British historian, F.M. Powicke, has observed that "the Christian religion is a daily invitation to the study of history." I believe that the same can be said, in italics, for the Mormon religion. Thus I encourage us together to reflect briefly on some of the relationships between religious and historical understandings, first with respect to Christianity generally, then with respect to Mormonism more particularly.

Considering history and theology initially in the context of the Christian religion has some legitimacy. First, Christianity is in the Western world a familiar item. Second, that faith option has a long and reasonably well documented history. And third, it is relevant to our most specific subject which is, after all, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, not the Church of Joseph Smith of LDS.

To return to Powicke's comment, the Christian religion is indeed enmeshed in history. Christianity may often have been described as a religion "of the book," but it is also unmistakably a religion of history. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." While this is primarily a statement about theology, it is surely a statement about history as well. And so one has not only Christian philosophies of history, but also Christian practitioners of history. Any embarrassment about the modifier "Christian" is unnecessary, for most historians these days carry an adjective of some sort around with them: intellectual, social, radical, statistical, political, economic, military, or what-have-you. But does being a Christian historian create special difficulties? I think the answer has to be "yes," special difficulties and perhaps special opportunities.

One of the difficulties is concealed in my glib use of the word "Christian." Though the Protestant Reformation (or Revolt) is nearly half a millennium behind us, we have only recently ceased to ask of a biography of Luther or an account of the Inquisition: Is the author Protestant or Catholic? To respond simply "Christian" would be to indulge in the most intolerable evasion and irrelevance. And in surveying the whole history of the Christian church, it made much difference whether the writing was by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, German Lutheran, Scotch Presbyterian, or British Unitarian. As one Christian historian, E. Harris Harbison, remarked, "Sectarian prejudice has long been a notorious obstacle in the path of historical understanding." Strident polemics and narrow parochialism are familiar faults. Even more serious criticism was leveled against "Christian history" by the fierce philosophes of the Enlightenment era. Christian historians, they averred, ignored those civilizations not dominated by the Church, quareeled over petty party differences, found a miracle for every difficulty of causa-
tion, and relied on revelation for every declaration of purpose. For example, one ninth-century bishop and biographer in Ravenna could write:

Where I have not found any history of any of these bishops and have not been able by conversation with aged men, or inspection of the monuments, or from any other authentic source, to obtain information concerning them,—in such a case, in order that there might not be a break in the series, I have composed the life myself, with the help of God and the prayers of the brethren.¹

Such a technique marred Christian history, but fortunately this technique was more typical of an earlier time.

So admittedly Christian history is vulnerable to criticism. It also, however, has powerful potential. First, as Augustine noted, the history of the City of God is one of meaning and direction. Rejecting the notions of history as repetitive cycle on the one hand or whirling chaos on the other, the bishop of Hippo found in history a dynamism and purpose, even a consummation. Indeed Christian theology emerges from history—from the history of God’s dealings with humankind. Herbert Butterfield (in his Christianity and History) writes:

...the Christian must find that religious thought is inextricably involved in historical thought. The historical Jesus on one hand brings to a climax [the develop-

ments of ancient history], gathering up the whole story and fulfilling the things to which the Old Testament had so often pointed. In this respect, His life, His teaching and His personality are the subject of an historical narrative which knits itself into the story of the Roman Empire. Over and above all this, however, Christianity is a historical religion in a particularly technical sense that the term possesses—it presents us with religious doctrines which are at the same time historical events or historical interpretations. In particular it confronts us with the questions of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, questions which may transcend all the apparatus of the scientific historian—as indeed many other things do—but which imply that Christianity... has rooted its most characteristic and daring assertions in [the] ordinary realm of history... The fact that Christianity comes down to us as an historical religion in this sense... is bound to provide certain bearings for the interpretation of the whole drama of human life on this earth, bound to affect, for example, any views or dim feelings that we may have concerning the scheme of things in time.⁴

For the Christian historian, in other words, God is not dead and whirl is, therefore, not king.

Second, the Christian historian approaches the vast canvas of the human past with a point of view, a perspective, even a passion. In an earlier time, this may have seemed more a liability than an asset. In our own day, however, total and impersonal objectivity is seen more as delusion and snare. The historian does not and cannot stand apart from the stream which he attempts to describe. He is not in the balcony watching life played upon a stage, for he too is one of the players. The Enlightenment thinkers believed themselves totally objective, shorn of all prejudice and presupposition. But as Carl Becker demonstrated long ago (in his Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers), they too were captives of a prevailing climate of opinion, they too burned down one heavenly city only to erect another. The Roman Catholic historian, Eric Cochrane, believes that the committed Christian historian has at least two advantages over his secular counterpart. One, he is likely to take religious issues and religious ideas and religious motivations seriously; he may even know a little theology! And two, such a historian follows his scholarly pursuit as a holy vocation. Catholic historians, he writes, “must regard the work of historical inquiry not as a way of gaining social prestige, of building academic empires, or of making payments on suburban swimming pools.” Rather, he sees the enterprise, the calling, as a process of sanctification—both for the historian herself/himself and for those she/he reaches through her/his work. Cochrane acknowledges that “talent rains on the just and unjust alike” but sees the calling as an added incentive to hard work, diligence, and thoroughgoing honesty. With approval he quotes Giuseppe Alberigo, “All historical research conducted with scientific rigor is a spiritual adventure; and research into the history of the Church is also a religious experience.”⁵

The third potential for Christian history is the capacity for universality, for empathy as broad as the human race. Unfortunately, Christian history has often degenerated into partisan polemical history, with the circle of sympathy so narrowed as to exclude nine-tenths of the

An accurate concept of Mormon history must not only lengthen its timeline to include the most ancient of times, but also broaden and widen it to include all people and cultures.
human race. God’s love, ocean-wide, is meted out thimbleful by thimbleful. The contemporary Peruvian theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, describes salvation as the communion of all human beings with God and among themselves. For him, it is no longer useful to speak of a profane world, for grace—whether accepted or rejected—is present among all peoples, and all human activity comes within the scope of Christian concern. “There is only one human destiny,” he writes, and “the history of salvation is the very heart of human history.” This gives history its unity and salvation its universality. Those who try to “save” salvation exclusively for their own group, their own class, their own nation, will end up “losing” it. The salvation of Christ, Gutierrez concludes, “is a radical liberation from all misery, all desolation, all alienation.”

Far too often, the message of salvation is fatefuly linked to a particular cultural mode, to a single epoch. If Ptolemaic astronomy falls, then Christianity must fall. If Darwin be right, Christ is of no avail. If capitalism collapses, then the Church is doomed. In its first three hundred years, Christianity was rarely tempted to wed itself to the political or economic or even scientific system of the day. In its critically formative period, it profited from its cultural alienation. Since that time, however, it has often succumbed to the dangerous temptation to identify God’s will with its own, to make itself and its institutions the very center of the universe.

This brief prolegomenon suggests then that the problems of Mormon history and theology are not unrelated to the larger question of Christian history and theology. Certainly some psychic distance, some historical perspective may be gained by seeing a single church in the context of the universal Church. But one must not be oblivious to the differences. Mormon theology (of the Utah church), like Christian theology generally, sees direction and progress in history. But for the former, the development is without end, and nothing lies beyond time. Eternity, as Thomas O’Dea pointed out, is simply “indefinitely prolonged time” during which man in cooperation with God gains mastery over the other elements in nature. Not just history is dynamic, but all reality is on the move—purposefully, progressively, and endlessly. Mormonism has a process philosophy quite apart from the underpinnings of Whiteheadian thought and a sense of time from which nothing in the universe is exempt. The Mormon view intensifies the connection between history and theology even more than does the orthodox Christian view.

Also relevant to the understanding of history are the Mormon concepts of God and man. God has more limits and man fewer than in traditional Christian thought. God is finite, not infinite, subject as all else to the vagaries of time, limited by the materials available to him for the creation of the world. To employ the language of Sterling McMurrin on this point:

As a constructor or artisan God, not entirely unlike Plato’s demiurge of the Timaeus, the Mormon deity forms the continuing processes of reality and determines the world’s configurations, but he is not the creator of the most ultimate constituents of the world, either the fundamental material entities or the space and time that locate them. . . . it is a basic article of Mormon theology that God is related to a world environment for the being of which he is not the ultimate ground and by which he therefore is in some sense conditioned. This means that God is a being among beings rather than being as such or the ground of being, and that he is therefore finite rather than absolute.

McMurrin acknowledges that the language of absolutism and omnipotence is more emotionally satisfying and is, therefore, to be found in many a Mormon sermon, but

The Enlightenment thinkers were also captives of a prevailing climate of opinion; they too burned down one heavenly city only to erect another.

“like it or not, the Mormon theologian must sooner or later return to the finitistic concept of God upon which both his technical theology and his theological myths are founded.”

If the great gulf between God and man (in Augustinian or Calvinist thought, for example) is narrowed by the limits placed upon God, it is further bridged by the high view taken of man. God is as man once was, and man may become as God now is. Man is not the fallen, depraved, impotent creature of much Christian thought, not the earthen pot complaining to the potter, “Why hast thou made me thus?” Original sin, with all its potential for debilitation or irresponsibility, is cast aside explicitly and boldly. Again, in the words of Sterling McMurrin:

To fail to recognize that at its foundation Mormon theology is essentially a rebellion against especially the orthodox Protestant dogma of original sin, and the negativism implied by it for the interpretation of the whole nature and life of man, would be a failure to discern not only the distinctive character of Mormon doctrine but also of the Mormon religion itself. . . . The history of Mormon theology . . . has been at many points a recasting of Pelagianism, Socinianism, or Arminianism, in a nineteenth-twentieth-century role, but where reason and theological subtleties have counted for less than common-sense insights, practical necessities, and dogmatic certainties.
Now such a high view of man's powers and potential could lead to romanticizing many hard facts in history and to wishing away the reality of evil. Nineteenth-century America offers several examples of just such romanticism and monism. Remarkably, Mormon theology, while exalting man, does not obscure or minimize the force and fact of evil. Evil exists, but the freedom of man to do something about it also exists. Evil is not always the "blissing in disguise," not invariably an integral part of some overarching but hidden plan, not merely and evasively the absence of good without an independent existence of its own. Evil is, for God and man alike, a true and profoundly untrue. The Mormon past, properly apprehended, is an ancient and inclusive past.

A second area of historical concern for Mormons is that of America and the New World. Here Mormons can helpfully remind all of us that the history of this hemisphere does not begin in 1492 or 1565 or 1607. Beyond extending the time-line, Mormons also declare that America and the New World were being prepared for a new revelation, a timely restoration. In the fullness of time, it came through the person and prophecy of Joseph Smith: a gospel out of America, about America, and to some degree of America. After the period of persecution,

Is the author Protestant or Catholic? To respond simply "Christian" would be to indulge in the most intolerable evasion and irrelevance.

challenge, an occasion of struggle, endurance, and ultimate victory. Once again, the importance of history is magnified, not minimized; events are not merely some sort of pageant play or placement test for the world beyond.

And history is taken seriously within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Let me suggest four areas in which this appears to be the case. First, ancient history. As Richard Bushman has pointed out, one cannot take Mormonism seriously as a religion without taking seriously its attention to ancient history in the Book of Mormon. This certainly need not imply that only one window should be opened to the ancient world (single window history, like single issue politics, is a risky business). But it does imply that the time-line does not begin in 1830 and that the heritage of all human history is a legitimate and relevant part of the Mormon heritage. John Henry Newman once remarked that to be deep into history "is to cease to be a Protestant." While I do not accept that as binding truth, I acknowledge some force in the idea for those who see Protestantism as wholly the product of the sixteenth century—with nothing of relevance occurring in the fifteen hundred years between the apostolic age and the age of the Reformation. So to steal from Newman, I might be tempted to say that to be deep into history is to cease to be a Mormon—but I hope that I have made clear in what sense I believe that to be both

the Mormon dream seemed tied to the American dream, and for a time both fared remarkably well. Now, with the American dream faltering (today seems less like the fullness of time, more like the emptiness), it is increasingly important for Mormonism to guard against a cultural captivity. But in any event, America's history has been taken seriously, divinely guided in preparation for and fulfillment of the promises of Zion.

Third, Mormons consider their own particular history with deep earnestness. A century and a half of Mormon history in this country alone is filled with inexhaustible drama. The sources and resources brought to bear on this lively past are enormous. The point hardly needs to be labored. I would simply like to pay tribute to one man, Leonard J. Arrington, for the quality and the quantity of his labors. He has coaxed, cajoled, encouraged, guided, and inspired countless young Mormon scholars in doing their own history in a manner that is responsible, open, probing, and devout. For non-Mormon scholars, he has opened doors and reduced suspicions on a scale that can only bode well for the future of the Church. Most of all, he has personally set a standard of integrity for all the rest of us to follow—or to ignore at our peril. Of Mormon history as of Christian history generally, the question should not be whether the author was a Mormon or a non-Mormon, but whether that author was a historian or a hack.

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Fourth, it is no secret anywhere in the scholarly world that Mormons take seriously their individual and family history. This herculean enterprise is a matter of pride, and justifiably so. The raw data accumulated—now also disseminated and preserved with the aid of modern technology—constitute a source of incalculable utility. Historians—a proud and arrogant lot—do point out, however, that genealogy is not history. In his recent book on the Roots of Modern Mormonism, Mark P. Leone indicates his reservations about Mormon "amateur history, basically chronicle and vignette, not interpretation; its skeleton is kinship, not politics or economics, and it is unreservedly uncritical." While Leone concedes that the Church makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of the genealogical searches, he believes that the searches themselves give a strong egocentric perspective to all historical undertakings, with one result being that the broadest human grouping acknowledged is that of the family. The past is not seen in terms of larger entities, broad social forces, subterranean causes, profound cultural conflicts. When the approach to the past is essentially, if not exclusively, autobiographical, history is "atomized." This kind of historical investigation also conspicuously the utopian and restorationist ones, the world began anew with their own founding. For many reasons, as I have suggested, Mormonism has largely resisted this dismissal of the past. Largely resisted, but not totally. There is still a strong tendency to go back no further than a single century or to find authentication chiefly or solely in one's own experience. All American piety did and does the same thing. Culture was undernourished and institutions collapsed and broke apart with breathtaking frequency. Mormonism has too strong a sense of institution and authority for collapse—at least in the twentieth century. But cultural and personal enrichment can still be denied. Mormonism, which takes time so seriously, should gulp down larger and larger chunks of it from all humanity's past.

Other religious bodies originating in nineteenth-century America share this need—and have responded to it variously. Christian Science, for example, turns far less to history than to philosophy. But in terms of its own denominational past, it has manifest great and often jealous concern. The recent writings of Robert Peel, however, help make possible a freer commerce between "in-house" historians and those who approach Christian Science from the outside. The movement led by Alexander Campbell, a contemporary of Joseph Smith, has suffered internal discord and dissension which has distracted the group from a steady concern with earlier Christian history. Yet, several conferences and periodical issues have tried to place that restoration movement into the larger context of the primitive and free church precedents. Seventh-day Adventists have recently been dismayed by the efforts of Ronald Numbers to place their foundress, Ellen G. White, more solidly in the company of her fellow health reformers of the mid-nineteenth century. Some of these historical ways of thinking are quite

The time-line does not begin in 1830, and the heritage of all human history is a legitimate and relevant part of the Mormon heritage.

tends to be adulatory, to be an endorsement rather than judgment of the present. In Leone’s words:

... Mormons lock themselves into the present more effectively than the rest of society.... [They] never see profound change and are even prevented from seeing the causes of it because all history is an individual's reflection; and just as a mirror never tells a viewer what it saw yesterday, history never tells Mormons what they or their society looked like before. It cannot do so because the living Mormon is the image in the mirror.

In all four areas of concern with the past—ancient history, New World history, denominational history, and family history—the attention is keen. Thus, to appropriate Powicke’s remark: "The Mormon religion is a daily invitation to the study of history." That much, it seems to me, is fixed and sure. In scrutinizing the relationships between history and theology in the Mormon context, however, some problems or questions do remain. In a most tentative and exploratory way, let me suggest three areas in which both historians and theologians might wish to focus their reflections on "the Mormon connection."

1. They might ask, as I now do, whether an effort should be made, consciously and deliberately, to lengthen the time-line of historical consciousness. All American religion, as Sidney Mead long ago pointed out, suffers from historylessness. For so many groups, and
new and, therefore, often shocking; they can also prove refreshing. A recent Adventist book looks at the question of Saturday and Sunday worship—surely nothing new here. But the look is not at nineteenth-century America; rather, it is at second-century Rome, and thence to the entire patristic period. The Adventist author is, moreover, the first non-Catholic graduate of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome (Samuele Bacchiocchi, From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday in Early Christianity). Scholarly barriers should be crossed with the same courage and zeal that missionaries have crossed ethnic and national barriers.  

2. Which leads to a second area of reflection. If history's timeline needs to be lengthened, its embrace can also be widened—to include non-Mormons both as the subjects and authors of history. This conference itself is an example of what I mean, and I would like to think that it could have as readily occurred under the sponsorship of the Church. Why might it not? Because there is a continuing defensiveness, an uneasiness, a "garrison mentality"—to use the phrase of Davis Bitton. And Mark Leone has commented that "Mormons seem at the moment to be the sole owners of their own past." Much of that we can best understand various efforts to seal off students from "worldly" ideas, the denunciation of pornography, the unwillingness in Church periodicals to include different points of view or even critical letters to the editor, the hypersensitivity to criticism, the thrust for praise, the patronizing editorials on "professors," the in-terminable self-congratulation at having the truth... and the suspicion greeting the historian who wishes to study Mormon history. "Is it for us or against us?" The assumption is that the world is divided already between the sheep and the goats.  

So it is possible to understand the defensiveness; what is also required is an understanding of its cost. For history shortened in time and narrowed in scope loses its capacity to enlighten, to liberate, to offer that emancipation which comes with genuine self-understanding. If

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this is readily understandable. When others were owners of the Mormon past in earlier generations, they manhandled that past horribly. Ordinary sense might suggest, therefore, that one not surrender a proprietary hold. Beyond the fact of that period of persecution and vile misrepresentation is the additional fact of this religion's visible and vulnerable youth. The formative years of a religion—consider Christianity once again—are turbulent and contradictory, filled with false starts and misdirections. Senior citizens can look back on the vagaries of pimply puberty with philosophical calm—not so the adolescent himself, challenged without at every turn and tortured from within by self-doubt and insecurity.

Still another reason for being suspicious of the outsider is the theological novelty of the Utah church, and novelty is only another word for heresy. In an earlier period, Mormons were condemned by the Gentile world for being polygamous and un-American. Now they are emphatically monogamous and vigorously American. So all is forgiven and forgotten—at least until one begins paying attention to theology. There, the traditional Christian, confronted by a finite God, an unfamiliar Trinity, an unlimited freedom, and a forbidding temple ritual, may respond with a new wave of wild accusation and scurrilous diatribe. Perhaps fearing such a situation, the Mormon Church keeps its guard up against the outsider.

Calvinist theology has a tendency to sink into gloomy despair, Mormon theology may have a tendency toward a Pelagian or a Promethean pride. And since that is all humanity's most threatening sin, perhaps Mormon history—if broadened and lengthened—can provide a needed corrective to this facet of Mormon theology. However, to be successful in this regard, the approach to history, instead of reinforcing egocentricity, must be one which transcends it. If our paths are to be guided by the light of experience, that light must shine as broadly and as brightly as possible.

3. A final arena for reflection has to do not so much with the length or breadth of history as with the attitude taken toward it. To put it succinctly, history should be seen as an ally and not as a foe. Mormon theology knows no Vincentian formula: only that is to be believed which has been believed by all men, always, everywhere. Mormon theology is not horrified by the notion that dogma has a history, that doctrine does develop, and that revelation is not closed. Think of the real advantage (the Mormon "edge") which this stance provides—no necessity for a Talmudic commentary, for a textual transmission apparatus, for a council of Imams, or for a collection of canon lawyers. Continuing revelation, far from being an embarrassment in a twentieth-century world, offers the opportunity for adaptation and growth, for flexibility and development. The opportunity is enhanced by the ab-
sence of a class of professional theologians or official interpreters of the written word. No priests to muzzle the prophet. Of course, the amateur status can become a liability as well, certainly if obscurantism and mindless literalism assume control. So another plea for the embrace of history, with its instruction in ambiguity, variety, possibility, failure—and sin. The liberating power of history was well demonstrated, I believe, by the publication in 1970 of Stephen G. Taggart’s little book, *Mormonism’s Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins,* and three years later of Lester Bush’s article in *Dialogue.* Change, wrote Taggart, “must eventually come” and eight years later it did. I do not argue a post hoc, ergo propter hoc. I do argue that a recognition of the relativities of history made easier the modification of doctrine. And I also argue that Mormonism has the mechanism for change and development already in place.

Another way in which to manifest the embrace of history rather than its disdain is to do with archives and access. In his recent book on the opening of the Vatican archives (*Catholicism and History*), Owen Chadwick details the elaborate intrigue, political and ecclesiastical, that kept these archives so long from the scholarly world (the intrigue even included the kidnapping of the archives by Napoleon in 1810). Not until the final decades of the nineteenth century were these archives opened. In the height of a renewed conflict between science and religion, the Roman Catholic Church even released all of the Galileo manuscripts, concluding—rightly I believe—that it had more to fear from imposing a rigid and authoritarian secrecy than it did from openness and honest scholarship. Leo XIII in 1883 said, “Let nothing untrue be said; and nothing true be unsaid.” Of course there are risks, as freedom always involves risks, but a church which emphasizes so eloquently the absolute freedom of man cannot gracefully thwart that freedom’s honorable exercise.

History must be embraced. But in 1980 this is far from a challenge to be set before Mormonism alone. A whole society is turning its back on history, is ignoring or dismissing its past. Such recent books as Philip Rieff’s *Fellow Teachers* and Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* bemoan the loss of historical memory, the reversion in America to a kind of barbarism. As Lasch noted, a denial of the past at first and superficial glance appears “progressive and optimistic,” but on closer analysis, we see that it embodies the “despair of a society that cannot face the future.” So the problem is far greater than that represented by a single church or a particular tradition.

The genial pontiff John XXIII turned out to rate about a 7.5 on the Richter scale. Among his many deeds and pronouncements are these words: “The best apology for the Church is the impartial history of its life.” Wise and welcome words for his or for any church. But they were a long time in coming, which is why—no doubt—that patience is an admirable virtue.

Notes
2. Ibid., p. 435.
6. Ibid., pp. 136-8, 150.
9. Ibid., p. 35.
10. Ibid., p. 66-7.
13. Ibid., p. 201.
15. Taggart’s book was published by the University of Utah Press; quotation is from p. 76.

On this matter of lengthening the timeline, I offer (more or less facetiously) one example. In 1976, the Deseret Book Company published *Building the City of God: Community and Cooperation among the Mormons* (by L.J. Arrington, F.Y. Fox, and D.L. May). Chapter One opens with this sentence: “When Sir Humphrey Gilbert’s ship was swept by sudden storm from her companion vessels in 1583 and lost with all on board...” Now, I have no doubt whatsoever that the authors wrote “1583” for Sir Humphrey Gilbert. But I can just imagine a copy-editor or proof-reader at Deseret Press musing as follows: “This is a book about Mormonism and therefore, of course, a book about the nineteenth century, not the sixteenth century. Thus, 1553 must be a misprint for 1583.” One effort to lengthen the timeline was thereby swiftly done in!

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