



Looking for God in History

THE MODERN CRITIQUE OF POSITIVISM HAS POWERFUL IMPLICATIONS
FOR THE WRITING OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY.

Neal W. Kramer

How to write history has been a major topic of philosophical debate for centuries. This is hardly surprising since concepts like history and time vary widely from culture to culture. A striking example of such differences is found in Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.¹ Eliade here contrasts the cyclical conception of time exemplified in Greek and Indian sacred mythology with the biblical conception of time as having a beginning and an end. The Greeks found solace in the continuity and regularity of nature and its cycles of life while the Hebrews saw time as a limited sojourn apart from God. The early Christians continued the Hebraic tradition. They taught that the coming of Christ signified that God had created time and that history would continue only until the Second Coming.²

The Christians' teleological conception of history persisted in Western civilization until the beginning of the Renaissance. At that time humanistic scholars began rediscovering and translating ancient texts. One aspect of their work was a reevaluation of the idea of history. The resulting ideological conflict between Hellenistic and Christian notions of history helped produce an atmosphere in which a new idea of history could be nurtured. This approach advocated by a group of non-clerical but university-trained historians was based on a developing methodology of science. Philosophers like Locke and Hume articulated theories of how truth could be uncovered through the careful study of the past.³

In the nineteenth century attempts at writing empirically verifiable, logically coherent cause-effect history were well under way. By this time God had been relegated to the realms of superstition. There was no longer any need to interpret history with reference to God or a divine plan because facts when properly organized interpreted themselves. History became a chronological narrative of events as they happened. All the historian required for his task was tenacity, a set of

rules for determining the validity of evidence, and access to the necessary primary sources. The past had become an object for scientific inquiry. Evidence was judged by empirical standards and whatever did not qualify as "real" under the new guidelines—such as the hand of God—was considered an illusion caused by ignorance, illness, and so on.

Such notions were the foundation of not only the historiography practiced by Ranke but also the positivistic sociology of Comte and the materialisms of Marxists on the one hand and utilitarians on the other.⁴ The second half of the nineteenth century marked the high tide of the belief in the all-encompassing ability of scientific methodologies to comprehend all things. Huxley's advocacy of Darwin's theories and the beginnings of Fabian socialism in England only typify what was fast becoming the ideology of history in the Western world. The logical positivists extended the limits of this inherited epistemology to the breaking point.⁵ They constructed a theory of knowledge which in effect equated all knowledge with scientific knowledge. Sentences or propositions which could not be verified through sensory experience were declared cognitively meaningless.

However, a concerted challenge to the very underpinnings of positivism has been mounted in the twentieth century. Much of the critique has centered on assumptions about language. Positivism assumes that language is transparent, describing the world exactly as it is without being subject to any conceptual biases. In contrast Wittgenstein has shown that our use of language is based on a set of arbitrarily established rules.⁶ The rules limit what a concept means and in which contexts it is meaningful. One who adopts a particular mode of thought interprets the world according to the rule of his conceptual mode.

The structuralists, the name applied to a diverse group which includes Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jean Piaget, and Michel Foucault,

NEAL W. KRAMER is pursuing a Ph.D. in English language and literature at the University of Chicago.



developed similar ideas about how our use of language mirrors other human activities. Foucault, for example, offers a lucid account of "discourse" as a set of restrictions on what we are or are not able to say.⁷ The entire body of his work stresses that we are limited in what we can know by what we can say about the world.

Jacques Derrida has tried to demonstrate the tenuousness of writing as the medium through which the world can be understood.⁸ Written language, according to Derrida, tends to "deconstruct." The meaning that was temporarily so obvious disintegrates into possibilities for meaning that are incapable of describing the world as it is. Rather than opening the world to our understanding, language therefore limits how we can think about reality and what we can ever claim to know. Absolute knowledge becomes nothing more than a fleeting dream of the scientist because of the limiting effects of language. Adoption of a set of rules or conventions is thus more a gesture of what one wishes to talk about than of what it is possible to know.

This new understanding of the inherent limitations of language has powerful implications for the writing of Christian history generally and of Mormon history in particular. It demands a reevaluation of the basic philosophy and methodology of historiography. The fathers of the skeptical tradition had effectively dismissed God from reasonable discourse about the past.⁹ Though there was a sort of kinship between their "idea of progress" and the earlier teleological eschatology of Christianity, they denied any actual power behind historical movement and described instead a kind of "natural" historical inertia.¹⁰

Understanding that such notions are in fact conventional and not somehow transparent or necessary does not automatically suggest a foolproof means of rendering an account of religious experience, however. One doubts that that will ever happen. Faith is more an act of will than it is an act of knowing. What now appears to be the case is that religious experience can be described within its own linguistic contexts and evaluated on its own terms. Religious history need not be intimidated by an outmoded value system that reduces the experiences religious writers most want to describe to mere superstition. One can now strive to include the deep spiritual power of the past in a narrative instead of seeking a two-dimensional representation of the scientific "facts."

Unfortunately, many of the vestiges of the belief in scientific history still proliferate in the small community of professional historians and sociologists writing about Mormons today. Since professional training in all the major graduate schools in the United States and Great Britain has been dominated by the scientific approach, most professional scholars have been indoctrinated with the epistemological values it seeks to inculcate. And since most of the scholarly writing on Mormonism today comes from people trained in the methods described, it comes as no surprise that such writing tends to compartmentalize the writing of our history within the narrowly defined limits of positivistic discourse.

Professionally-trained historians write for a very specific audience—other professionally-trained

historians. In this sense, they have become like lawyers. They go to professional schools to master a particular kind of language which carries with it a peculiar way of thinking about the world. They then proceed to act as if their discourse were perfectly ordinary, expecting others who wish to communicate with them to adopt the same point of view in order to make sense of what is being said. That this severely limits what actually may be discussed is never brought up. Thus, when a work is promoted for more general audiences, neither the reader nor the author is able to break the powerful conceptual bonds imposed upon him by the conventions of the discourse of modern professional history.

I would say that the limitations of positivistic historical discourse are too extreme to allow it to become the conceptual framework behind writing the history of the Church. For example, sophisticated historians would have us believe that there is no place in their work for non-scientific testimony of the role of God in the rise of Mormonism and in the continuing guidance of his church and people. These historians would like to make convenient categories like sacred history and profane history, whereby they justify what they choose to leave out. However, those who have witnessed God's hand and freely acknowledge it in all things are not comfortable with such views of history. Boyd K. Packer's speech to Church Education System employees is typical of the displeasure of the leadership generally with some of the histories published in the last few years.¹¹ I think that it is proper to infer from his remarks here and elsewhere that he disapproves of the sort of methodology that deliberately chooses to leave out the most important facets of the rise and growth of the Church.

Many of the professional historians and scholars writing such histories are or were members of the Church—participants in a community which exists primarily because of God's active role in our lives and which continues to testify of that role. Part of the price some have had to pay for their professional objectivity has all too often been the loss of fellowship with the Saints. (And their fellowship has been willingly given up, not arbitrarily withheld by the community at large or its leadership.) If that is the burden one is called to bear in order to present an acceptable offering to the scholarly community, then that burden is simply too heavy and ought to be cast aside.

Because my own interest in Mormon history is avocational rather than professional, I hesitate to criticize works which evidence obvious expertise. Yet I feel that their authors must continue to be challenged to stop avoiding the divine as they seek to explain the miraculous growth of the Church and the great fidelity of the Saints. By hedging our bets, couching our descriptions of spiritual experiences in subtly demeaning language, hiding our belief in the reality of revelation behind objective criteria, we may establish careers, but we mightily offend delicate testimonies. Such writing is, quite bluntly, the open and willful desacralization of a most sacred history.

Refreshingly, the Mormon community at large has generally avoided the intrusion of the doctrines of



positivism into its experience. Indeed Mormonism brought with it the reality of the divine in history. The Book of Mormon itself is ample testimony of this important facet of the religion. Some of the holiest experiences in Church history have now become a sanctified part of the scriptural record. One feels compelled to see in the restoration of the gospel the restoration of the knowledge that God does play a significant role in history and that the writing of it serves to reveal sacred truths about him to all people.

There have been some outstanding works of Mormon history written in the past. The single most impressive aspect of each, however, has not been its aloof objectivity; rather, it has been the simple presentation of human experience with the divine. My personal favorites have included Orson F. Whitney's *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, Matthias F. Cowley's *Wilford Woodruff*, and B.H. Roberts's *Life of John Taylor*. The quintessential Mormon history, however, is the Joseph Smith story. No single account of the Mormon past has ever matched the power and simplicity of Joseph Smith's few words and pure testimony.

It must be more than obvious that one of my criteria for effective Mormon history is the straightforward narration of personal experience as it was perceived, without the added embellishment of sophisticated, anti-religious commentary meant to soften the impact of the situation. Part of the model I would adopt has its basis in the stories of Jesus presented by the writers of the Gospels. Another part comes from Nephi's narrative of his father's experience in the Book of Mormon. Both types of narrative are characterized by attempts faithfully to describe single events in some detail and then to testify of the truthfulness of the occurrences depicted. The testimony may be presented through an aspect of style (such as parallelism with other similar experiences, as used by Nephi), the adoption of a particular interpretive mode (as in Matthew's incorporation of typology within the narrative of his Gospel), or simple exhortation (Mormon's comments at various points throughout his book). It should be noted that the scriptures are filled with other literary ways of telling and testifying. My intuition leads me to believe that spiritual maturity might produce more figurative histories, but I do not advocate the deliberate mystification of a text. Nephi's "plainness" is much more to my liking.

Plain or simple need not imply, however, that the writer strive to be naive. Evaluation of evidence must include therefore prayerful consideration of all the available material and the consequent weeding out of sources of questionable value and/or veracity. Few people familiar with Joseph Smith or Brigham Young would maintain that their lives were overly simple or naive. But the histories of their lives and work should not be cluttered with speculative psychological diagnoses or objective evaluations of the quality of the revelations they received. These histories can be presented as the stories of real people engaged in a holy work. The reader should not be asked to judge whether the narrative itself conforms to some transitory standards of professional propriety but whether the work described is the work of God.

It seems to me that this is the sort of history we need to have written by Mormon historians. Unfortunately, my experience with much of the history I have read dictates that most scholars just do not want to do it. (There are definitely outstanding exceptions to this.) Much of what happened in the early days of the Church has not yet been written. When it is, it will more than likely reveal personal apostasy as well as personal testimony. It will reveal personal weakness at times, as well as personal strength, even in the Church's staunchest defenders. We need not gloss over aspects of people's lives that are not uplifting, but we do need to include their personal spiritual triumphs unmasked by various rhetorical disguises. Ultimately, we cannot move away from what to people with testimonies is an undeniable reality—that the hand of God is mightily revealed in the history of this church from its earliest days to the present. The same God who appeared to Joseph Smith and revealed the gospel to him reveals his pleasure to Spencer W. Kimball as he has to all the other presidents of the Church. If we claim any less, then we have forgotten what we really believe.

Notes

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or Cosmos and History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954). The entire work serves as a sort of prolegomenon to a philosophy of history, tracing the origins of the concept of history and differentiating between various archaic approaches and their more modern counterparts.
2. Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) pp. 182-190. Lowith examines "the theological implications of the philosophy of history" and offers an account of the rise of scientific historiography in relation to fundamental theological concepts.
3. Locke's empiricism, relating all knowledge to direct sense experience, is best formulated in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*—arguably the most significant philosophy work of the seventeenth century. A perfect example of the skeptical approach is Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*. Hume's definition of nature and the narrow context in which he defines the concept of natural law is typical of what I would call the empirical/skeptical approach. Religious history is explained here as a set of superstitious responses to natural phenomena.
4. Both Lowith's book and Hayden White's *Metahistory* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1973) offer instructive accounts of the development of historiography in the nineteenth century, relating it to the evolution of the dominant epistemologies of the period. Patrick Gardner's *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) offers a typical British account of scientific explanation in historiography.
5. One need only refer to Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian" in order to see the historical arguments of the Logical Positivists against Christianity. It is an arrogant and not even always logically coherent attack against all Christians for their association with evil behavior in the past.
6. Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* is his most important work on epistemology. Its implications about how concepts are formed and used through "language games" as they relate to particular "forms of life" have fostered many new and interesting attempts at understanding even the most basic notions about concept formation and our understanding of the world. Of real value in understanding concepts from the historical point of view is Stephen Toulmin's *Human Understanding* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).
7. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970).
8. Derrida's most important work on writing appears in his two books *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) and *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). An interesting and capable account of Derrida and his relationship to French philosophy generally appears in Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).
9. I have already referred to Hume above. David Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Ernest Renan offered devastating historical critiques of Christianity. In each they built upon a scientific approach to what ought to be accepted as fact and strengthened the methodology they sought to defend.
10. The idea of progress is still finding staunch support in works like Robert Nisbet's *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, Inc., 1980).
11. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect" *BYU Studies* 21 (Summer 1981):259-78.