his prophets that may not correspond to what the divine or infinite is like at all. Believers who use history to meet their religious yearnings may, in short, be on a dead-end street. For example, believers assume that scriptures are God's words and that the prophets are inspired; yet their own historical biases probably distort the meanings of these so-called "divine" messages. I am suggesting there are dividends for faith in trying to get the "divine" message as directly and untainted by history as possible.

Believers readily recognize scriptures that suggest such an approach: "There is a Spirit in Man, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding (Job 32:8)." "For what man knoweth the things of man save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11)." "No man knoweth . . . who the Father is but the Son and he to whom the Son will reveal Him (Luke 10:22)." "For the testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy (Rev. 19:10)." "Ask God and He will manifest the truth of it unto you by the power of the Holy Ghost (Moro. 10:4)." And even, "Be still and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10)," (hardly the theme of MHA).

My argument holds that the pursuit of faithful witnesses to divine nature is valid and desirable. I am suggesting also that the chances of success in obtaining that divine witness may be greater if believers carry as few historical biases and distortions into their quest as possible. Too often those who claim divine evidence of God's handiwork simply have drawn rational deductions from a priori assumptions that are wholly unsubstantiated. We see it in such arguments as: Joseph Smith was a prophet; therefore, the Book of Mormon is true. Or the Book of Mormon is true; therefore, Joseph Smith was a prophet.

Or, the Book of Mormon tells of Hebrew traditions and Joseph Smith was a nineteenth-century American; therefore, Joseph Smith could not have written the Book of Mormon.

Now what kind of spiritual witness is that? Compare it with a visit from Jesus Christ himself, promising the faithful they are sealed up unto "eternal life" (D&C 131:5, 130:5, 88:3-4; John 14:23). It may be well to remind ourselves again that even church leaders who demand faith-promoting histories do not claim that Saints become sons of perdition by denying the witness of history. (I suspect they do not claim that one gets eternal life by believing it either.)

Again, I am not trying to propound a religious position; rather I hope to call attention to problems of faith that may exist for the believers because they have been using history as the basis of their faith. In any case, if God is missing, it is not the historians' fault. And while there are many other areas and examples that might be explored in depth, hopefully these few will illustrate the point successfully.

Let me now turn to my final point, the need for evaluation and analysis of the evidences obtained from both history and faith. Since believing historians are both historian and believer in one, it is easy to lose track of the fact that there are always *two* kinds of data to evaluate. Such people must continually check their position by asking, "How do I know that fact? From history? Through faith? Or through conclusions from a synthesis of those two kinds of evidences?" For these people those processes occur almost automatically. Carl Becker noted that every man was his own historian. We could extend the analogy to: every believer his own theologian. What is important to the serious student is that interpretation and uses of data/facts follow their acquisition. Historians should not have the big answers before they have the evidences for them. Nor should believers have the big answers before they know the questions.

My concern here is not for Mormon theology but for Mormon history and historians. Somehow these scholars must find a means for satisfying their need to synthesize the data they have as believing historians. Historically the Mormon movement has not supported and encouraged the development of a Mormon theology. This condition is especially true for Utah Mormons. As a result, when believing historians arrive at the stage of serious data analysis and synthesis, they have had little help and certainly no tradition established by which their syntheses can proceed. I believe important changes in this area are now beginning.

An impact of this historical condition for Mormon historians has been to draw them into the vacuum where they begin to function as theologians or quasi-theologians at least. My observations are in no way a criticism but are intended to provide some insight into why the dilemma of faithful history takes its special forms in Mormon history. *DIALOGUE*, *Sunstone* and *MHA* are all, at least in part, responses to unfilled theological needs among believers, particularly among those of the scholarly community.

It might be useful if there were more trained theologians helping us wrestle with the angel of faith and the human of history. Yet while theological efforts can help, they are only a partial answer for faithful historians to whom the struggle is ever present and very personal. These scholars will have to decide finally how badly they want to be professional historians and how much they want to be and can be believers. Their chances for success will be greater if they do not try to use the broad gate and wide way of history as the means to enter the narrow gate and straight way of faith. Also, the chances for truly significant insights and contributions to both Mormon history and faith will be better.

No doubt these faithful historians' struggles will at times be similar to those of Oliver Cowdery, who wished to translate but was not prepared to give to the process the sustained energy that would bring him understanding. I hope faithful historians will provide that kind of commitment. Both Mormon history and faith need it, for as yet I do not see how the promise of life and the hope of eternity can be as easy as history or as ephemeral as the witness of faith only.