
Part 2

Philosophical and Theological Underpinnings

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

When we introduce the idea of God as an active participant in the historical process, we introduce all of the age-old theological and philosophical questions relating to the relationship between God and man, for God is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Mormon 9:9), and what is history but the forward moving through time of the tapestry of human events? Part 2 of this volume is thus intended to deal with basic issues that derive from such an approach. The first chapter in this section, “Merging the Secular and the Spiritual,” by the editor, Roy A. Prete, is intended to define the scope of the book on the basis of its spiritual underpinnings, to deal with methodological issues, to position the work with regard to Latter-day Saint beliefs and the existing literature, and to outline the major themes.

In the next chapter, “Providential History: The Need for Continuing Revelation,” Brian Q. Cannon, a noted BYU historian and director of

the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, traces the secularization of history writing since the eighteenth century and the repeated and varied attempts by believing Christians to reestablish providential history as a viable genre of historical study. A minority among their secular counterparts, providential historians have sought to understand the cosmic role of a sovereign deity in human history, but successive schools among them have had difficulty relating general principles to the specifics of historical development. As a result, many providential historians have been relegated, in the absence of any further knowledge of the divine role or divine purposes, to using the Bible as a moral guide, with Christian principles merely serving as a yardstick in their appraisal of human conduct. Cannon thus appraises the difficulty, acknowledged by many providential historians, of attempting to ascertain the nature of God’s intervention in

human affairs without the benefit of revelation beyond that contained in the Bible. Modern revelation, Cannon asserts, will allow Latter-day Saint providential historians “to see far more than would otherwise be possible,” but they too need to be humble in their approach and to realize their limitations in determining what God has said and how it may apply to specific situations.

Basic principles affirmed in modern revelation nonetheless help us understand God's dealings with his children and establish a framework for a Latter-day Saint appreciation of the divine role in human affairs. Byron R. Merrill, from a background in law and religion, thus considers in the following chapter the vital principles of “Agency and Freedom in the Divine Plan.” He emphasizes that the opportunity for people to exercise their agency, a necessary requirement for growth and development, is the most fundamental of all gospel principles, and the issue on which the War in Heaven was fought (see Moses 4:3–4; Revelation 12:7–9). In earth life, the right to exercise our agency in an environment of freedom is fundamental to human progress, but, as Merrill points out, freedom may easily be lost through breaking commandments and through the rule of tyrannical government. Because the principles of agency and freedom frequently affect the nature and extent of divine involvement in human affairs, an appreciation of these principles is crucial to any understanding of God’s often apparent, but sometimes invisible, role in human history.

To gain a better appreciation of that role, Roy A. Prete attempts to answer an important question in the chapter “How Has God Intervened in History?” (which is much the same question as how does He currently intervene?), a question which can be answered, at least in part, from scripture and the statements of modern prophets. To establish the spiritual context, the plan of God in the premortal world for the salvation of His children must be considered, as well as the consequences of the War in Heaven—

essentially moving the conflict between good and evil to this world. As a loving Father, God continues to watch over His children but intervenes in overt ways only as they have faith. The author has identified, as a tentative list, sixteen means by which God has interacted in the affairs of men, such as the Creation, the revelation of His gospel to our first parents and succeeding generations, through gospel covenants and covenant peoples, and in the preservation of scripture.

Our Father in Heaven is the God of all nations and works with all His children. He thus preserves and enhances spiritual and secular knowledge among peoples who may lack a fullness of the gospel. God’s hand may also be discerned in whom He sends at specific times and places for particular missions, in the Light of Christ to which all people have access, and in the teaching of correct principles and laws to His children while allowing them their agency in the application of His instructions. He sustains and promotes good family life. His hand may further be discerned in the migration of covenant peoples, in the raising up of lands of liberty, in the outpouring of scientific and technological knowledge, and, in dramatic fashion, in the calling of a modern prophet in this dispensation. Finally, we must recognize that divine retribution may be involved in selected destructions, which people frequently bring upon themselves when they become totally steeped in evil.

A more difficult question relates to when God will or will not intervene in human affairs, for this is a matter involving not only the purposes and will of God but also the agency of man and the exercise of faith. To explain the apparent dichotomy of God’s intervention on behalf of the faithful (which even then is unpredictable), His presumed noninterventionist attitude toward the generality of mankind, and seeming indifference to human suffering, is the task of Craig J. Ostler, a recognized doctrinal scholar. Drawing insights from Latter-day Saint theology on the purposes

of mortality, Ostler attempts to address this issue in his chapter, "Earthquakes, Wars, Holocausts, Disease, and Inhumanity: Why Doesn't God Intervene?" His treatment helps us see things from the Lord's point of view, taking into consideration the Atonement of Christ, the principle of agency, and the need for humans to be tested in a variety of circumstances.

The question of God's interaction with the major religions of the world is the subject of Roger R. Keller's chapter, "Why Study World Religions?" An expert on world religions, Keller bases his thesis on prophetic statements, including the First Presidency letter of 1978, which states that God has inspired many of the great philosophical and religious leaders of the world. He argues that God has in fact worked with many religious groups, giving them spiritual and moral truths as He has seen fit (see Alma 29:8),¹ in preparation for their receiving the full light of the gospel at a later time in their eternal journey. Latter-day Saints, who wish to share the gospel with other peoples, would do well to know of their beliefs and can also sharpen their appreciation of various dimensions of their own heritage through comparative study.

Modern prophets and apostles have affirmed that the great outpouring of knowledge in

modern times is from God. In the final chapter in part 2, "The Discovery Process: Spiritual and Secular Parallels," Sherilyn Farnes and Roy A. Prete explore the discovery process by which all the great scientific and technological advances have come in the modern era and conclude that it is similar in many respects to the process of revelation in the spiritual realm and that all of these advances have come from the Lord for the benefit of mankind and the building up of His church. They are part of the promised endowment of knowledge of this, the dispensation of the fullness of times.

NOTE

1. The same principle undoubtedly holds true with regard to the earth's peoples in other areas of human endeavor such as literature, architecture, art, and technology. Secular historians note that only in the seventeenth century did Europeans pull ahead of their Asian counterparts in most of these areas. (See Gale Stokes, "Review Essay: The Fates of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 2 [April 2001]: 508–25; Philip F. Rehbock, "Globalizing the History of Science," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 1 [Spring 2001]: 183–92).