

The Case for the New Mormon History:  
Thomas G. Alexander and His Critics

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MY OVERWHELMING FIRST IMPRESSION of Thomas G. Alexander's "Historiography and the New Mormon History: A Historian's Perspective" published in *DIALOGUE* (Fall 1986) is that the author, in the words of a character in a recent Paddy Chayevsky screenplay, is "mad as hell and is not going to take it any more." This is unfortunate. An article, ostensibly devoted to clarifying the theory and method of a new approach to Mormon history, becomes instead a largely polemical attack on some whom Alexander considers critics of his way of writing Mormon history.

Obviously historians hold profoundly different opinions on how to write Mormon history, differences that are not just academic but go to the very heart of understanding the Mormon tradition and hence affecting the faith of believers. And yet, with all that has been written in the last twenty-five years, we still do not know much about the historiography of this new approach. A well-thought-out article, clarifying this situation, accurately portraying the various sides in the matter, and presumably defending one approach over others, would have made a real contribution to the much-needed dialogue on this subject. But on each of these fronts, Alexander's article comes up short.

Instead of identifying and assessing methodological claims made by New Mormon Historians<sup>1</sup> or otherwise discerning presuppositions at work in their writings, Alexander proposes that this new way of writing Mormon history is an example of a larger scholarly effort he terms "human studies." He spends

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander identifies only a few New Mormon Historians, but I believe he would include in the group himself, Leonard J. Arrington, Davis Bitton, James L. Clayton, Lawrence Foster, and Jan Shipps. He might also include Marvin J. Hill and Melvin T. Smith, although he feels these two "go too far in the direction of detaching their personal religious and moral views from their work" (p. 39).

a third of his article trying to establish that human studies, manifesting a "relativistic historicism," are free from secular or naturalistic biases ("positivistic biases," as he puts it); he then claims that the New Mormon History, since it is a part of this humanistic endeavor, must also be free from any positivistic taint. As I read Alexander, he does not adequately support either claim.

Alexander describes human studies in terms of "positivism" and "historicism,"<sup>2</sup> and explains much of the latter notion in terms of the "genetic fallacy."<sup>3</sup> He takes his definition of "positivism" from the nineteenth-century evolutionary thinking of August Comte (p. 27), who stated that all human knowledge is contained within the boundaries of science (the systematic study of all phenomena, human or otherwise) and the explication of the laws embodied therein. Not surprisingly, Comte rejected the unverifiable speculations of theology and metaphysics. Alexander also refers to a twentieth-century version of this movement, known as Logical Positivism or Logical Empiricism (p. 27), but does not point out how this version developed beyond the earlier position, nor does he seem to appreciate that while both of these views of positivism have become largely outmoded, this ideology has had, and continues to have, a profound influence in the natural as well as the social sciences.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander uses the term "historicism" in at least two ways: (1) an older, absolutistic view associated with such thinkers as Plato, Hegel, and Marx, whereby general laws or principles of historical development enable us to predict the future course of history (Alexander does not describe this view in these terms or in reference to these thinkers but seemingly has this position in mind when he quotes from Meyerhoff and Windelband [p. 31, n2; p. 32], even though he confusingly speaks of a "third" type of historicism); and (2) a modern relativistic view, whereby all historical claims or events can be understood only in light of the presuppositions, interests, and concepts of a particular culture at a particular stage of development (p. 42). Alexander associates the first view with positivism and sees the second as a rejection of positivism (p. 32), noting that the second view sees "generalization, 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 the term" (p. 33). I fail to find in his discussion, however, support for the claim that "relativistic historicism" is wholly free from secular and naturalistic presuppositions and that, by association, the human studies are free from positivistic influences.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander's definition of "relativistic historicism" is unclear, in part, because he chooses to deal with the notion in terms of the "genetic fallacy." He never says what he means by this latter term, except to say how this mistake can be avoided, namely, by the historian demonstrating "convincing causal connections between the thought of historical personages and their cultural surroundings" (p. 34). Whatever Alexander has in mind here, it is not the genetic fallacy. This is a mistake in reasoning whereby something is wrongly described or evaluated, solely in terms of its origins. For example, it is a mistake to conclude that because consciousness originates in neural processes, assuming for the sake of argument that it does, that consciousness is nothing but neural processes. Alexander seems to mean by the term an erroneous explanation of something based on a mistaken account of its origins. Fawn Brodie was wrong about the Book of Mormon by claiming that it originated with Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, for instance, according to Alexander (p. 31), but he never tells us why. In any event, his use of the term is confusing; it does not go very far in telling us what he means by "relativistic historicism" and is no help in establishing his main point, which is that this version of historicism is free from all secular and naturalistic influences.

<sup>4</sup> The positivist influence continues in various forms of behaviorism and in sociobiology, psychoanalysis, and especially its latest incarnation, psycho-history. A recent study concludes that

positivism has left a mark on philosophy that is still very much in evidence today. . . . And even if the "verifiability theory" is not accepted, it is still regarded as one of the

Furthermore, nowhere does Alexander establish his key point that human studies are free from all secular and naturalistic influences. He gives a lengthy account of one view of historicism that emerged in the late nineteenth-century and that is associated with human studies. In one broad sweep, quoting or making reference to such luminaries as Friedrich Schleiermacher (p. 31), Max Weber (p. 32), Michel Foucault (p. 32), and Freud (p. 35), not to mention Hippolyte Taine (p. 27) and Nume Denis Fustel de Coulanges (p. 42), among others, Alexander contends that this historicism, by virtue of being part of human studies, sought to distance itself from the more extreme stance of the positivists, but he fails to show that this effort was wholly successful. The preponderance of the evidence seems to be to the contrary.

As to Alexander's assertion that the New Mormon History is an instance of human studies, he simply states, "I believe the New Mormon History is an aspect of the historicist tradition within human studies" (p. 31). Nowhere does he provide enough detail for the reader to conclude either that New Mormon History is an instance of what he is calling human studies or that it is free from positivistic biases.

Aside from this theoretical groundwork, the real thrust of Alexander's article is to answer the claims of two groups of critics of the New Mormon History. But in reconstructing the position of his opponents and in dealing with their charges, Alexander, once again, comes up short.

He deals with the first group, the "secularists," in less than two pages. These are scholars such as Klaus J. Hansen and Mario S. de Pillis, historians of Mormonism noted for their distinctive approach to the subject and hence their opposition to the New Mormon History. Alexander respects these critics and acknowledges that they understand the work and objectives of the New Mormon Historians, but he differs with their interpretation of Mormon topics strictly in secular and cultural terms and accuses them, in a rather telling phrase, of being in error in "attempting to move [the New Mormon History] more toward positivism" (p. 31).<sup>5</sup>

The second group, called "traditionalists," includes David E. Bohn and Louis C. Midgley, both political science professors at Brigham Young University, and two graduate students, Neal W. Kramer and Gary Novak. Unlike the "secularists," these individuals are not historians, but Alexander groups them according to their peculiar criticisms of both the "secularists" and some of the New Mormon Historians. Alexander directs his anger at the "traditionalists," clearly feeling that their opposition to certain historians, himself included, has become something of a "cultural purge" (pp. 44-45, n5). (I

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standard options, and a standard point of departure, in discussions of meaning and in philosophy generally. A student of philosophy today could hardly fail to encounter it, and he will be expected to know what may be said for and against it (Hanfling 1981, 1-2).

Much of what is said in this passage about the impact of positivism on philosophy applies as well to the social sciences.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander considers the "secularists" only in terms of their criticism of his methodology, but these individuals are historians of Mormonism first and critics of other approaches second. Comparing and contrasting these two approaches to writing history would have been helpful.

wonder if this group might not better be called the “gang of four,” given Alexander’s tone.) Alexander is “personally frustrated” (p. 44) with these critics and devotes nearly two-thirds of his article to settling accounts with them.

Even though Alexander says it is “imperative” that bridges be built between the New Mormon Historians and their “traditionalist” opponents (p. 45), this is only after he has accused them of misrepresenting the New Mormon Historians by “the selective citing of quotations out of context” (p. 38) and of “completely [failing] to understand the views of those they attacked” (p. 45). Furthermore, he claims, 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” (p. 46) and there is “little reason to believe that they will not continue to misrepresent the views of the New Mormon Historians” in the future (p. 46). Unfortunately, most of these charges are not documented. Whatever else Alexander is trying to achieve here, his objective does not appear to be bridge building.

I find it disappointing that nowhere does Alexander fully describe the position of these “traditionalist” critics. Furthermore, what he does say about them is often confusing<sup>6</sup> as well as difficult to follow since a number of his references are to works that have never been published or are not readily available.<sup>7</sup> The rules of scholarship require a careful and accurate reconstruction of the position of one’s opponents supported by references to sources in the public domain. Because this is not always the case, it is often impossible for the reader to determine whether Alexander’s interpretations of his critics are correct or whether his countercharges are justified.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Alexander focuses on Bohn’s view of objectivity, that historians think they can “escape from [their] own historical condition . . . and exist beyond time and space in some fourth dimension from which [they] can gaze upon the past objectively” (Bohn 1983, 23). Alexander first assumes that this definition is standard: that it is possible to “view an object outside oneself without personal bias” (p. 27). However, he later links this view with positivism to dissociate it from New Mormon Historians (p. 37) and holds that Bohn is wholly mistaken in attributing this stance to any of the New Mormon Historians. He then claims this notion is a call for absolute detachment, which for him is both impossible and undesirable (p. 38). Bohn, he argues, would be “hard pressed to find a single historian practicing today who believes that objectivity is possible in any absolute sense” (p. 37). Finally, Alexander acknowledges that some New Mormon Historians “have tried to detach their personal religious and moral views from their writing” (p. 39) in their search for objectivity. In other words, he comes full circle in his reasoning. After reading Bohn, I would conclude that both of these authorities probably agree on the impossibility of this kind of objectivity and on the unfortunate fact that some New Mormon Historians may have fallen victim to this. In any event, I think that Alexander’s treatment of this notion confuses the very questions he is seeking to clarify and that he and Bohn are in fact quite close on this point.

<sup>7</sup> Of ten “traditionalist” sources he cites, three are published and readily available, three are published but in periodicals not readily available, and four have never been published.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander’s reconstruction of Bohn’s 1983 article “No Higher Ground” is particularly careless. Bohn, he states, “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’” (p. 29). Bohn gives the example, but nowhere does he ascribe the view to anyone in particular—it is simply a useful example for the point he makes. Alexander continues:

[the New Mormon Historians] have accepted Joseph Smith’s experiences as he reported them. In answering Bohn, Larry Foster, a Quaker who wrote one of the most important

These flaws aside, Alexander's line of development is essentially this: On one level, he charges these critics with a fundamental misunderstanding of what the New Mormon History is all about, resulting from their having made a "category mistake," which means, for him, that they are not "sufficiently familiar with the subject matter under discussion" (p. 26).<sup>9</sup> But Alexander also implies that his opponents are disingenuous in their intent. He can find no reason why these critics refuse to give any credence (in his view) to the New Mormon Historians' explanation of their own work other than "sheer arrogance" (p. 44). On this level, Alexander writes as if his critics know full well what the New Mormon Historians are up to.

Alexander, I believe, has neither made correct judgments nor grasped the fundamental issue in this confrontation. He has correctly focused on the question of positivism (or secularism, or naturalism) but does not seem to recognize the implications that follow. If I am right, this would account for his preoccupation with discovering a hidden agenda in his opponents' position and why he claims deliberate misrepresentation on their part.

The issue for Alexander is, rightly so, whether or not the New Mormon Historians are positivistic in their orientation. This charge has been leveled by the "traditionalists" not only at this group, but also at the "secularists" (pp. 27–28, 30–31; Bohn 1985, 2). But the "secularists" also see evidence of positivism in the work of some of the New Mormon Historians. Alexander cites E. K. Hunt, for example, who

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." [Hunt] suggests that "religious experiences . . . cannot be

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early studies of polygamy, pointed out that New Mormon Historians . . . take Joseph Smith's experiences very seriously indeed. They are, he said, "among the most powerful religious experiences on record" (p. 29).

No doubt Foster takes the prophet's experiences seriously, but does he "accept them as Joseph Smith reported them"? Elsewhere he has stated that such visionary experiences are due to "internal psychological mechanisms . . . causing Joseph Smith to experience a sort of 'waking dream' of exceptional power and significance" (1985, 4). This, of course, is not how the prophet reported or accepted these experiences and certainly not how he understood them.

<sup>9</sup> As with his treatment of "historicism," "genetic fallacy," and "objectivity," Alexander's handling of the notion of "category mistake" is a prime example of his imprecision in dealing with key concepts. His charge is serious and, if proven, could support his claims about misrepresentations by the "traditionalists," but he does not offer a sound argument. Alexander quotes Gilbert Ryle in defining "category mistake" but stretches the application of the concept far beyond what Ryle means by the term. Ryle describes "category mistakes" as "systematically misleading statements" which are grammatically correct but semantically nonsensical. For example, Ryle suggests that it makes perfectly good sense to say of someone, "he has the habit of talking loudly." But it would be a mistake, and nonsensical, to speak of the "habit" itself as loud, since "habit [is] not the sort of term of which 'loud' and 'quiet' can be predicated" (1949, 33). A more sophisticated version of this conceptual confusion would be for a person to think he or she could relate to fictitious characters in the same way they relate to real people (1949, 16).

Alexander's claim, that his critics are not sufficiently familiar with the subject matter they are dealing with, simply does not describe a category mistake. Alexander appears to quote Ryle to this effect (p. 26), but this cannot be since Ryle nowhere makes this point in the pages indicated. Since he places so much emphasis on this claim (pp. 26, 41), I find his mistaken or purposeful misuse of this concept in his own criticisms to be quite serious.

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" (p. 30).

For Alexander, this charge can be answered by contending that the natural sciences are positivistic, while human studies are not, and by identifying New Mormon History with human studies. He is "frustrated" precisely because, in his view, the "traditionalists" either cannot or will not see what is for him a clear resolution of the matter. Unfortunately, I find in reading the published works of some of these critics, particularly two *Sunstone* articles by David Bohn (1983; 1985), that from their perspective Alexander's solution simply will not work — hence the two sides are talking past each other.

Bohn, for instance, in "No Higher Ground" argues that the social sciences, including ways of doing secular history, are products of the contemporary historical condition which he describes as a "broad but ill-defined sort of positivism" (1983, 28). I assume that Bohn, in describing the contemporary *zeitgeist* in the social sciences and humanities, has chosen the generic label "positivism" (he also uses "secularism" and "naturalism" on occasion). One may quarrel with his selection of terms, but for me his intention is clear, the label is apt, and he gives an adequate argument to defend his position.

For Bohn, the fundamental issue is not whether history follows the canons and perspectives of what Alexander would term human studies, as opposed to the natural sciences, but whether or not the "ideological baggage, the questions, values, and commitments which constitute" the worldview of secular historians are compatible with the subject matter being studied, in this case Mormonism (1983, 30). In Bohn's view, it is not enough that New Mormon Historians take seriously the claims and experiences of those they study; nor is it enough that these historians not detach themselves from what they study and exercise imagination and intuition in arriving at their interpretations. It is, rather, a matter of the presuppositions reflected in the language and concepts the historians use in rendering interpretations. For Bohn, it is a matter of competing hermeneutics, of competing worldviews.

Alexander never confronts this problem directly. He merely states, without further elaboration, "a particularly odd characteristic, it seems to me, is that works they [the "traditionalists"] 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" (p. 41). Given Bohn's position, it is not surprising he and others would focus on problems in the philosophy of science and competing hermeneutical theories, since, for them, these concerns undergird questions of historical methodology. It is precisely at this junction that Alexander fails fully to comprehend the central issue at hand — hence, the real dispute between the New Mormon Historians and the "traditionalists" is never joined in this article.

In a section entitled "Dealing with God in History," Alexander claims that in doing New Mormon History, he uses

models from the social and behavioral sciences and religious studies to interpret the events; but nowhere in that essay [he is referring to his 1976 article on Wilford Wood-

ruff in *Church History*] *do I imply that the experiences were purely naturalistic, false, or inauthentic, mere psychological projection, the results of biological or environmental determinism, or anything but the memory of the people who reported them* (p. 40; italics added).

What is Alexander's point? On one level he seems to be saying that he only reports experiences as they are recounted by those who had them. Yet he also says he is interpreting, not just reporting, in terms of the categories of the social sciences and religious studies — that is, he is explaining the meaning or value of what others say they experienced. But to do this is to imply something. One cannot interpret and not imply. I find in this assertion strong evidence that Alexander has not understood the argument of the “traditionalists” and thus has not answered their objections by confusing the question of interpretation in the historian's work. Let me illustrate this point.

Asked how a historian should construct generalizations (i.e., interpret accumulated evidence), Alexander responds that the criteria are subjective, chosen according to what the historian thinks is relevant according to his own worldview (p. 36). On this basis, Alexander concludes that

none of these scholars 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 (p. 40).

Alexander maintains that in proceeding this way the New Mormon Historians recognize no sacred-secular dichotomy — they are not writing secular narratives but accounts that interpret things according to *both* religious and secular categories (pp. 40, 44). What is missing, however, is an explanation of how such a “synthesis” of sacred and secular categories is possible, and more importantly, how such interpretations are able to avoid a reductionistic treatment of all things religious; that is, how they are able to prevent secular categories from gaining the upper hand. Certainly there is more to it than Alexander's promise that “religious” terms will be used or that “sacred experiences” will be taken seriously.

The categories of the social sciences and religious studies are hardly bias-free and in their own way reflect various worldviews, positivistic or otherwise, that may or may not be at odds with the Mormon worldview. Alexander cannot acknowledge using these categories and still interpret his subject in a way that is necessarily compatible with and supportive of the Mormon worldview. To assume that there is no difficulty in drawing upon the social and behavioral sciences and religious studies in this respect is naïve. This is the central issue of the argument between Alexander and his opponents.<sup>10</sup> The “traditionalists”

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<sup>10</sup> Some people write history, and in this case, Mormon history, using concepts and offering interpretations that imply a wholly secular or naturalistic worldview, where the notion of an “unseen reality,” or of “God” as a transcendent being, simply does not come up, is not “real.” Lawrence Foster, I would argue, holds to something like this position. When Foster interprets the Prophet's visionary experience, for example (see note 8 above), he

recognize problems in trying to write history that understands the Mormon tradition other than on its own terms and thus question the methods of the New Mormon Historians, who, on the other hand, favor this alternative way of writing Mormon history. Since Alexander does not address this key dispute, the separate arguments continue apace rather than meeting in useful dialogue.

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implies that whatever the Prophet may have thought was the cause of his experiences, and he always attributed them to God, they really resulted from certain peculiar, idiosyncratic psychic states. According to Foster's view, such experiences can always be explained in these terms and hence interpreted according to this view of the way the world is. Part of what makes Foster's view of such things distinctive is precisely its avoidance of any explanatory reference to what could be called, for want of a better term, an "unseen reality." This is not to disparage this view, but just to try and understand it for the purpose of contrasting it with other possible interpretive schemes. The rub comes when such a worldview is employed to interpret, in this case, a religious tradition that is conceptually and in every other way founded on an acknowledgment and acceptance of an "unseen reality." If one of the objectives of an interpretation is to enable us to understand something, and that interpretation proceeds in terms that are inherently alien or at odds with what it is purporting to describe and understand, then we should not be surprised when the resultant description does not "ring true," or in some key respects "misses the mark" and hence gives us little help in our quest for understanding.