

MORMONISM AND THE RISE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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I -- Introduction

Within Mormon thought is a philosophy of history based upon the assumption that spiritual forces sometimes play a primary role in the formation of historical events and are vitally important in the establishment of societies founded upon the ideals of freedom and social union. Some historians conclude that the influence great men exert causes history to develop in a given direction. Others hold that forces within society are more important causative factors. Karl Marx, who, with Friedrich Engels, proposed the theory of dialectical materialism, wrote in defense of this view. "The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life."¹ While Mormonism accepts both the influence of great men and of socio-economic factors in shaping human destiny,² it holds that, aside from these considerations, deeper and more significant spiritual elements sometimes give primary impetus to the movements of history. This was particularly true in the rise of Western civilization. The Book of Mormon pictures the resurrected Christ as stating to a group in ancient America that "the pouring out of the Holy Ghost through me upon the Gentiles [the Western nations]. . . shall make them mighty above all."³ Here, according to that volume, was the most influential causative factor involved in the rise of the West.

This view is founded in the Mormon concept of Christ as a divine being in whom there is centered the principles and powers of life, light, Spirit and truth that sustain and govern the universe. These divine powers, variously called the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of God, the Light of Christ, the Light of Truth, and the Holy Spirit, emanate from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space. They constitute "the light which is in all things, which giveth life to all things, which is the law by which all things are governed, even the power of God. . . ."⁴

The basic characteristic of God's power is intelligence, associated in Mormon thought with "light and truth."⁵ Intelligence by nature for-sakes evil and error. The "pure attributes" thereof, Brigham Young explained, "stand upon their own basis." They need no support. In a system filled with light and truth "the fabric sustains itself."⁶ Upon this basis only can organized life exist. Said a revelation: "All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also; otherwise there is no existence."⁷ It follows that where truth and light predominate, error is eradicated and life then becomes independent in its sphere--free and mature, having achieved obedience to the laws that govern it. "Here is the agency of man, and here is the condemnation of man," concluded the revelation.⁸ Here, too, is the true foundation for union and cohesion in organized life.

Another revelation observed that intelligence has a natural affinity with intelligence truth embraces truth, virtue loves virtue, and light cleaves unto light.

Mormon thought holds that man, with all organized creatures, is dependent upon the spiritual powers that center in Christ for life. These powers must interact with and illuminate the intelligence within man, giving him the power to think and move and have a being. Since these quickening powers center in Christ, He is the light and the life of the world. While the Light of Christ in its elementary manifestations is given to all men, the influence of spiritual powers in the lives of men may be increased by the exercise of proper desires and by man's obedience to the principles upon which they operate. In their influence lies the key to enlightened freedom and social union. As expressed by John Taylor, "Where the Spirit of God is, there is union, harmony and liberty, and where it is not there is strife, confusion, arid bondage."¹⁰

The Mormon view of man's dependence upon the Spirit is not deterministic. The right to the blessings of the Spirit is the natural heritage of all men.¹¹ Furthermore, man, not God, determines the degree to which the Spirit may influence his life. God "gives wisdom, increase, and power" to those who seek to save, Brigham Young explained, but when the desire, attitude and conduct of men are in rebellion to light and truth, the influence of the Spirit is withheld.¹² God does the giving and the withholding, but he acts without partiality, according to divine justice and equity, and in the final analysis man determines what he receives.

By its very nature a philosophy of history based upon the influence of spiritual powers is subject to limitations. Mormons would be first to question to what degree historians have the data available and the criteria necessary to conclude specifically where and to what extent spiritual powers have shaped human events, except in some instances where they may have been prominently manifested. Since the divine element is said to operate with each individual on a personal basis, each one's desires, qualities of character and talents are important in determining how and to what extent it may manifest its blessings. Though the Spirit is pictured as striving with man, each individual is free, and only by his personal dedication and responsiveness can it significantly motivate and enlighten him. Even then one may lack the capacity clearly to discern and apply the light and truth that is available. Material factors of a wide variety must also be considered. Many times the divine element may not be the basic causative factor in a given action; and in other cases it may even be totally lacking in influence. Thus, instead of there being a purely spiritual source of causation, more often a combination of elements may influence each historical situation. Where one may initially stimulate or give sanction to a given act, another

may divert or even deter the individual from his original intent. George Fox and James Naylor, for example, may both have partaken of a measure of the Spirit in the early Quaker movement, but while Fox is remembered for his spiritual sensitivity and his stability of character, Naylor's radical tendencies are rightly deplored. Again, Socinianism espoused the quest for freedom that accompanied the Protestant Reformation, as did the atheists of the French Revolution; but precisely where and to what extent either group may have been enlightened by spiritual powers coming from God are open to question.¹³ But aside from certain limitations and qualifying factors, the Mormon position holds that spiritual powers, particularly among certain influential groups, played an important role in stimulating the development of Western institutions.