



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 21 | Number 1

Article 6

2009

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Martin E. Marty

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Marty, Martin E. (2009) "We Might Know What to Do and How to Do It: On the Usefulness of the Religious Past," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 21 : No. 1 , Article 6.

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title We Might Know What to Do and How to Do It: On the Usefulness of the Religious Past

Author(s) Martin E. Marty

Reference *FARMS Review* 21/1 (2009): 27-44.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract The historical influences of the past on modern religion are important for the future of religion.

WE MIGHT KNOW WHAT TO DO AND HOW TO DO IT: ON THE USEFULNESS OF THE RELIGIOUS PAST

Martin E. Marty

The historian who approaches a general readership or audience is necessarily self-conscious about any proposed transactions. When professional historians get together, they tend to be self-com-miserating in ways that the public tends to associate with admirals and clergy. Admirals often are sorry for themselves because of lost ships and the decline of the navy; clergy, because of lost souls and the putative decline of religion. Historians engage in whinging over lost enrollments on college campuses and an alleged decline of interest in the past.

The statistics are on the side of those who feel sorry for themselves. When curricular revision time comes, history often suffers. When people overhear other people complaining about various high school or college subjects, they tend to be complaining about history: it was dull, boring, pointless, full of meaningless and forgettable dates and names. At best it represented what Tennyson's *Ulysses* was about: "old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago." At worst it produced terror among those who did not think in historical terms but still had to pass tests.

This essay, delivered on 20 March 1989 at Westminster College of Salt Lake City, is reprinted with minor editing by permission of the author and Westminster College from *The Westminster Tanner-McMurrin Lectures on the History and Philosophy of Religion at Westminster College* (Salt Lake City: Westminster College of Salt Lake City, 1989).

A pacific if not pacifist sort who ordinarily opposes capital punishment, I might make an exception in the cases of high school or college teachers who help produce such reactions to history. History deals with people, and people are interesting. It treats the living and the dying, the healing and the killing, the fearing and the hoping that make up the stuff of life—themes which engross us in respect to contemporaries. It takes real creativity to render history dull.

In support of the luckless and lackluster historian, let it be said that she or he faces enormous odds in a society which devotes itself so much to the present moment, which all but endorses and promotes amnesia. People are taught to enjoy the “now,” to consume commodities offered at the moment, to be current and trendy, to rejoice in progress over stupid ancestors, and to be free of the dead hand of the past.

And yet . . . and yet: there are good reasons for contemporaries, be they religious believers or not, to connect the “now” and the future with what has been handed down and what they carry within them as cultural inheritance. David R. Carlin Jr. spoke up well for this when he showed how we can regard the future as a land of opportunity or a region of responsibility. Seen only as opportunity, the future comes at us as something with resources to be used up. Thus we grind up the natural environment and, exploiting it, ruin it as fast as possible. Or we can be stewards:

Ironically, the best way to develop an attitude of responsibility toward the future is to cultivate a sense of gratitude toward the past. I am not going so far as to advocate Oriental-style ancestor worship, but the Chinese and Japanese have had a point. We are born into a world that we didn't make, and it is only fair that we should be grateful to those who did make it. Such gratitude carries with it the imperative that we preserve and at least slightly improve the world that has been given us before passing it on to subsequent generations. We stand in the midst of many generations. If we are indifferent to those who went before us and actually existed, how can we

expect to be concerned for the well-being of those who come after us and only potentially exist?¹

Theodor Adorno went even further. Recalling that most of human life is suffering, not to be aware of the past and thus of suffering in the past is somehow to rob the victims of the honor and dignity of their suffering, to be less than fully humane, not quite trustworthy in respect to the demands and cries of people in the present.

To go on in such a vein, reaching for a thousand easily available references of such helpful sorts, would be counterproductive: it sounds like preaching and is not likely to keep awake those who see the past as inert, dead, gone, not living in our minds at present. It is more promising to point to the way history is with us, the past is part of us, willy-nilly. One hears Canadian novelist Robertson Davies speaking for any of us: “When I most want to be contemporary the Past keeps pushing in, and when I long for the Past . . . the Present cannot be pushed away.”²

The Past keeps pushing in unrecognized in many cases. A generation ago, in a time when the student generation was often formally and systematically opposed to the past—dissenting against “Mom’s and Dad’s” (and the Dean’s) world, trashing inheritances in the belief that a utopia could then follow—cultural critic Eugene Goodheart reminded them of a reality. In dealing with the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian pasts, he noted for them that while they did not wish to, or did not possess the tradition, the tradition possessed them. So much of what we are is reflexive, gestural, unconscious: we have no words, phrases, movements, or programs that are not colored by what we inherit. Not to know the inheritance is not to know ourselves, to be ignorant of what we are and can be or do, ready to lose our identity and become powerless. To know the tradition is to know who we are and to what we belong, to be aware of the repertory of options available to us.

1. David R. Carlin Jr., “Backing into Modernity: Confessions of a Cultural Conservative,” *Commonweal*, 7 April 1989, 204.

2. Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels* (London: Penguin, 1983), 124.

Not for a moment does this defense and praise of consciousness concerning the past mean that contemporaries can or would do well to live there. L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* has provided a helpful phrase to teach the distance from the past: "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."³ Forgetting can be as creative as remembering. We would be overwhelmed if all the artifacts of the past were saved and piled high. What if all magazines were as hard to throw away as *National Geographic*? It has been hypothesized that the world may soon tilt on its axis because no North American has ever thrown away an issue of the heavy-papered magazine which looks as if it bids for permanence. If everyone saved everything as they save *National Geographic* we would be smothered. On these terms, the great enemies of traditionalists, antiquarians, and historians, the forces which lead artifacts to dust, can be seen as creative. I cherish a clever myth propagated by Katherine Whitehorn: after God had created all things, "on the seventh day He saw all that He had made, and realised the way things would go. So on the eighth day He bestirred Himself again, and created moth and rust, His final stroke of mastery."⁴

Clearly, just as our minds are selective in what they remember and moth and rust are arbitrary about what they eat or destroy and what they allow to survive, so we are and have to be selective about what we claim and find in the past, especially for the purposes of assessing the religious present and approaching the future. A useful way to approach the issue of how the layperson, which means the vast majority of the human race that are not professional historians, deals selectively with the past is to begin with "remembering." We think in commonsense terms.

This means beginning with individual and personal memory. We call upon it and upon records supporting it to go about transacting daily affairs. When the Internal Revenue Service calls for a reckoning each April 15, all taxpayers become historians. They have to have saved records and now draw upon them as supporting evidence. Many keep diaries, to record their growth or to prime their memories.

3. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), xvi.

4. Katherine Whitehorn, "Dung-beetle urge," *Observer*, 2 November 1980, 35.

Contracts are deposits into the historical record, to be consulted periodically. No one credibly claims that one's own personal experience is a wholly reliable guide: neither narcissism nor solipsism is a friend of history, and we may chuckle when people let their own range of happenings be the be-all and end-all of resources. In Chicago we tell the story of a healthy nonagenarian, the emeritus chief executive officer of a firm he had founded. During the 1970s his company called together the employees, as it did for an annual "meet the ex-CEO" ceremony. The patriarch, addressing them, waxed eloquent about how prosperous and good "the eighties" would be. He was speaking after the oil crisis of the mid-decade was poisoning prospects for such a future. One young middle manager who had not been briefed that one should not ask questions asked a question. How did the senior man "know" that "the eighties" would be good? The answer came with a smile and a sweep of the hands: "They were *last time!*"

People are historians when they look at the record of athletic teams in order to invest their hopes or their funds for wagering. Not all learn: Chicagoans, for instance, foolishly build up hopes for their Cubs and White Sox even though nothing in the record suggests reasons for such hopes. People are historians when they look at the performance of companies and at events in the careers of these firms in order to determine whether or not to buy stocks in such corporations.

In intimate personal life we are historians; we live by story. If religious communities are built on story, so are individual lives—for example, in the miniature community called coupling or marrying. Picture young lovers getting acquainted. One gives no hope for a romance built upon conversations like those which would follow these questions: "What are the ten principles by which you love?" or "What is your formal philosophy of life" No, the two ask each other to tell their stories, to be historians. "Have you been in love before? Were you abused? Have you been divorced? Where did you travel? Would you tell me about your parents and how you were brought up? Did you have an adolescent crisis? Do you want to hear my story?"

Life is not only lived one-on-one, or by one's self: we are social beings, born in and destined for some sort of social, communal, and

corporate existence. And here story, and history, come in in even more suggestive ways. We have no access to a past beyond our own memory unless someone has taken pains to tell or write stories about it, to make it this accessible. Most of this can belong to antiquarians and professional historians, archivists and pack rats. We seek access to that which historians have tended at particular moments in society. G. J. Renier points out when: when we have to “stop to think.” Stopping to think is an important communal act when a nation, a church, any social group has to calculate and assess prospects.

Through reflection on artifacts, traces, group memory, people find out who they are. John Steinbeck’s “Okies,” dirt-poor Oklahoma farmers in time of drouth and depression, had to go to California, their promised land. They crammed into dilapidated cars and trucks. When someone said there was no room for old hats, china dogs, letters, and other keepsakes, they knew “how the past would cry to them in the coming days. . . . ‘How will we know it’s us without our past?’” and insist on taking them along.⁵

With identity comes power. Milan Kundera quotes the historian Milan Hubl to show what Middle European tyrants and totalitarians knew and know: “The first step in liquidating a people is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. . . . Before long the nation will forget what it is, and what it was,” and it can easily be exploited.⁶

We are ready for our text. Abraham Lincoln once said, “If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it.”⁷ And knowing “where we are,” by now it should be clear, depends upon where we have been, upon our past and our knowledge of the past, upon history and tradition. It is our present duty and delight to connect all this now with

5. John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Heineman, 1939), 43. This reference and others to the value of the past and to the limits of its use receive expansive treatment in David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

6. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 159–64.

7. Abraham Lincoln, “House Divided Speech,” Springfield, Illinois, 16 June 1858.

religious history and the present condition and prospect of religious communities, of *religion*.

Religious communities are not made up of antique collectors. For instance, the Christian church is not a memorial society; theologian Jürgen Moltmann, speaking of faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, says that the church is not a “keeper of the city of the dead.” While tradition keeps it healthy, when it loves tradition it is not a community of traditionalists. (Jaroslav Pelikan, Yale’s historian of Christian teaching, says that tradition is the living faith of dead people while traditionalism is the dead faith of living people.) It lives by stories. These can engender doctrines. Interpreting them requires the development of and use of philosophy. Yet one would not through doctrine or philosophy have come to the detail of the narratives which engendered Jewish, Christian, and later believing communities dependent upon them.

I will illustrate this after reminding others what I remind myself: technically, forms of devotion to “story” and to “history” are not quite the same thing. History has a storylike character, but not all story is what we usually mean by history. But for present purposes we can conflate the two. Now to illustrate:

Dan Jacobson, a South Africa–born London novelist, has written *The Story of the Stories: The Chosen People and Its God*.⁸ Jacobson does not believe in the God of Israel. He thinks of this God as a projection, an illusion, an invention to fill social needs; one can find strong hints of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Emile Durkheim in this view. But Jacobson yields to none in his admiration for the way the story of this God’s dealings has produced and affected Jewish history. Jacobson writes about how this God chose Israel and covenanted with the nation. This was a moral God, whose judgments were to fall on Egypt and Assyria. But the novelty in the present case was that this was not a mere tribal deity; Yahweh’s judgments fell most strongly on the chosen and covenanted people.

8. Dan Jacobson, *The Story of the Stories: The Chosen People and Its God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).

Out of this awareness of moral claims and responsibility came power for the people identified with Yahweh.

To be bald about it . . . , historically speaking: the societies that developed along the banks of great rivers like the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates were bound to be more powerful and hence more expansive than any that managed to perch itself among the rocky hillsides and exiguous valleys of Judea and Samaria. The rest—the “facts” of conquest and enslavement—duly followed.

Only, the Hebrews had a story to tell, their conquerors did not. That was the sole advantage they had over them. And what an advantage that has turned out to be, all said and done.⁹

Whether or not today’s Jews believe in the God of Israel—some do, some don’t—the story or history still gives identity and power to the community. The story of the birth of Israel and of the Holocaust are the great positive and negative new chapters in the story. Philosopher Emil Fackenheim is being an historian and drawing on history when he says that to the received Jewish laws there must now be added one more: that no Jew dare participate in circumstances which make another Hitler possible. When Jews celebrate Passover or any of their other feasts, they are expressing who they are in the light of story, of history.

Christians similarly live by story. They see God’s activity in the events, words, works, circumstances, and effects of Jesus Christ and tell the story of his death and resurrection as constitutive of the faith that forms their community. Some traditions, such as the Catholic, extend the sense of story through the ages. Liberal Baptist theologian Harvey Cox showed how wide the concepts of unfolding tradition, story, and history are when he said that, in many respects, the Bible is an unfinished plot—and “we’re in it.” But even the Restorationist and Primitive communities—such as the Church of Christ, which repudiates intervening Christian history—live off the original genera-

9. Jacobson, *Story of the Stories*, 126–27.

tion of Christianity and its story. Christians engage in activity, healing, works of justice and mercy, worship and adoration, always as an event-centered community; they draw upon the past to know “where [they] are, and whither [they] are tending,” so that they might know “what to do, and how to do it.”

One cannot speak or write under “Tanner–McMurrin” auspices without being aware of the environment in which the lectureship was sponsored: on soil where the Latter-day Saints acted upon the basis of their history, their story. Mormons have not made much of doctrine, of theology: they especially live as chosen and covenanted people in part of a developing history. Much is at stake when the story is threatened, as it potentially could have been when forged documents concerning Mormon origins agitated the community and led to tragedy a few years ago.

I had an occasion to address the crucial role of history in Mormonism in an earlier lecture, happily and coincidentally sponsored by Obert C. and Grace A. Tanner. There I mentioned that “from the beginning this faith was always characterized by its thoroughly historical mode and mold,” and that I saw it as “historically classical” in its tradition. When Latter-day Saints argue, they argue about morals based on history, or about historical events and their meaning—and about how the contemporary community acquires its identity and its sense of “what to do, and how to do it” from the assessment of the character, quality, content, and impetus of that story.¹⁰

One could visit believing community after community for examples. What Shiite Islam is working out in Iran has to do with interpretations of Muslim history that go back more than a thousand years. Yet people live by and die for or because of that history today: “what to do, and how to do it” derive from the believers’ sense of “where [they] are, and whither [they] are tending” in respect to early Muslim history. Fundamentalists may not like the dynamism and flow of history, but they find their fundamentals in the past. Thus in American Protestantism, the history of the creation of the world in the Bible, as

10. Martin E. Marty, “Two Integrities: An Address to the Crisis in Mormon Historiography,” *Journal of Mormon History* 10 (1983): 3–4.

opposed to scientific theoretical and empirical accounts; the “literal” reading of the New Testament stories; the “literal” expectation of the fulfillment of history in Jesus’ second coming—all these point to the separate roles of story and history.

Dynamic and fluid interpretations motivate revolutions inspired by religious communities. Thus the black civil rights movement was a development of the stories of Sinai and the promised land, of American slavery and liberation, of suffering and triumph, of evil surroundings and potential virtue in the activities of the black community and its allies. The “women’s movement” in religion involves a disinterring of old texts and meanings, a re-visioning of the Jewish and Christian stories apart from the patriarchy which pervades so many of the accounts of events. It is hard to picture getting a spiritual revolution going without reverting to the story, the history, of the community: how else does one identify oppressor and oppressed and give moral legitimacy to the attempt by the latter to inconvenience, change, overthrow, or replace the former, in the name of God? Conversely: do not worry, over the long pull, about people who try to change the world without “story.” They may project utopia, but getting from here to there demands attention to event and events. People are relatively powerless if they lack identity, plan, or plot as grounded in history.

Not to know history can be inconveniencing for those who deal with people who live by story. The Jews who moved by story in founding Israel created new circumstances in the Middle East. Shiite and Sunni Muslim fundamentalists, acting on their stories, jostle their neighbors and may create terrorist circumstances for nations like the United States, which live by other stories. Not to know the history of Buddhism was expensive during the United States’ venture in Vietnam. To try to deal with conflict in Northern Ireland, or even to know on which side of a street to walk, it is necessary to know long histories associated with people called “Protestant” and “Catholic.” To deal with the assertive *Southern* Baptist Convention, in the South or in the North, it is advisable to become aware of what it meant for this convention to be in Dixie before it was in the Sunbelt, to have roots in

the Old South, roots which color the Baptist appropriation of a story which happened on the east end of the Mediterranean millennia ago.

To be attentive to story does not mean that one cannot change the course of a community. Indeed, one studies the story precisely to participate in such change. The nineteenth-century giants of Christian church history—F. C. Baur, Adolf Harnack, Ernst Troeltsch—patented or lived by the notion that “one studies history in order to overcome history,” to intervene in history, to act and produce change. Adolf Harnack thought that early Christianity had suffered from “acute Hellenization,” so he had to tell the story of how and why that was true in order to help it overcome what he thought was a Hellenic blight.

Now we can begin to see why Abraham Lincoln speaks to this issue. In many ways, Abraham Lincoln was and is the theologian of the American experience. He took the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, fused them, and made of this fusion what he called his “political religion.” He treated the story with language which drew upon biblical cadence and reached the hearts of the populace. He didn’t say “eighty-seven years ago” but “fourscore and seven years ago” in his effort to sacralize the history, to render it formal and ready for ritual, in the dedication of Gettysburg cemetery. His intent was to mobilize a people to complete a set of necessary heroic and sacrificial activities which would extend the story of the fallen. He spoke of the “mystic cords of memory” that bound the people. If Lincoln saw a misuse of the sacred story, he reminded both sides in the Civil War that they used the same story, read the same Bible, prayed to the same God, claimed that this God was on their side. In the name of transcendent justice, he would then remind them that the Almighty has his own purposes, that the people should seek to discern this God’s mysterious will and follow it, aware that they could not claim God as they acted out his story.¹¹

Not all the history moves a religious community the same way. There are decisive, shaping acts, and there are many passing, trivial,

11. See William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959); and Glen E. Thurow, *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1976).

forgettable, and not even potentially relevant happenings. Here a community may reach for more remote elements in its history to reform the present. Thus history can be a corrector of nostalgia, since one does not reform very creatively on the basis of temporal homesickness. C. S. Lewis somewhere said that if you do not know history, you are likely to be a victim of recent bad history. Former president Ronald Reagan, for instance, evoked images of an America which had settled everything in its own settled way. He conjured pictures of Norman Rockwell's simple world, with the tower of the white church and the door of the red schoolhouse beckoning people to ordered existence in village America. His portrait had little to do with the America which was, and anyone acting upon his vision of the past would find, upon visiting it in reliable histories, that, like Gertrude Stein's Oakland, California, "when you get there, there's no *there* there." There was no such "there." The twenties and thirties of this century saw American religion in a state of conflict, as its participants contended over valid issues.

Behind them were also richer, longer histories. Nostalgia is the rust of memory, not the steel itself. It represents the 1940s through the Andrews Sisters but does not mention World War II, the 1930s with "The Music Goes Round and Round" but not with the Depression, the trivial without the suffering or the heroic. It is the root and depth of a tradition that does most to determine identities, to give a sense of "where we are, and whither we are tending." So Jews turn to Moses, Christians to Jesus, Mormons to Joseph Smith, Shiites to earliest Muslims for direction and liberation.

Why turn to the beginning of a tradition? Common sense says that all traditions are radical in their beginning. They may have appropriated from earlier traditions, other faiths: thus Christianity took over the Jewish canon, just as Mormons take over a Jewish-Christian canon. Each taking over alters what another community had made of a story, but the appropriators need the earlier story as they add new interpretations and events. The moment of appropriation: the call of a prophet, the self-awareness and claims of a messiah, the declaration of a new epoch; such a moment starts a new tradition, alters history, and

is the perpetual spring behind the source of a dynamic as opposed to a stagnant tradition in community.

Awareness of the radicalness of the origins and past decisive events gives potential power to those who would suggest new things to do and new ways to do them. Max Weber has said that there are essentially two ways for leaders to deal with traditions of story, especially when there are texts. The one kind, the charismatic or messianic, says, "It is written, but I say unto you." More normally, but with great potential, the leaders he calls "virtuosos" of a tradition, knowers and tellers of a story who call a community to live by it, deal differently with the history in the old texts. They say, "It is written—and I insist!"

Martin Luther King did precisely that with the sacred history of Lincoln's "political religion" and the sacred history of biblical religion in America. His charisma was lost on southern sheriffs. But he knew that in two hundred million minds there was some sense of responsibility to the Declaration and Constitution, and in almost as many was a sense of a stewardship of and responsiveness to the biblical tradition of justice, righteousness, and community. So he would first cite Jefferson or Madison, if not always by name; then he would refer to Isaiah or the Gospels. In effect King used history when he said something like, "It is written—and I insist." In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King almost gave up on his contemporary coreligionists in Alabama. He speculated: perhaps, if they did not live up to what the texts insisted, he would have to find a new community of the spirit as his base. Yet he never went hunting for such a community, nor did he build one. He was politically astute and artistically aware of the role of the existing story on which he drew for power to effect change. He told the American people where they were and whither they were tending by telling the story of slavery and freedom against a republican and biblical background, and that, as Dan Jacobson would say, was his and his people's (certainly effective albeit temporary) advantage.

If a long story, history, or tradition is vivifying because it was radical at root, and if it can become a lever for change by those who insist on it, there is a third reason for noting the value of the record. It provides a larger repository of options than would otherwise be available.

Let me illustrate. The Second Vatican Council fathers showed an awareness that they inherited a dying Christendom too devoted to tall towers, fortress and cathedral walls, pretension, triumphalism, and images to go with them all. The church as the Mystical Body was too mystical, not sufficiently embodying. The bishops did not invent new symbols, images, or models: they would have been eccentric, of little effect. They had to draw upon what was latent in the historical record. Thus they came up with motifs such as “the church as the people of God,” or the “servant church” in a world that needs service, or “the pilgrim church” for a church that was and had to be on the move inside modernity. Even the language of utopia has to draw upon the recognizable, so it rearranges pre-scriptions and prescriptions from longer pasts.

Fourth, believing communities use history for self-liberation. Historians of religious communities—and they may take the form of preachers, teachers, reformers—learn to teach their contemporaries that “there were no good old days.” What were presumed to be golden ages were, to those who lived in them, full not of things golden but of yellowness. One of my editors showed a good historical sense whenever he would get a letter saying, “Your magazine is not as good as it used to be.” He would answer: “You are right, and it never was.”

It is liberating to gain that insight in order to acquire energies for today’s tasks in religion. It also provides perspective on troubled institutions. In American religion, for instance, most of what is in trauma or tension is an invention from the 1740s to the 1840s. The denomination, ecumenism, mission movement, Sunday school, voluntary association—in every case an agency of promise in the midst of its perils—were born as creative responses to constitutional republicanism, the separation of church and state, early industrialism, and frontier existence. If the ecology surrounding the faith communities has changed, it may be that historical insight can suggest that believers need not go to the end in sacrifice for the sake of the temporal inventions of the mid-eighteenth through mid-nineteenth centuries. It may be that their God has in mind new creations and calls for fresh use of imagination.

How does a community go about effecting change in the light of its story? I will point to four outlining elements in the approach.

First, there must be what is here implied, a cherishing of stories. We have implied enough about how lovers, nations, and believing communities ritualize their histories. But the historian, novelist, storyteller, teacher all must conspire to find refreshing ways to treat the history which so often inspires apathy or rejection when it comes in dull packages and treatments.

After this, the community uses history for the sake of informing itself. Each set of believers has certain landmarks, certain established paths, outlines, pathfinders' marks, limits, specifiable dreams. Not to know one's way around these may inspire creative naïveté, but it may also lead to the necessity for a constant reinvention of the wheel. Awareness of what shaped a community seems to take time, but in the end it saves time.

Third, there must be a constant projection, a *pro*-jecting. That is, stories and impulses from the past get thrown up against some sort of screen called the future. Merely to tell the story may produce art for art's sake, story for story's sake. But a community which would help assure a future for itself must make space for itself through faithfulness to its story and through imagination as to how to use it.

This means, fourth, an understanding of the ways the primal stories are to be understood. Paul Ricoeur has given voice through his career to a classification he may share with many. Someone—a teacher, prophet, class leader, or preacher—confronts a community with a text from its history. They may respond by wanting to learn all they can about the world *behind* that text. That is what historians do: they account for something by seeing what preceded it. But the world behind the text is not our world. Second, they may do what literary critics do: they study the world *of* the text. It is important to know whether one deals with a letter of a poem, a parable or a psalm, a law or a description. But people do not live by genre alone.

Ricoeur therefore posits another use of story, history, text: one learns the world *in front of* the text. That is, a creative use of a text in today's world projects a future. It suggests ways of life, modes of being,

styles of thinking which would otherwise not occur to one. That is, it beckons for trust and a spirit of adventure.

Out of such understandings come various systems and philosophies. One can be a Jewish Platonist or Aristotelian, a Christian language analyst or metaphysician. Philosophy clarifies the language and addresses the background and meaning of story in a believing community. For example, in the Christian case, philosophy may bring one to an understanding of an ironic view of history. Reinhold Niebuhr liked to show that the God who sits in the heavens shall laugh (Psalm 2:4) when pretentious rulers conspire. Yet that understanding does not mean that history is without purpose and action without effect, that mortals are fools and hindsight teaches cynicism. No, the same texts show that this God is “humanely” involved with human history, that this God has called and calls later believers into spheres of responsible activity.

This “humane irony” allows for understanding of the past and the present shape of the community in ways that encourage people to live with ambiguity, paradox, and incongruity. They know they live in a world of limits, of finitude and contingency and transience. But their story, while showing them limits, also helps them endure and aspire to fresh creation. History is a great enemy of fanaticism, but it need not deprive those aware of it of resolve, ambition, or courage.

One sees a role for history in the social activities and pronouncements of religious bodies. Simply uttering ideology, trumpeting doctrine, or issuing commands turns out to be ineffective in free societies, where believers have choice. Social pronouncements based on story suggest “what to do, and how to do it” after reviewing the complicity of the bystander with the oppressor, the terms by which enslavements and deprivations occur, the heroism and saintliness or at least worthwhileness of the lives of those who in the past did something about, say, homelessness, exile, or hunger.

In the American scene there can be specific applications to interpretations. I put energies into showing how and why it is that, in today’s religion, it often occurs that “the committed people are not civil and the civil are not committed.” We study how sects can contribute to

revitalization of a republic but cannot truly be republican because they do not allow for the integrity of communities other than their own. We study what has happened with the rise of confusing pluralism. Once WASP males “ran the show,” centered and interpreted the culture. All others— women, Catholics, blacks, Jews—at least knew what they rebelled against when they rebelled. Was it so good back then? Would we be as well off as ideologues suggest when they want to legislate that America is a Christian or Judeo-Christian nation? We recall from historical records that in the years of most churchly homogeneity—in respect to the authority and truth of the Bible, the value of Protestantism, the moral law, the Christian story applied—the Civil War sundered the faith community. Maybe the story of pluralism will bring assets to a troubled nation.

In respect to the larger world, the historian helps relate the story of one community to another. It is not likely—of course, it is not biblically promised—that the whole world will turn Jewish or Christian. Believers have to relate to other communities which they cannot convert or subvert. Thomas Mann has said that the world has many centers; there is not likely to be but one. So we learn of the Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu, and other peoples through their stories: of their gods, their rituals, their beliefs, their experiences. Thus it is possible to draw closer to others without experiencing the loss of one’s own identity.

I have not listed the ability to predict among the virtues that come with an historical sense or knowledge in a believing community. History does not help assure outcomes to predictions. The best one can do on the basis of story is to point to paths taken and not taken, and then let the community choose in the light of the record. Still, surprise usually confounds the confident futurists.

Those who have heard or read this lecture and essay have no call to become professional historians if they were not already on the trajectories of historical professions. Those who would live by storytelling, keeping records, or interpreting histories cannot be kept away from fulfilling the desires and needs in their history, any more than a “born musician” can be kept from music if choices are free. But there may be an oversupply of academic historians; the positions are limited. We

are speaking of the ways in which nonprofessionals live by story, profit from historical work, and provide action out of which raw material for new stories can come.

The future remains horizontal, which means visible as a presence but utterly unknowable in detail. It is the scene in which actors, communities, and agents must know “what to do, and how to do it.” They act, not knowing the full consequences of their acts. But they act on the basis of awareness of who they are, of past actions, of what they can get from story, from history. They add to the story and thus provide grist for interpretation by the philosophers, or the writing of new chapters by later historians. That, at least, is where I think we are, and whither we are tending.