

Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective

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SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO, Moses Rischin, Fulbright Professor of History at the University of Uppsala in Sweden, in a review essay first used the phrase, "the New Mormon History." By it, he meant to categorize the attraction of "an array of sophisticated scholars within and without the Mormon fold" to the study of the Mormon past. Those within the Mormon fold, he said, have combined a study of "the details of Mormon history and culture . . . in human or naturalistic terms . . . 'without thus rejecting the divinity of the Church's origin and work'" (1969, 49). I interpret Rischin to mean that scholars writing in this tradition have recognized both the human and divine side of Mormon history, and that both they and non-LDS writers in this tradition have considered both the secular and religious aspects of the Mormon experience without trying to explain away the latter.

As this loose coalition of scholars has continued to produce a body of work, two movements have grown up attacking the new history — not only the writing itself but also the premises underlying such history. One group, whom I might call traditionalists, seem most disturbed by what they erroneously perceive as an attempt to deny the religious aspect of Mormonism and what they rightly see as a retelling of the traditional story in different terms. In contrast, the second group of critics — let's call them secularists — find that New Mormon Historians fail to write adequate history because they accept in too great a degree the perception of actors in times past of their own motivation and actions on the one hand and because they seem unwilling to accept totally contextual interpretations of events in the Mormon past on the other.

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This paper will do five things: (1) Outline what I consider to be the major error of the traditionalists; (2) Review the criticism of the secularists; (3) Suggest what I consider to be a more useful way of examining the premises of the New Mormon History; (4) Examine the desirability of achieving what I call "balance" in writing history; and (5) Speculate on some possible reasons for the discomfort of both the traditionalist and the secularist critics.

TRADITIONALISTS

It seems clear to me that traditionalists have seen the New Mormon History as bad history, in part, because they have misclassified it with a number of suspect neighbors, whom they perceive — quite rightly in many cases — as deficient. A prominent proponent of this position is Louis C. Midgley, a political science professor at Brigham Young University, who has done much of his professional work on moral philosophy and Paul Tillich. In an unpublished paper which he circulated in about 1981, for instance, he classified the New Mormon History as "historicist." The historicist assumes, he wrote, "that all artifacts are necessarily determined and therefore can be explained by the events out of which they grew and also [that] any element of culture must be evaluated solely by reference to its degree of conformity to the dominant trends in the larger culture out of which it took its rise." Thus, in his view, a New Mormon Historian would assume that "Joseph Smith's teachings (that is, the substance of his prophetic revelations, the Book of Mormon and other ancient texts he provided) are solely the products of his times" (c1981, 9–10).¹

Within a year or two, Midgley was joined in his concerns by David E. Bohn, a professor of political science at Brigham Young University, Neal W. Kramer, a graduate student in English language and literature at the University of Chicago, and Gary Novak, a graduate student at Columbia University. All four of them, publishing in Mormon periodicals or presenting papers at the Mormon History Association, have called the New Mormon Historians positivists.

In so doing, they have, in my opinion, fallen into what the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle called "a category-mistake," which he described as representing "the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category (or range of types or categories), when they actually belong to another." These mistakes happen, as Ryle pointed out when "people who are perfectly competent to apply concepts, at least in the situations with which they are familiar," are "liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong." This almost invariably occurs because they are not sufficiently familiar with the subject matter under discussion" (1949, 16–18).

¹ In another paper, delivered at the Western History Association conference in 1981, Midgley used the phrase "product-of-culture" in place of "product of his times" and characterized the New Mormon History as "The New Mormon Apologetics" saying that its authors purveyed "The New Chicago Argument" which he attributed to the work and influence of Martin Marty, a professor at the University of Chicago who delivered a Tanner lecture at one of the MHA annual meetings (1981, 1, 23–33).

Positivism is familiar to students as the school of thought promulgated initially by nineteenth-century French philosopher August Comte and continued in the nineteenth century by Hippolyte Taine and others and into the twentieth century by the Vienna Circle of Logical Positivists, which included such figures as Moritz Schlick and Rudolf Carnap. Positivism is a theory that theology and metaphysics are early and imperfect modes of knowledge. "Positive knowledge" can be based only on sense data and their properties and relations as verified by the empirical sciences, and all disciplines ought to be "scientific" in the sense in which the natural sciences would use that term. Comte explained: "The first characteristic of the Positive Philosophy is that it regards all phenomena as subjected to invariable natural *Laws*" and the duty of the researcher is "to ascertain what is the precise subject, and what the peculiar character of those laws [is]" (1959, 76–77).

Bohn provided a list of people he called "New Mormon Historians," who, he said, "mutually support the argument for a secular middle ground between the extremes of sectarian history," and in whose "language and method" he professed to have found "a broad but ill-defined sort of positivism." They have, he said, distanced themselves "from its more extreme manifestations," but they nevertheless "depend upon its vocabulary and fundamental categories to justify their method and thus their conclusions." Bohn defined the concept of "objectivity" as the historian's belief "that in some way he can escape from his own historical condition [to] . . . exist beyond time and space in some fourth dimension from which he can gaze upon the past." Unfortunately for his argument, he assumed that New Mormon Historians have this view point but supplied no evidence to support it. He then asserted that the New Mormon Historians "admit that objectivity is not possible but continue to offer it as a worthy ideal" and "even those who refuse to take a position [as positivists] still use methods, evolve categories, and develop explanations that presuppose objectivity. In addition, objectivist vocabulary is ubiquitous, lending a false sense of legitimacy and rigor to historical accounts" (1983, 27–28, 31).

By "objectivist" one must assume that he means the standard definition of the term which is the ability to view an object outside oneself without personal bias. This is how I interpret his comment about existing "beyond time and space in some fourth dimension from which . . . [the historian] can gaze upon the past objectively" (1983, 27).

His argument thus puts him in the rather unfortunate position of assuming that the New Mormon Historians are positivists who hold the ideal of objectivity as a positivist would define it. Then, in honesty, he had to admit that they themselves believe that objectivity is not possible — and hence that they cannot be positivists. Doggedly adhering to his thesis, however, Bohn still insisted that their statements and methodology can be interpreted as manifestations of positivism.

Kramer seems to share Bohn's assumption since he claims that the writings of New Mormon Historians are examples of "positivistic historical discourse."

Unlike Bohn, he did not identify the individuals of whom he spoke (1983, 16). Midgley and Novak in a joint paper presented at the Mormon History Association annual meeting in 1984 charged that "a crude Positivism . . . has long dominated the work of American historians" as a result of "the ideological indoctrination that goes on in graduate schools and in the professional setting in which historians operate." They linked these general comments about American historians to the New Mormon History by charging that "Mormon historians are quite frequently in thrall to various notions about the possibility of an 'objective history' that can be told by a neutral, detached historian." Like Bohn, they contradicted themselves by admitting that some New Mormon Historians believe such objectivity is not possible (1984, 25-26).

Nor do these critics define *secular*. Again, we must assume that they have used the normal meaning. The term comes from the Latin word *saecularis* meaning worldly or pagan and is defined as "of or relating to the worldly or temporal as distinguished from the spiritual or eternal: not sacred." In a thoroughly secular view, there can be no authentic religious experience, since everything must be interpreted in this-worldly terms. This definition is quite consistent with positivism, and Comte argued that the positivist necessarily rejected the idea of God. "In the final, the positive state," Comte wrote, "the mind has given over the vain search after Absolute notions" (1959, 75). Novak and Midgley seem to refer to this position when they say a "fundamental Positivist assumption" includes "a dogmatic rejection of the possibility that heavenly messengers may visit with the prophets" (1984, 30).

Bohn attempts to tie the New Mormon History into the positivist tradition by cataloguing the assumptions of the New Mormon History as "empiricism, biological determinism, and environmentalism," and asserting that New Mormon Historians use these interpretive devices "to provide causal explanations of human events" (1983, 28). He does not explain how something can be both biologically and environmentally determined.

His definition of causation seems unmistakably to be derived from the natural sciences, and he used the term *empiricism* in the logical positivistic sense, meaning direct sensory experience. In positivism, the only reliable measure of validity is secular personal experience. As twentieth-century logical positivist A. J. Ayer put it, "So long as the general structure of my sense-data conforms to the expectations that I derive from the memory of my past experience, I remain convinced that I am not living in a dream; and the longer the series of successful predictions is extended, the smaller becomes the probability that I am mistaken" (1958, 274).

Two years later, in defending his views against critics, especially Michael Walton and E. K. Hunt, neither of whom would ordinarily be considered a New Mormon Historian, Bohn alleged that "secular historians" — the term he used in his earlier article to categorize the New Mormon Historians — rule "out in advance the possibility of authentic moral choice and thus responsibility, making defensible moral judgements impossible" (1985, 2).

This statement, in my opinion, can only be characterized as irresponsible. Bohn cited, as an example, the Mountain Meadows Massacre. He claimed that historians who have written on the topic have done so "by recourse to a combination of psychological, sociological, and economic theories which understand such events as the necessary outcome of a chain of antecedent events" (1985, 3). It must have been unnerving to Bohn's readers to realize that his example demonstrates the exact opposite of the point he said it made. Juanita Brooks, in her classic interpretive history, *The Mountain Meadows Massacre*, clearly spelled out the responsibility of George A. Smith for "fanning a flame" of prejudice with inflammatory statements, found that John D. Lee was "guilty of participation," documented that Isaac C. Haight and the stake high council made the decision that the Fancher party "be 'done away with' " and summarized: "The final responsibility must rest squarely upon the Mormons, William H. Dame as commander [of the local militia unit], and those under him who helped form the policy and carry out the orders" (1962, 60, 61, 52-53, 95). Brooks definitely saw them as morally responsible individuals.

However, she also tried to understand what caused these people to bring themselves to such a heinous act, concluding that the massacre was "a classic study in mob psychology or the effects of war hysteria" (1962, 218). This may be what Bohn meant when he said historians try to provide causal explanations, but Brooks clearly drew the causes from the human studies, not from impersonal natural sciences. I consider this to be an excellent example of how Bohn's category mistake, based on an ideological presupposition, has led him to an incorrect conclusion.

In his 1983 paper, "No Higher Ground," Bohn, in an equally irresponsible and unsupportable statement, hypothesized that New Mormon Historians would "theorize that he [Joseph Smith] was an epileptic and that his visions were the inevitable hallucinatory properties of his seizures" (1983, 30). No New Mormon Historian has made such an argument. Quite the contrary, as will be shown below, they have accepted Joseph Smith's experiences as he reported them. In answering Bohn, Larry Foster, a Quaker who wrote one of the most important early studies of polygamy, pointed out that New Mormon Historians (among whom he would number himself since he is writing *New Mormon History*) take Joseph Smith's experiences very seriously indeed. They are, he said, "among the most powerful religious experiences on record" (1985, 3).

The confusion of readers in attempting to follow the arguments of traditionalists only reflects what I must consider to be confusion in traditionalist arguments themselves.

As another example of such confusion, since positivism is, by definition, an atheistic philosophy, Bohn apparently found it necessary to give that point special attention. After defining the New Mormon Historians' point of view as positivistic, he wrote: "I do not desire in any way to impugn their religious commitments, since many New Mormon Historians are faithful, practicing

members of the Church" (1983, 32n). He failed, however, to reveal how a person can be a "faithful, practicing member" and an atheist at the same time. In fact, there is considerable confusion in his views on this question, since other critics like Louis Midgley do question the faith of active church members, and Bohn has continually associated himself with Midgley's views (1981, 55).

SECULARISTS

In contrast to the traditionalists, the secularists have generally not fallen into the mistake of miscategorizing the New Mormon History. Klaus Hansen, a Latter-day Saint at Queens University in Ontario, who in 1984 produced the most thorough analysis of the new history from the secular position, has pointed out that New Mormon Historians have not questioned the faith claims of Latter-day Saints. Instead, citing my 1978 article as a model, he argued that it involves trying "to understand experiences in the way in which the actors themselves understood them; the analysis, while rigorous, must judge the participants by their own standards." Thus, Hansen continued, the New Mormon Historians have agreed "with William James that 'the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experiences is absolutely hopeless.' . . . We can understand Joseph Smith only if we can get inside him, so to speak, and experience what he experienced" (1984, 136-37).

As another example, Mario S. DePillis, a non-LDS historian at the University of Massachusetts who authored "The Quest for Religious Authority and the Rise of Mormonism," wrote a review of Richard L. Bushman's prize-winning study, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (1984). Questioning Bushman's unwillingness to provide naturalistic explanations for Joseph Smith's theophanies, DePillis argued that "any historian who rejects the historicity and supernaturalism of Mormon religion, or of any other religion, is compelled to emphasize Joseph Smith as just another product of local historical conditions" (1985, 293).

A rather predictable area of confusion has undoubtedly developed because some critics like Michael T. Walton and E. K. Hunt who have responded to the traditionalists have actually produced arguments that support the views of the secularists rather than those of the New Mormon Historians. Bohn correctly pointed out that Walton's and Hunt's arguments support a completely secular view of history (1985, 2-3). Walton, for instance, argued that "academic history cannot consider God as a causal factor" (1983, 2). Hunt, on the other hand, assumed that the New Mormon Historians use exclusively secular categories, and wondered "how . . . [they] integrate these religious tenets into their secular theories and assessments of facts." He suggested that "religious experiences . . . cannot be described or communicated in the same manner as ordinary experience that can be apprehended with the senses and intellect and that we generally refer to as objective," and that they must be interpreted as "metaphorical communications" (1983, 5-6).

CLASSIFYING THE NEW MORMON HISTORY

If the traditionalists are in error in calling the New Mormon History positive and the secularists are equally in error in attempting to move it more toward positivism, what is a more useful category within which to discuss it? To some extent, the discussion which follows is primarily of interest to scholars for whom the differences between various authors' philosophies would have visible repercussions in how a work would be written. However, it is also important to everyone who reads Mormon history since it attempts to make clearer what the new history tries to do and does not try to do.

It is my belief that most New Mormon Historians, although they differ considerably in their views, would perceive their work as a part of the human studies rather than as part of the natural sciences under which positivism would fall. Furthermore, I believe that the New Mormon History is an aspect of the historicist tradition within the human studies. This tradition developed initially out of German romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Its principal early proponents were historians like Wilhelm von Humboldt, Leopold von Ranke, and Johann Gustav Droysen, writers like Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and theologians and philosophers like Friedrich Schleiermacher (Iggers, 1983; Meinecke, 1972). Thus, it is quite different from the "historicism" of which Midgley accuses the New Mormon History which is a definition of the genetic fallacy. As he uses the term, historicism simply means that a phenomenon can be explained away by reference to its origin, as, for example, Fawn Brodie's argument that the parallels between the Book of Mormon and Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* are too striking to be mere coincidence (Brodie, 47).²

It is important to emphasize the relationship between the origins of historicism and romanticism. For romanticists as for historicists, "understanding requires an element of intuition (Ahnung)." Both were, in part, at least a rejection of the extremes of the Enlightenment which sought an exclusively "rational understanding of human reality." Romanticism and its creature historicism, recognizing "the emotional qualities of all human behavior," sought "to develop a logic that takes into account the irrational aspects of human life. The same deep faith in the ultimate unity of life in God, which marks the political and ethical thought of historicism, also marks its theory of knowledge" (Iggers, 1983, 10).

In the mid-nineteenth century, positivists attempted to recast historicism by forcing the combination of the natural sciences and human studies. Recogn-

² Reese 1980, 225. A third type of history that the New Mormon History is *not* is the type of historical determinism labeled "historicism" by Karl R. Popper (1966, 1957) and C. S. Lewis (1977), who attacked it as a deterministic or mechanistic approach to history. In this school of historical thought, scholars claim to have reached the exactness of the natural sciences, thus enabling them to predict events with their models as biologists, for instance, can predict the offspring of plants by knowing their genetic code. Examples of this type of historicism in action include Karl Marx (1932), the author of the Communist *Manifesto* and *Capital*, Giambattista Vico (1968), the eighteenth century Italian author of *The New History*, and Saint Augustine (1950).

nizing that this did considerable violence to the study of history, by the late nineteenth century, a group of European historians and philosophers sought to recapture the earlier tradition by rejecting the positivistic program. They did this in part by reasserting a definition of historicism as the study of the products of the minds of others within the field of the human studies "which moulds subject-matter . . . quite differently from that of scientific knowledge" (Dilthey 1976, 175).³ The principal proponents of this point of view during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were scholars like Germans Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber, Italian Benedetto Croce, and Briton Robin G. Collingwood. (See the bibliography for representative works.) In the early to mid-twentieth century, the school of thought influenced scholars like Friedrich Meinecke, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Carl L. Becker, Charles A. Beard, Herbert Butterfield, Marc Bloch, Isaiah Berlin, and Emilio Betti. More recently, it has played an important part in the thought of the Americans Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., and Hayden White, and the Frenchman Michel Foucault. All of these historians and philosophers have recognized to one degree or another that history could not be and should not seek to be objective in the sense of the positivistic natural sciences and that the study of products of the human mind required creative imagination and intuition for their interpretation.

Hans Meyerhoff, German-born University of California philosophy professor, provided a useful description of the aims of this type of historicism:

It is the historian's aim, to portray the bewildering, unsystematic variety of historical forms — people, nations, cultures, customs, institutions, songs, myths, and thoughts — in their unique, living expressions and in the process of continuous growth and transformation. This aim is not unlike the artist's Thus the special quality of history does not consist in the statement of general laws or principles, but in the grasp, so far as possible, of the infinite variety of particular historical forms immersed in the passage of time. The meaning of history does not lie hidden in some universal structure, whether deterministic or teleological, but in the multiplicity of individual manifestations at different ages and in different cultures. All of them are unique and equally significant strands in the tapestry of history; all of them, in Ranke's famous phrase, are "immediate to God" (1959, 10).

In a similar vein, the late-nineteenth century German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband characterized the natural sciences as *nomothetic* (seeking to find general laws) while the human studies are *ideographic* (seeking to understand the unique) (Reese 1980, 629–30; Berkhofer 1971, 245–51; White 1973, 381–82).

Windelband is not, of course, strictly correct. Certainly the historicist makes generalizations and comparisons. Such generalizations are, however, devices to assist in understanding, not attempts to make law-like statements. It is a truism among historians that "all generalizations are false, including this one." Alexis de Tocqueville, the nineteenth-century French historian, writing

³ Of course, I am creating an ideal type in this essay and the actual works of Mormon Historians will undoubtedly differ from it. However, I believe that the type I have outlined here is generally correct.

in the spirit of his contemporary, historicist Ranke, argued the necessity for generalizations when he wrote:

God does not have to think at all in general terms about mankind. He sees with a single glance and separately all the creatures who compose humanity, and He understands in each of them the similarities that bring them together and the differences that leave them isolated from one another.

God does not have the need for general ideas; that is to say, He never feels the necessity of including together under the same form a great number of analogous objects in order that He may think about them more easily.

For man it is completely otherwise. If the human intellect were to attempt to examine and judge all the particular cases that demand attention, it would soon become lost in the midst of the immensity of details and it would no longer understand anything. In this extreme situation man has recourse to an imperfect but necessary action that helps him in his weakness but which gives further proof of his limitations (in Gargen 1963, 332).

Thus, the historicist perceives what have been variously called generalizations, models, hypotheses, and paradigms as aids in *understanding* rather than as tools in *predicting*. Such generalizations and models are also not "truth" in any absolute sense of that term. In attempting to explain this functional difference between the historicist's attempt to understand and the positivist's attempt to predict, Dale H. Porter, a contemporary American historian, has called such generalizations "normative hypotheses" which derive "from concrete experience." They are not "deterministic" but rather "anticipate some contrast between possibility and actuality, and allow the historian to investigate the uniqueness of events" through the comparative approach. They may identify patterns of behavior that seem strange today but "make perfectly good sense [in the culture and] from the point of view of the historical subject" (1981, 37-38). An example from Mormon history would be perhaps the use of magic to try to find buried treasure in Joseph Smith's time.

Max Weber conceived of certain comparative generalizations, such as the concepts of charisma and bureaucracy as ideal types. For Weber as for others in the historicist school, the goal of the human studies was to understand and interpret the subjective states of mind of human beings (1964, 87-104). I cannot completely accept Weber's views since they have been interpreted, perhaps erroneously, to mean that an ideal type like bureaucracy was value free. In fact, these types are, of course, value-laden simply by the fact of being selected while other candidates are rejected. Berkhofer proposed a related model which argued that we need to understand a culture through the viewpoint of the people of the past who experienced that culture (1971, esp. Chs. 6 and 7).

In a sense, Weber's view is the comparative side of the analytical model proposed by Berkhofer in his argument for the necessity of understanding a culture through the viewpoint of the actor in past times. Where Weber might have looked for similar examples of charismatic experiences in different cultures at different times, Berkhofer would undoubtedly expect the historian to

concentrate on understanding the experience of a single charismatic figure in a particular time.

No one has, to my knowledge, seriously denied that historians need to understand a historical figure's subjective states of mind to understand how the figure related to the culture in which he or she lived. The works of the New Mormon Historians thus include discussions of past cultural conditions. Why would a discussion of the national temperance movement during the decade that produced the Word of Wisdom be seen as evidence of genetic fallacy (or of environmental or biological determinism) rather than as responsible and necessary statements of the context in which a set of events took place? (Allen and Leonard 1976, 95; Shipps 1981). Far from undermining faith, intelligent description and analysis of historical contexts may actually strengthen it by adding greater clarity and understanding. Two additional examples are a discussion of communitarian ideas and settlements in the consideration of the United Order and an analysis of vernacular magic in interpreting Joseph Smith's experiences (Arrington, Fox, and May 1976, 18-19; Hill 1972, 74, 76-68; Bushman 1984, 7, 69-76).

It is true that in some cases such contextual discussion has led to the genetic fallacy. An example is the assumption of Fawn Brodie, who was not a New Mormon Historian, about the connection between *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon. The way of avoiding the genetic fallacy is for the historian to demonstrate convincing causal connections between the thought of historical personages and their cultural surroundings (Alexander 1978, 17).

Unfortunately, critics of the New Mormon History like David Bohn do not seem to understand that terms like *causal* and *causation* have different meanings in the human studies than in the natural sciences. As Collingwood pointed out in considering these differences, "Instead of conceiving the event as an action and attempting to rediscover the thought of its agent, penetrating from the outside of the event to its inside, the [natural] scientist goes beyond the event, observes its relation to others, and thus brings it under a general formula or law of nature." For the historicist, however, "the cause of the event . . . means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about: and this is not something other than the event, it is the inside of the event itself" (1956, 214-15).

The protection against the genetic fallacy is, then, to show that the ideas from the context were also present in the products of the minds of historical figures. Thus, it would be necessary to show not just that there was a temperance movement in the United States but that Mormons in the nineteenth century were interested in temperance for whatever reasons. During the period shortly before the arrival of the railroad, for instance, Leonard Arrington has shown that temperance and the Word of Wisdom were preached as a means of reducing outflows of money which might otherwise be used to help bring the poor to Zion (1958, 250).

Because of the potential problems with the genetic fallacy, I believe Dilthey was only partly right when he wrote, "The interpreter who follows conscien-

tiously the train of thought of the author will have to bring many elements to consciousness which could remain unconscious in the latter — he will thereby understand him better than he had understood himself” (in Bleicher 1980, 15).

In my view, this assumption needs to be seriously qualified. Since historians must understand the context they will inevitably bring such elements into consciousness. Still, they can legitimately use as evidence of motivation only those elements that they can actually show were present in the thought of historical figures. After all, a particular historical figure may not have known about a particular cultural element, may have disagreed with it, or may have interpreted it much differently than the present-day historian. For example, during the 1860s there was a tendency on the part of Mormon leaders to interpret the Civil War as the result of God’s judgments on the people of the United States. At the same time, Abraham Lincoln viewed it as a war which was necessary to preserve the Union, Alexander Stephens saw it as a war to preserve states’ rights, and Ulysses S. Grant saw it as caused by slavery. Most historians today would find the three factors that Lincoln, Stephens, and Grant saw in the war, but few if any would interpret it as God’s judgment on the people of the United States. In understanding the Mormon response to the Civil War, it is crucial to see that latter condition.

There are two additional limitations on Dilthey’s calm faith that a historian can know a historical figure (or any other person, for that matter) better than that person knew himself or herself. Freud observed cogently that when writing about the particularly gruesome historical experience of galley slaves in antiquity, peasants in the Thirty Years’ War, victims of the Inquisition, or Jews awaiting a pogrom that it is “impossible for us to feel ourselves into the position of these people, to imagine the differences which would be brought about by constitutional obtuseness of feeling, gradual stupefaction, cessation of all anticipation, and by all the grosser and more subtle ways in which insensibility to both pleasurable and painful sensations can be induced” (1958, 32).

A second problem is that evidence of either cultural thought or personal belief may not be available. Bohn was absolutely right when he pointed out that the available documents from the past are fragmentary and selective at best. Historians recognized this long before he called it to their attention. At times the historian may try to fill in by speculations on the basis of information from the context or from social scientific theory (Berkhofer 1971, 21, 265). The narrative produced by this technique is speculative, however, and should be both acknowledged as such by the author and judged as such by the reader.

It is also important to differentiate between context and evidence. Context is a reconstruction of the social patterns, climate, and characteristics of a given time and place; but the only valid historical evidence is the product of the mind or minds of an individual or group of individuals — such as their journals, letters, buildings, furniture, or art. I would be the first to admit that we have not always been careful to observe this distinction, but it should nevertheless be our ideal. The collective state of mind revealed by statistics can constitute valid evidence, but such evidence consists of the combined views of in-

dividuals or the perception of that collective state as formulated by the statistician. Statistical patterns and statistical probabilities are not natural laws. Moreover, such evidence is empirical, not in the sense of the natural sciences, but in the sense of the human studies since it is verified from the products of the minds of individuals treated collectively (Croce 1920, 13; Dilthey 1976, 21, 186–90).

Thus, when historicists use the language of verification or speak of causation, they mean that they can find the ideas they cite in the products of the minds of the people about whom they are writing. They do not mean that their “evidence” or “causal factors” conform to some general law or that some sort of determinism is present. This is so, since as Croce put it, “the reality of history lies in . . . verifiability [through documents], and the narrative in which it is given concrete form is historical narrative only in so far as it is a *critical exposition* of the document.” His definition of *document*, identical to the use of *text* in hermeneutics, includes any product of the human mind including artifacts like paintings, chairs, or buildings (1960, 14).

What constitutes evidence? How does — or should — a historian construct generalizations to account for their evidence? Certainly, the criteria for including evidence are, by their nature, subjective. It is done on the basis of those matters the historians believe are relevant to their subject. Historians will naturally seek to answer those questions most important to them and those who share their world view. As Croce put it, “Every true history is contemporary history,” since it addresses those questions most important to the historian and the historian’s immediate audience (1960, 12).

However, this inevitable subjectivity does not mean that one historical narrative is as good as another despite the good intentions of the author. Critics and ordinary readers both accept only narratives that include evidence that we perceive as relevant and that try to answer questions important to us. Narratives that sidestep evidence or that fail to address questions important to us today are rightly judged deficient. For example, a discussion of the life of Joseph Smith without a consideration of his participation in vernacular magic or the discord that the introduction of plural marriage brought into his family life would give as false an impression as the failure to consider his first vision or the Book of Mormon.

At the same time, the historicist is aware, as Thomas Kuhn has pointed out, that no generalization (he uses *paradigm*) can include all evidence (1970, 110). One might generalize, for instance, that Brigham Young’s work as a colonizer was extremely successful in spite of failures like the iron mission, the lead mission, the sugar factory, and the various United Orders. In the historian’s judgment, the establishment of hundreds of towns, farms, and businesses by people under his direction may be enough to outweigh those failures.

BALANCE IN WRITING HISTORY

Perhaps the weakest portion of David Bohn’s critique of the New Mormon History is his discussion of objectivity. The position he defends is crucial for his

argument since, in order to establish that historians are positivists, he must show that they believe in objectivity as defined by the positivistic natural sciences. It is this requirement, I believe, that produced his unsupported assertion that historians believe they can stand "beyond time and space in some fourth dimension from which . . . [they] can gaze upon the past objectively" (1983, 27).

Nowhere does he misrepresent more obviously the views of historians in general and the New Mormon Historians in particular than in this argument. In an August 1982 interview to the *Seventh East Press*, he said that he planned to "argue that objectivity is impossible, especially in writing history. 'It's amusing to hear talk about the "real Mormon history," ' he is quoted as saying 'as if we were omniscient.' " In response, I wrote a letter to the editor indicating that Bohn's comment "strikes me as amusing. Anyone familiar with the literature would recognize that this question has been debated *ad nauseum* within the historical profession at least since Charles A. Beard's American Historical Association presidential address in 1933 in which Beard argued that objectivity was impossible. . . . I suspect that Bohn will be hard pressed to find a single historian practicing today who believes that objectivity is possible in any absolute sense." (1982, 9) In spite of what I thought was a rather clear statement of my views, he included my name in the list of those who believe in and practice objectivist and positivistic history (Bohn 1983, 27). He buttressed his argument further by selective quotations from historians like James Clayton, dean of the Graduate School at the University of Utah. "Clayton," Bohn said, "celebrates the New Mormon Historians in their belief that 'religious history . . . should be neutral . . . objective . . . and concerned with [the] consequences for . . . accumulations of wisdom.' He sees historians as 'objective and scholarly advocates of the truth . . . who respect objectivity more than orthodoxy' " (Bohn 1983, 27).

What Bohn failed to report is that in the same article Clayton denied that the historian's understanding of "objectivity" was anything like the positivist's. "I am not suggesting that historians should not have a point of view or that they can ever achieve total objectivity," Clayton wrote. "I am saying that the goal of any historian is to get as close an approximation of what actually happened as is humanly possible, even if that approximation does violence to his or her own most cherished religious values, and that understanding, not advocacy, is the *sine qua non* of good historical scholarship" (1982, 34). Although Clayton and I would probably not agree on everything, we are in accord when it comes to believing that positivistic objectivity is impossible.

Later in his article, Bohn apparently tried to cover himself. "The New Mormon Historians might well respond that no reputable historians believe it is possible to be objective and therefore the arguments made in this paper attack a straw man." Still, he asserted, "They admit that objectivity is not possible but continue to offer it as a worthy ideal. Even those who refuse to take a position still use methods, evolve categories, and develop explanations that presuppose objectivity. In addition, objectivist vocabulary is ubiquitous,

lending a false sense of legitimacy and rigor to historical accounts" (Bohn, 1983, 31).

In fact, I doubt that any of the historians Bohn named hold anything like the views he attributed to them. He made his case only by the selective citing of quotations out of context, the misrepresentation of their views, and the mistaken transportation of words and phrases drawn from the human studies into the positivistic context.

In fairness, I must be the first to acknowledge that historians have created some of their own difficulties. To many people, objectivity implies absolute detachment. In my opinion, such detachment is both impossible and undesirable. It is impossible because all individuals carry a set of cultural baggage which inevitably colors their perspective. It is undesirable since, if historians are to understand the experiences and motivation of actors in times past, they must exercise creative imagination and intuition. This is, however, not an original insight. Historians since at least the time of Humboldt and Ranke have recognized it (Iggers, 1983, 10).

Nevertheless, for the historian, the word *objective* has a rather precise meaning derived from the thought of Immanuel Kant. He used *objective* to mean that which is outside the individual and *subjective* to mean that which is within (in Reese 1980, 398–99). Collingwood and Dilthey use *objectivity* as a synonym for personal knowledge of the mental products of others, since for them, historians can understand the experiences of historical people only by recreating them in their own minds (Collingwood 1956, 218; Dilthey 1976, 183). They both call such products — concepts, letters, furniture, etc. — "objectifications," indicating that such concepts are the products of the mind of others and as objects have an existence outside the mind of the historian.

In their standard text on historical methodology, Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff reinforce this human-studies definition by arguing that "*an objective judgment is one made by testing in all ways possible one's subjective impression, so as to arrive at a knowledge of objects*" (1977, 140; italics in the original). The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote that in "its strict epistemological sense: the objective is what thought has worked out, put into order, understood, and what it can thus make understood." Drawing from historicist Marc Bloch, he makes a special point that the term, as used by historians, "does not mean the objectivity of physics or biology" (1965, 21).

We may say that one of the strongest influences on the historicist conception of objectivity has been the humane tradition known in German thought as *Bildung*. Although this word is frequently translated as "culture," it means both more and less than our word — rather like what we mean when we say someone is cultivated or liberally educated. One of the ideals of *Bildung* in the humane tradition, as Hans-Georg Gadamer put it, is going "beyond what man knows and experiences immediately. It consists in learning to allow what is different from oneself and to find universal viewpoints from which one can grasp the thing 'the objective thing in its freedom,' without selfish interest" (1982, 14). I know of no historicist who believes that objectivity is anything

more than a sympathetic attempt to understand objects outside his or her own mind, including the ideas of others.

Nevertheless, since the term "objectivity" has become so weighted with the positivistic connotation of full detachment, my own feeling — as I have indicated to students in my classes in historical methodology over twenty years of teaching — is that it should be abandoned. In its place, I prefer to use *balance*, by which I mean a judicious and intuitive weighing of the products of the minds of people in times past to come to reasonable interpretations of their thought.

DEALING WITH GOD IN HISTORY

What role do moral values and a belief in God and his dealings with humankind play? It is clear that some historians, including some of the New Mormon Historians — in the search for objectivity — have tried to detach their personal religious and moral views from their writing. For example, Marvin Hill tried to do this in his critique of Fawn Brodie (1972, 72–73). Melvin T. Smith, director of the Idaho State Historical Society and a past president of the Mormon History Association, cited his own personal/professional dilemma and argued for "the desensitizing of 'faithful history' . . . [through the] recognition that history as a discipline is a finite study of finite human beings" (1984, 1).

Not all historicists would agree. Some like Herbert Butterfield, for instance, have argued that God has played a discernable role in history and that historians can include His acts as part of their interpretation (1977, 200–201). Others like Friedrich Meinecke and Isaiah Berlin believe that the historian must make moral judgments (Meinecke 1973, 268–88; Berlin 1954, 30–53).

In my view, historical personages who make statements of moral values or report dealings with God supply evidence that historians must treat just as they would any other evidence. For example, when historians read Joseph Smith's reports of a visitation from God and Jesus Christ, they must ask whether he is generally a credible witness and whether his actions after the event are consistent with that revelation. In practice, interpreting such an event is not different than interpreting any event for which the reporter is the only observer.

In general, I would say that most New Mormon Historians have dealt with moral values and religious experience in just that way. Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton point out:

The tools of secular scholarship are crude and inadequate instruments for measuring mystical theophanies, which for believers mean the excited discovery (as the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones expressed it) that 'God is a living, revealing, communicating God — the Great I Am, not a great He Was.' *What the historian can do is to analyze as fairly as possible Joseph Smith's own account of his experiences* (1979, 4; italics added).

They then report and interpret the products of Joseph Smith's mind — written accounts of his First Vision — with comparative statements to try to help both the Mormon and non-Mormon reader to understand them.

In my own work I have reported, summarized, and interpreted Wilford Woodruff's ideas and experiences, some of which might seem quite unusual to twentieth-century Americans. In his conversion, he "felt the Spirit of God to bear witness that . . . [missionary Zera Pulsipher] was the servant of God, and that the message was true." Likewise, his Kirtland experiences "included visitations by heavenly beings, speaking in tongues, receiving washings and anointings, formal blessing in which the power to heal the sick and other gifts were given to him, manifestations of clouds of blood and fire, and the overcoming of the power of Satan." In Zion's Camp, "Joseph Smith addressed them 'in the name of the Lord . . . and often while addressing the camp he was clothed upon with much of the Spirit of God.'" (Alexander 1976, 58, 60, 62). I used models from the social and behavioral sciences and religious studies to interpret the events; but nowhere in that essay do I imply that the experiences were purely naturalistic, false, or inauthentic, mere psychological projections, the results of biological or environmental determinism, or anything but the memory of the people who reported them. Above all, since those who experienced them did not consider them metaphorical, I have no right to do so.

But Arrington, Bitton, and I are believing, practicing Mormons. How have non-Mormons dealt with Mormon religious experience? Most recently, Jan Shippo, in considering Joseph Smith's experiences reported them as authentic examples of his religious convictions and interpreted them using models from religious studies:

Fixed in time and place in Smith's canonized account as having been manifested in a grove of trees on the family farm on the morning of a beautiful clear day in the spring of 1820, this theophany answered the lad's question about which of the "sects" were right and which were wrong. When the two personages appeared to him in that "pillar of light," they told him he must not join any of the existing denominations for they were all wrong, an injunction that kept him from becoming a Presbyterian and, as it turned out, moved him closer to the position on religion taken by his father (1985, 9).

She has made it clear that she is a practicing Methodist and does not accept the faith-claims of the Latter-day Saints, but her narrative was written in a spirit of understanding. The experiences were not explained away as naturalistic events, psychological projections, cultural determinism, or metaphors. Larry Foster maintains a similar position about the use of religious experiences among historians from different personal faiths (1985, 3-4).

None of these scholars, naturally, have produced narratives that tell the story exactly as Joseph Smith or Wilford Woodruff would have described it to their contemporaries. This is because historicists have a dual task: to interpret what was in the minds of historical persons and to answer the questions they perceive as most relevant to their contemporaries. The authors have also drawn on a wide range of models from religious studies and the social and behavioral sciences to produce their narratives. Nevertheless, in the most profound sense, the New Mormon Historians recognize no sacred-secular dichotomy and thus they melt the barrier between the two categories. This becomes particularly

clear in those cases like the Kirtland Temple experience when the evidence historians must interpret includes reports of experiences with both secular matters (one person speaking to and touching another) and with the Infinite (Christ appearing to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery).

In short, the New Mormon History has not produced secular or naturalistic historical narratives in the usual meaning of those terms. Still, these narratives — grounded in the humane tradition and the human studies — interpret both religious and temporal experiences, and address questions raised by people in our time and culture.

WHY THE CRITICAL ATTACK OF THE TRADITIONALISTS?

Thus, the attempt of the traditionalists to decry the New Mormon History as positivistic is a singular misinterpretation. These critics have failed almost completely to understand the educational background, intellectual antecedents, and point of view of the historians they criticize. A basic reason seems to be, as Ryle suggested, that they are unfamiliar with both the field of historical methodology and with the assumptions underpinning the work of the New Mormon Historians. It may be that because of their own prejudices, they were unwilling or unable to ask the questions, either of the works or of the historians whom they knew personally, that would have accurately revealed the real assumptions and perspectives of the historians they have tried to critique. A particularly odd characteristic, it seems to me, is that the works they have cited in an attempt to explain the points of view of the New Mormon Historians indicate a major interest in the philosophy of science and in phenomenological hermeneutics, not in historical methodology.⁴

A second area in which Bohn, Novak, and Midgley seem uninformed about historical matters lies in their characterizations of historians. Midgley and Novak have written that graduate education in history has indoctrinated students with an ideological inclination toward "a crude Positivism" (1984, 25–26). Bohn claimed that historians have learned a "broad but ill-defined sort of positivism" (1983, 28).

I offer in refutation my own experience. What they describe simply does not reflect my own training nor that of other historians I know. I left graduate school believing that scientific history in anything approaching the positivistic

⁴ Bohn (1983, 32 n23) mentions Collingwood's name, but he seems unfamiliar with the extent of his influence in the historical profession. Collingwood's *The Idea of History* has been widely circulated in hardback and paperback editions and is undoubtedly one of the best known and most influential texts on historiography from a historicist point of view in the English language. Novak and Midgley (1984, 31, n57) cite Dominick LaCapra, a historian at Cornell University who himself wrote an approving essay on Hayden White, a professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz (1983, 72–83). Their use of LaCapra is puzzling. They write almost as if they do not understand that both LaCapra and White are American historians. Furthermore, neither Bohn, nor Novak and Midgley seem familiar with the historiographical writings of Carl Becker (1935) or Charles Beard (1934, 1935), who probably had the most profound impact on my generation of historians, because they both rejected the possibility of objectivity in the positivistic sense. It is particularly fitting that LaCapra should teach at Cornell, where Becker taught for so many years.

sense was both impossible and absurd. If I had to describe myself I would say that I was then and remain most in sympathy with the relativistic historicism of Beard and Becker than the positivism of the British historian Henry Thomas Buckle or the Frenchman Numa Denis Fustel De Coulanges. I believed that objectivity was impossible since all historians must continue to look with their eyes, interpret with their brains, and understand from the context of their own experience. I was quite convinced that determinist models tended to be overly simplistic. More than twenty years as a professional historian have only confirmed these convictions.

Bohn seems to have begun with the theory that he was dealing with positivism or something close to it based on assumptions from the natural sciences. Following his own view that "theory and related hypotheses . . . guide him [he says the historian, but it can as well apply to himself] in interpreting and selectively organizing its content, . . . [and] in sorting out relevant facts and fitting them together into a coherent response," he extracted or manufactured only evidence confirming his views (1983, 29).

In some cases, he left contradictory evidence out of consideration. For instance, he cited James Clayton as believing in the objectivity of the positivist. In reality, as I read Clayton, he meant the objectivity of the human studies.

As another example, to make his evidence fit his theory he has cited passages in the opposite sense of their actual meaning. For example, he cited my 1978 article on the historiographical treatments of Joseph Smith as arguing that "causal connections" should be understood in the positivistic sense. In actual fact, what I said and meant was that historians must find "causal connections" in the sense Collingwood used the term, that is, the thought in the mind of the actor by whose agency an event was accomplished (Bohn 1983, 28; Alexander 1978, 17).

He has also been guilty of manufacturing examples from his own imagination. In his 1983 article, for instance, he assumed that the New Mormon Historians would propose an interpretation of Joseph Smith's experiences as products of psychological abnormalities when none has done so (1983, 31). In his answer to his critics in 1985, he ignored New Mormon Historian Juanita Brooks's clear assignment of personal moral responsibility to the perpetrators of the Mountain Meadows Massacre and asserted instead that New Mormon Historians would use "naturalistic" approaches that rule "out in advance the possibility of authentic choice and thus responsibility, making defensible moral judgments impossible" (1985, 3).

In what seems to be a display of scholarly discourtesy, without citing any evidence from Larry Foster's writings, Bohn virtually accused him of lying. Earlier, Foster had criticized Bohn by insisting that "certainly not all academic historical writing is biased against taking religious movements seriously on their own terms. I have repeatedly encountered writers who assume that certain religious claims are so obviously untrue that they do not merit serious investigation. Such a narrow-minded viewpoint is not held either by myself or by leading Latter-day Saint historians of my acquaintance" (1983, 4). Bohn re-

sponded that "Foster's talk about taking Mormon claims seriously and not drawing premature conclusions is mere pretense." This response may have come because accepting the validity of Foster's insistence on the reality of religious experience would also have meant admitting that the New Mormon History was not a secular phenomenon which uses positivistic methodology to interpret everything in naturalistic categories (1985, 3).

The tone of Louis Midgley's writings indicates that he thinks he is dealing with the work of anti-Mormons. Using the polemical tools of *ad hominem* and misrepresentation in a paper attacking Marvin and Donna Hill, for instance, he called Marvin Hill "Brodie's New Replacement." In a paragraph in which he gave no names but was presumably writing about New Mormon Historians like Marvin Hill (since Fawn Brodie about whom he was also writing was not a member of the Church at the time), he said that "by acting like enemies to the Saints, by behaving like base traitors, Cultural Mormons have striven, in the most extreme cases, to provide the necessary ground for the rejection of the restoration and the community it has generated as well as a rationalization for their own disloyalty to that community" (c1981, 3-4).

In another paper, he referred to such work as "the New Mormon Apology" which, he says "if taken seriously by the Saints [is in fact] destructive of faith." He also asserts that the historians who have written it have been guilty of "more than a little bad faith (that is, self-deception) and even, perhaps, some blatant hypocrisy" (1981, 33, 54-55).

Violating the canons of ordinary academic discourse, Novak and Midgley actually went so far as to place quotation marks around a phrase not found in my article on Wilford Woodruff. They call it "seemingly amenable to explanation in 'naturalistic terms'" making it appear that the phrase "naturalistic terms" is mine. It is, in fact, their own view. Like Bohn, Midgley insisted that the assumptions underpinning the New Mormon History are "naturalistic," a view he has pushed most recently in his "Marshalling the Forces: The New Uncertain Sound" (c1985, 8), a critique of L. Jackson Newell's "An Echo from the Foothills: To Marshal the Forces of Reason," since published in the spring 1986 number of *DIALOGUE*. I trust that it is not necessary to review the reasons why *naturalistic* is so drastically misapplied, since, as a critique for those historians who are willing to accept the Latter-day Saints on their own terms, the phrase is obviously inappropriate.

Neal Kramer's criticism seems to be that of a graduate student who has read a smattering from recent criticism but who is largely unfamiliar with the cultural attitudes or with the development of the historiography he purported to discuss. He cited Leopold von Ranke, for instance, a deeply religious and believing Christian who often saw God's hand in history, as someone who had "relegated" God "to the realms of superstition." He cited Hayden White's *Metahistory* approvingly in a footnote, but he obviously did not understand White's point of view, or he would not favor the epic history written of the Mormon past since, as White has shown, there can be no real change in essence over time in that form (Kramer 1983, 15, 17; White 1973, 54).

Furthermore, while these traditionalists have insisted that they would like to carry on a dialogue with the New Mormon Historians, their actions belie their assertions. They accuse the New Mormon Historians of disloyalty to the Church and steadfastly refuse to discuss the actual views of those they criticize. They insist instead on critiquing their own paraphrases, quotations out of context, and misrepresentations.

It is this refusal of the traditionalists to give any credence to the historians' explanation of their own work which is most frustrating to me personally and professionally. I find it difficult to explain in any way except as sheer arrogance. Instead of recognizing that the New Mormon Historians use both secular and religious categories in their interpretations, these critics focus only on the secular and naturalistic, then accuse the historians of ignoring the religious or of redefining "religious experience . . . as the psychology of religious experience" (Bohn, 1985, 2).⁵

⁵ In what can only be seen as intentional misrepresentation and obtuseness, Louis Midgley, in his response to L. Jackson Newell, raised the issue of censorship. "When my colleague David Bohn tried to publish a little essay dealing with methodological problems in the New Mormon History, every effort was made to censor that essay and prevent its publication. And efforts were made to emasculate it during the editorial process. And even after it appeared in print one frantic scholar made a terrible fuss because his name appeared in a footnote" (Midgley, c1985, 8).

What actually happened is that David Bohn shared an early draft of his paper with me in which he misrepresented Larry Foster's point of view quite badly. I sent him a copy of my lengthy critique which I also furnished to Peggy Fletcher at *Sunstone*. I did not ask her not to publish the article, but my critique made it quite clear how badly mistaken Bohn was.

At the presidential reception at the next Mormon History Association meeting Midgley told me that Bohn had been asked to recast the article and to include my name in it as someone who agreed with the views he had attributed to Foster. Thus, the editorial work Bohn was asked to do actually enlarged upon his charges rather than emasculating his views. At that reception, I asked Peggy Fletcher about the matter and when she indicated that my name and those of others were indeed included, I told her quite forcefully that, in that case, Bohn had badly misrepresented my views as well as those of Foster. Later, when the article appeared, I told Peggy that I was enormously offended because Bohn had not only misrepresented my views generally in his article, but had quoted from my article on Joseph Smith (Alexander 1978, 17), misrepresenting my argument by citing it in exactly the opposite sense of its clear meaning (Bohn 1983, 28).

Midgley seems to believe that the practice of his group in misrepresenting the views of others is a proper exercise of scholarly prerogative and that complaints by those whose views are misrepresented are illegitimate.

This cry of censorship as a smokescreen to cover misrepresentation has appeared from the traditionalists in other contexts as well. Following the 1984 Mormon History Association meeting Gary Novak wrote a letter to the editor of the *MHA Newsletter* charging that an unwritten rule of the MHA was "that non-Mormons and anti-Mormons are permitted to attack the very foundations of the faith while Mormon believers are not expected or allowed to reply" (1984, 5). In fact, as a member of the program committee for that meeting, I can attest that Novak, Midgley, and others representing the traditionalists presented their views in papers at the meeting and were not censored as Novak alleged. What the program committee actually did (something of which I am certainly not proud) was to reject the proposals of several people like Tony Hutchinson, who have been critical of some aspects of the Mormon experience, since some committee members were afraid the papers would be too inflammatory for BYU audiences.

In addition, even after Midgley had circulated his attack on Marvin Hill (c1981) I made the mistake of believing — on the representations of Assistant Dean Ted J. Warner — that Midgley could present his views without making personal attacks on people with whom

Most important, perhaps, the traditionalists could have learned something from Hans-Georg Gadamer with whom at least three of them are familiar. His views reinforce my belief that critics — or historians — can never really understand the thought of someone else unless they are willing to give it a sympathetic reading in the spirit of balance necessary for the human studies. As Gadamer put it, “A person who is trying to understand a text has also to keep something at a distance, namely everything that suggests itself, on the basis of his own prejudices, as the meaning expected, as soon as it is rejected by the sense of the text itself” (1982, 422). Because the traditionalists have violated this basic principle of scholarship, I find virtually nothing of value in their critique of my work or the work of other New Mormon Historians. They have almost completely failed to understand the views of those they have attacked. They have incorrectly identified the basic assumptions of the New Mormon Historians by placing them in categories such as positivism, naturalism, secularism, and determinism. They have not refrained from personal attacks by insinuating or stating that the New Mormon Historians who are Latter-day Saints are enemies of the Church who deny the reality of religious experience.

Let me be the first to admit that I may have misunderstood the intentions of the traditionalists. In the spirit of Gadamer and Ryle, I recognize that every author and critic must understand that the meaning of words and phrases is not absolute. The cultural conditions and assumptions of those who use words invest them with particular meaning. Understanding particular discourses or texts comes only after understanding the cultural context and intellectual world of the people who use them. Perhaps the New Mormon Historians and the traditionalists do not share much of the same worldview. If this is so, it is imperative that we begin building bridges, rather than hurling weightier missiles. This cannot be done, however, until the traditionalists begin to accept the New Mormon Historians’ interpretation of their own work.

THE CRITIQUE OF THE SECULARISTS

In contrast, I have found it much easier to discuss points of agreement and disagreement with the secularists. I have genuine respect for the writings and integrity of Klaus Hansen and Mario DePillis. Moreover, DePillis, whom I have known for nearly a quarter of a century, is a scholar and a Christian

he disagreed. For that reason, I lobbied with a member of the program committee of the Western History Association to ask them to allow him to make his presentation at the annual meeting in San Antonio. At the time, I believed it was possible if he presented his views in a rational form to carry on a dialogue about his differences with the New Mormon Historians. I was badly embarrassed since he presented a paper consisting largely of what I could consider only name-calling and misrepresentation.

In other words, far from being censored the traditionalists have had ample opportunity to present their views, and have used those occasions to misrepresent quite shamefully the views of those with whom they disagree. In the process, I have been personally embarrassed at least four times by actions of members of their group because I assume that they understand the simple scholarly conventions of challenging and debating issues on which they disagree.

gentleman in the deepest sense of those terms. Their understanding of the work of the New Mormon Historians tends to be generally accurate; and while they disagree with the assumptions underpinning it, they do not misrepresent the works. Hansen would like the New Mormon Historians to examine the truth claims of the LDS leaders and people in secular terms while New Mormon Historians prefer to report and interpret those claims as valid representations to the extent that they are internally consistent. DePillis has called for an examination of the development of Mormonism in terms of Joseph Smith's nineteenth-century culture. I would find this approach too limited. While context is important in studying ideas, the major problem with focusing on it exclusively is that it denies the possibility of genuine individual creativity or inspiration — a break with the culture.

CONCLUSION

In my view, the religious history written by the New Mormon Historians passes safely between the Scylla of exclusively secular categories of interpretation and the Charybdis of uncritical "faith promoting" accounts of the Mormon past. This method requires the historian to interpret God and his actions but does so through the perceptions of human beings who have religious experiences.

I do not know if the traditionalists hope to see the cessation of the New Mormon History. If this is their hope, it will be disappointed. For my part, I do not expect the end of either the new history or the resulting controversy, in part because the track record of the traditionalists gives me little reason to believe that they will not continue to misrepresent the views of the New Mormon Historians.

Nor do I expect to see New Mormon History itself become a historical artifact. Drawing upon both the spiritual and temporal experiences of the Mormon people and melting the boundaries between sacred and secular, New Mormon Historians will continue to write narratives and interpretations which help both faithful Latter-day Saints and interested and informed non-Mormons understand Mormonism. The role of critics in maintaining high quality work is one that I invite and welcome. What I call for is a cessation to tactics that not only violate the canons of scholarly discourse but also the spirit of truth-seeking and fairness that should characterize all disciples of the Master we jointly profess to serve.

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