

Mormonism and the Idea of Progress

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Introduction

Robert Nisbet defines the *idea of progress* as the notion that mankind has advanced in the past, from barbarism and ignorance, is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future.¹ It is arguably the central motivating philosophy that has led men and women throughout history to forge ahead to a brighter future.

The idea of progress is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian thought. Most non-Christian ancient religions believed in an endless course of recurrent cycles. In Babylonian cosmology, a Great Year was thought to 424,000 years, after which the universe repeats.² Even Plato's cosmology was cyclic, with a periodic destruction and recreation of the world.³ The Jewish religion, in contrast, taught what is now termed "linear" or "progressive" history: the world had a starting point in the past, and we can look forward to a future epoch when the misfortunes, injustices and evil of this world will be set right. This can be seen in the Old Testament account of the creation of the earth; in the promise to Abraham that his seed would prosper; in the account of Moses and the children of Israel migrating from Egypt to the promised land; and finally, in their anticipation of the Messiah who would reign in glory. Christianity further developed this tradition of progressive history by identifying Christ as the Messiah, by naming his advent as the "meridian of time," by teaching a higher law that superseded the Law of Moses, by predicting a future second coming of Christ, and by describing a heaven where the righteous dead will be resurrected.⁴ Later Christian theologians correctly observed that this philosophy rules out the notion of eternal recurrence.⁵

Closely connected with this concept of linear, progressive history is the Judeo-Christian belief that God governs the world based on a system of rational laws. The Biblical account of the creation, for example, can be read as the creation of order out of chaos.⁶ Faith in the rationality of God is also emphasized in books such as Job, which eloquently teaches that ultimately everything will be righted, in spite of the many tragedies and hardships in life. While we may not fully understand God's system of justice and order at the present time, we have faith that at some future epoch it will become clear.⁷

¹ Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, (New York: Basic Books, 1980; reprinted by Transaction Publishers, Piscataway, New Jersey, 1993): 4-5.

² Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, (Princeton University Press, 1971): 115.

³ Benjamin Jowett (trans.), "The Dialogues of Plato," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 7, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952): 451.

⁴ Eliade, 102-130, 141-147.

⁵ Marcus Dods (trans.), "The City of God," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952): 350.

⁶ Ian G. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997): 199-204.

⁷ John F. Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1995): 22-25.

The Idea of Progress in the Modern Era

The Judeo-Christian expectation of a progressively brighter and more rational future has had impact far beyond the world of religion. British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead noted that modern science, as it developed in the West, was based on the “faith that at the base of things we shall not find mere arbitrary mystery. ... When we compare this tone of thought in Europe with the attitude of other civilisations when left to themselves, there seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God.”⁸

Faith in human progress and the rationality of God sustained scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and Newton. Even though their revolutionary system was at odds with the Ptolemaic cosmology assumed in the Bible and taught since antiquity, they recognized that it constituted a more beautiful and rational framework for the physical world. The Catholic Church resisted these developments for many years, but eventually acknowledged them as part of the Christian tradition of progress.⁹ Many Protestant writers also embraced the idea of progress. Calvin, for example, taught that before Christ’s second coming, religious knowledge and knowledge of secular arts and sciences would spread throughout the world.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, unsettling discoveries in astronomy and biology, notably Darwin’s theory of evolution, brought new challenges, but most theologians were able to accommodate these developments. In the early twentieth century, French theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin argued that human progress was inexorable, virtually mandated by the laws of the universe. He further saw the idea of progress as the one theme that could re-unify science and religion: “To incorporate the progress of the world in our picture of the kingdom of God ... would immediately and radically put an end to the internal conflict from which we are suffering.”¹¹

But by the mid-twentieth-century, progressives such as Teilhard became a minority voice. Even in the nineteenth century, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche revived the ancient doctrine of eternal recurrence, and disparaged the notion of progress: “Mankind does not represent a development toward something better or stronger or higher in the sense today. ‘Progress’ is merely a modern idea, that is, a false idea.”¹² Kaufmann noted that the doctrine of eternal recurrence is “the antithesis of any faith in infinite progress, whether it be evolution, Faust’s unbounded striving, or the endless improvement of the human soul. ... It is the antithesis, too, of any faith in another world.”¹³

In the past few decades, it has become fashionable in academic circles to minimize or even deny the notion of human progress.¹⁴ In part, this is a reaction to the twentieth century’s grim legacy

⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, (New York: Macmillan, 1939): 17-19, 27.

⁹ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967): vol. 8, 542; vol. 7, 612.

¹⁰ Nisbet, 128.

¹¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Rene Hague (trans.), *Toward the Future*, (London: Collins, 1975): 96.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (New York: Penguin, 1978): 3-4.

¹³ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950): 321.

¹⁴ Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 1-16.

of two devastating world wars, Hitler's Jewish holocaust, Stalin's prison camps, Mao's cultural revolution and Pol Pot's killing fields. Another factor is the growing consciousness of mistakes in past centuries, such as African slavery, the conquest of native American peoples and the oppression of women. Such tragedies have led many thinkers to question the notion of human progress, as well as the concept of linear history. Even in the realm of science, where one would think that progress is indisputable, there have been numerous detractors. As astronomer Timothy Ferris notes, "The empirical spirit on which the Western democratic societies were founded is currently under attack, and not just by such traditional adversaries as religious fundamentalists and devotees of the occult. Serious scholars claim that there is no such thing as progress and assert that science is but a collection of opinions, as socially conditioned as the weathervane world of Paris couture."¹⁵

The Idea of Progress in LDS Thought

Mormonism, from its founding, promoted a unique version of the progressive philosophy of Judeo-Christian thought. A central tenet of Mormonism is modern revelation, which affirms that progress in religious knowledge continues forward just as in the secular world. This is most clearly stated in the ninth Article of Faith: "We believe in all that God has revealed, all that he does now reveal, and we believe he will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." This language is strikingly similar to the definition of the idea of progress as given by Nisbet: "Mankind has advanced in the past, ... is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future."¹⁶ Along this line, Joseph Smith taught that the Bible is not perfect and complete, as taught by some other denominations at the time, but contains translation errors, omissions and other defects, and, most importantly, it is but a stepping stone to future revelation. The *Book of Mormon*, followed by the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*, were brought forth as evidence that the heavens are not closed.

For centuries Christian theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, taught of an absolute and omnipotent God -- a Being who is unchanging, wholly beyond space and time, wholly beyond our comprehension, and who created the entire universe, including mankind, *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Although very early LDS discourse tended to affirm this traditional absolute concept of God,¹⁷ later teachings of Joseph Smith and others advanced a distinctly progressive theology. Joseph specifically denied creation *ex nihilo*, asserting instead that the basic elements, as well as the "intelligences" of human souls, are uncreated and eternal (and thus not contingent on God).¹⁸ Further, Joseph taught that God works in accord with natural laws, rather than by transcending them.¹⁹ Closely connected with these principles is the "law of eternal progression," namely that mortal life is but an interlude between a preparatory pre-mortal existence and an eternal post-mortal existence, where the righteous will advance in knowledge and glory without limit. Along

¹⁵ Timothy Ferris, *The Whole Shebang: A State-of-the-Universe(s) Report*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997): 13.

¹⁶ Nisbet, 4-5.

¹⁷ Joseph Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, LDS Church, 1835. Joseph Smith's authorship of the *Lectures* is questionable - more likely they were authored by Sidney Rigdon. See Leland H. Gentry, "What of the Lectures on Faith?" *BYU Studies* 19 (Fall 1978), 5-19.

¹⁸ D&C 93:33; D&C 93:29; Abr. 3:18.

¹⁹ *History of the Church*, vol. 4, 46 (Dec. 15, 1842).

this line, LDS scripture teaches, “whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection,” and “the more knowledge and intelligence one gains through diligence and obedience, the greater the advantage in the world to come.”²⁰ These ideas are most clearly stated in Joseph Smith’s King Follett discourse:

You have got to learn how to make yourselves Gods in order to save yourselves and be kings and priests to God, the same as all Gods have done -- by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, from a small degree to another, from grace to grace, until the resurrection of the dead, from exaltation to exaltation. ... Intelligence is eternal and exists upon a self-existent principle. It is a spirit from age to age and there is no creation about it. The first principles of man are self-existent with God. All the minds and spirits that God ever sent into the world are susceptible of enlargement and improvement. The relationship we have with God places us in a situation to advance in knowledge.²¹

After Joseph Smith’s death, subsequent LDS presidents and authorities further developed these unique doctrines of progress. Brigham Young asserted that the “first great principle,” the “main spring of all action,” is the “principle of improvement.”²² “We have the principle within us, and so has every being on this earth, to increase and to continue to increase, to enlarge and receive and treasure up truth, until we become perfect.”²³ “[W]hen we have lived millions of years in the presence of God and angels ... shall we then cease learning? No, or eternity ceases.”²⁴ He further declared that those who are consigned to the terrestrial and telestial kingdoms will eventually have the opportunity to advance to the celestial kingdom, provided they prove themselves worthy.²⁵ Brigham Young specifically dismissed the idea of an absolute, unchanging God,²⁶ and he went even further than Joseph Smith in embracing progress in the secular world: “Our religion measures, weighs and circumscribes all the wisdom in the world -- all that God has ever revealed to man. God has revealed all the truth that is now in the possession of the world, whether it be scientific or religious.”²⁷

Brigham Young was hardly alone in teaching progressive theology during this period. George Q. Cannon taught that mankind will have the opportunity of “progressing from one degree of glory to another, without end, because there is no end to eternity.”²⁸ Wilford Woodruff declared, “If there was a point where man in his progression could not proceed any further, the very idea would throw a gloom over every intelligent and reflecting mind. God himself is still increasing and progressing in knowledge, power and dominion, and will do so world without end.”²⁹ In

²⁰ D&C 130:18-19.

²¹ Stan Larson, “The King Follett Discourse: A Newly Amalgamated Text,” *Brigham Young University Studies*, vol. 18 (Winter 1978), 198-208.

²² *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 2, 91 (Feb. 6, 1853).

²³ *ibid*, vol. 5, 54 (Jul. 19, 1857).

²⁴ *ibid*, vol. 6, 344 (Jul. 31, 1859).

²⁵ D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Extensions of Power*, (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1997): vol. 2, 752.

²⁶ Herald R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, vol. 1-6, (SLC: Bookcraft, 1954): vol. 2, 214-223.

²⁷ *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 8, 162 (Sep. 2, 1860); see also vol. 9, 168 (Jan. 26, 1862).

²⁸ Quinn, vol. 2, 799-800.

²⁹ *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 6, 120 (Dec. 6, 1857).

general, nineteenth century LDS discourse tended to minimize, not maximize, the distance between God and mankind, and between God's world and this world.³⁰

In the early part of the twentieth century, James E. Talmage, while elaborating on the law of eternal progression in the original edition of his book *The Articles of Faith*, asserted that progression was possible after death not only within one kingdom of glory, but also between kingdoms.³¹ John A. Widtsoe was intrigued by Herbert Spencer's theory of evolutionary progress, which he equated with the doctrine of eternal progression.³² As Widtsoe explained, "Progress ... is a process of adding to that which we now possess, by the elimination of errors, by the actual accretion of new truth, and by the development of greater self-mastery. ... It is a steady approach to the likeness of God."³³ Widtsoe also taught that God was the organizer, not the creator, of the world, and that he is bound by laws.³⁴

Brigham H. Roberts, arguably Mormonism's greatest thinker, taught that "The world's best hope is the world's continued progress in knowledge of the truth."³⁵ While commenting on the impact of the restoration, he declared, "By those collateral rays of light men have been led to those great discoveries in the arts and sciences and in mechanics, which make our age so wonderful as an age of progress and enlightenment."³⁶ Roberts also elaborated on Mormonism's distinctive theology of God, asserting that God exists in time and space and is not absolutely omnipotent and omniscient, but instead is bound by certain fundamental laws, and increases in knowledge and glory. Roberts pointed out that this progressive concept of God avoids many of the pitfalls of traditional Christian theology.³⁷ Roberts was also an eloquent advocate for a progressive approach to science and religion, in the sense of championing, rather than battling, progress achieved in the scientific world. He wrote, "To pay attention to and give reasonable credence to [scientific] research is to link the church of God with the highest increase of human thought and effort."³⁸

³⁰ Eugene England, "Perfection and Progression: Two Complementary Ways to Talk about God," *BYU Studies*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Summer 1989), 31-45; Boyd Kirkland, "The Development of the Mormon Doctrine of God," in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, Gary J. Bergera, ed., Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 1989, 35-52; Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 1965, 1-13; Kent E. Robson, "Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience in Mormon Theology," in *Line Upon Line: Essays on Mormon Doctrine*, Gary J. Bergera, ed., 67-75.

³¹ James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, (SLC: LDS Church, first edition, 1901): 421; Thomas G. Alexander, "The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine: From Joseph Smith to Progressive Theology," *Sunstone*, vol. 5, no. 4 (July 1980), pg. 24-33.

³² John A. Widtsoe, *A Rational Theology as Taught by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, (SLC: General Priesthood Committee, Salt Lake City, 1915): 20-22; Alexander, 29.

³³ John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, (SLC: Bookcraft, 1943): 179.

³⁴ Widtsoe 1915, 20-22; Alexander, 29.

³⁵ Brigham H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. Stan Larson, (1931, SLC: Smith Research Associates, 1994): 16; also published as B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, the Way, the Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch (1931, reprint Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), 318.

³⁶ *Conference Report*, (SLC: LDS Church), Oct. 1903, 73.

³⁷ Brigham H. Roberts, *The Mormon Doctrine of Deity*, (1903, republished by Horizon Publishers, Bountiful, Utah, 1982): 95-114.

³⁸ Roberts 1984, 364.

More recently, Hugh B. Brown wrote, “We should be in the forefront of learning in all fields, for revelation does not come only through the prophet of God nor only directly from heaven in visions or dreams. Revelation may come in the laboratory, out of the test tube, out of the thinking mind and the inquiring soul, out of search and research and prayer and inspiration.”³⁹ In discussing Darwin’s “beautiful” theory of evolution, David O. McKay argued that the theory of evolution can be seen in a positive light, as suggesting that mankind is destined to progress towards eternal life: “Why should man come so far if he is destined to go no farther? A creature which has traveled such distances and fought such battles and won such victories deserves, one is compelled to say, to conquer death and rob the grave of its victory.”⁴⁰

Misgivings about Progress

But as in the secular world, there appears to have been a retreat from this progressive philosophy in the LDS Church during the second half of the twentieth century. This is most clearly seen in Bruce R. McConkie’s influential work *Mormon Doctrine*, where God is described as omnipotent and omniscient, without qualification.⁴¹ He also tended to dismiss modern scientific progress, endorsing instead the literalist views of Joseph Fielding Smith in this arena. Elaborating on his views in a 1980 speech, McConkie described as “heresies” the notion that God progresses in knowledge, the possibility of progression between kingdoms in the world to come, and the scientific theory of evolution.⁴²

Although David O. McKay often praised the world’s secular and technological progress, he raised concern in other areas: “Man is making great progress in science and invention, greater perhaps than ever before, but he is not making comparable progress in character and spirituality.”⁴³ He noted the growing cost of crime, and criticized increasing sexual permissiveness, which he warned could destroy society.⁴⁴ He associated these trends with an increasing irrelevance of religion in daily life, a consequence of decline in church attendance and a collapse of Christian moral standards.⁴⁵

Numerous other general authorities voiced warnings of decline in the ensuing years. Alvin R. Dyer decried the moral degradation of society.⁴⁶ Mark E. Petersen added, “The so-called sex revolution is destroying us.” He connected these regrettable developments to the “selfish element” in the world that no longer believes in God.⁴⁷ Ezra Taft Benson linked this erosion of morality to economic decline, together with concerns that the U.S. and other western nations were

³⁹ Hugh B. Brown, “A Final Testimony,” from Edward L. Kimball, *An Abundant Life: The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown*, (SLC: Signature Books, 1988): 139.

⁴⁰ David O. McKay, “A Message for LDS College Youth,” (Provo, UT: BYU Extension Publications), Oct. 8, 1952, 6-7. See also *Conference Report*, Apr. 1968, 92. The passage cited in the text above was quoted from Raymond West (no source given).

⁴¹ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, (SLC: Bookcraft, 1966): 544-545.

⁴² Bruce R. McConkie, “The Seven Deadly Heresies,” talk at BYU on June 1, 1980, transcript in author’s possession.

⁴³ *Conference Report*, Oct. 1963, 89; Apr. 1968, 91; Apr. 1953, 14.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, Apr. 1966, 106.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, Oct. 1946, 112.

⁴⁶ *Conference Report*, Apr. 1964, 75.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, Apr. 1969, 62-64.

drifting towards socialism and communism.⁴⁸ On another occasion he cited juvenile delinquency, pornography, narcotics and crime, and then tied these to U.S. political problems, such as federal budget deficits, welfare and inflation.⁴⁹ Howard W. Hunter questioned whether “spiraling progress” is good for society: “What of the future of the family and home life, which in past generations have been great stabilizing forces in society? What of the solidarity of community and national life? What of the future of our economy, as the consequence of inflation and increased debt? What of the modern course of deterioration of morality and its effect upon individuals, families, nations, and the world?”⁵⁰

The Present Situation

At present there appears to be an ambivalent approach towards the idea of progress in LDS thought. On one hand, there is some moderation in the stream of rhetoric bemoaning the decline of modern society. For example, Gordon B. Hinckley, the current president, recently declared, “But in a larger sense this has been the best of all centuries. In the long history of the earth there has been nothing like it. The life expectancy of man has been extended by more than 25 years. Think of it. It is a miracle. The fruits of science have been manifest everywhere. By and large, we live longer, we live better. This is an age of greater understanding and knowledge. We live in a world of great diversity. As we learn more of one another, our appreciation grows. This has been an age of enlightenment. The miracles of modern medicine, of travel, of communication are almost beyond belief. All of this has opened new opportunities for us which we must grasp and use for the advancement of the Lord’s work.”⁵¹

But on a more basic doctrinal level, the retreat from the progressive doctrines of the early Church continues apace. O. Kendall White has given the name “Mormon neo-orthodoxy” to this new emphasis on absolutism, literalism and fundamentalism.⁵²

Two recently published books by BYU religion scholars illustrate this trend. In *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, BYU religion professor Steven E. Robinson declares, “There is not a word of the Bible that I do not personally accept and believe.”⁵³ He extends this view to the whole Church: “there is not a single verse of the Bible that Latter-day Saints do not accept,” and “We take the Scriptures to be literally true, and we hold symbolic, figurative or allegorical interpretation to a minimum, accepting the miraculous events as historical and the moral and ethical teaching as binding and valid.”⁵⁴ Robinson’s book makes virtually no mention of well-known limitations of Biblical scripture, even those that are well-known to

⁴⁸ *ibid*, Apr. 1957, 54.

⁴⁹ *ibid*, Apr. 1968, 50-51.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, Oct. 1970, 129.

⁵¹ *ibid*, Apr. 1999.

⁵² O. Kendall White, *Mormon Neo-Orthodoxy: A Crisis Theology*, (SLC: Signature Books, 1987).

⁵³ Craig L. Blomberg, Stephen E. Robinson, *How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997): 59, 72.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 20, 55.

many Latter-day Saints. His position is clearly in the same spirit as a recent statement by Christian evangelical groups affirming the inerrancy of the Bible.⁵⁵

Equally problematic is Robinson's treatment of the LDS doctrine of God. He affirms, without any reservation or qualification, that "God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, infinite, eternal and unchangeable."⁵⁶ He acknowledges some early LDS teachings that man can become as gods, and that God was once man, but he dismisses them as from "non-canonical" sources. He repeatedly emphasizes that Mormons do not believe in "a limited god, a finite God, a changeable god, a God who is not from everlasting to everlasting, who is not omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent."⁵⁷

Another interesting recent book is *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* by BYU religion professor Joseph Fielding McConkie. Here are some excerpts:

God is not subservient to the laws of the physical universe. ... The laws that govern in the celestial realm are far beyond those known to us in this temporal, telestial state in which we find ourselves.⁵⁸

Question: Is the theory of evolution compatible with the doctrine of the Fall? Answer: No. We can tug, twist, contort, and sell our birthright, but we cannot overcome the irreconcilable differences between the theory of organic evolution and the doctrine of the Fall. ... Evolution is the notion that lower forms of life can, through the course of generations, genetically improve themselves. For that to happen, both birth and death would have to exist [before the Fall].⁵⁹

This world will know seven thousand years of temporal history. ... To argue for a longer time is to suggest ages for which God has forgotten to call for accountability.⁶⁰

Question: Did God discover law, or is he the author of it? Answer: God is the author of law, not its creation or its servant. ... God is not a scientist. He does not harness law and then use it to bless and govern his creations.⁶¹

Many passages of scripture exalt learning [quotes D&C 93:36, D&C 131:6 and D&C 130:19]. Properly understood, such texts center our attention on things of the spirit rather than the intellect. It is not the learning of the classroom to which these passages of scripture refer but rather to those things that can only be learned in the service of others.⁶²

⁵⁵ "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1982, copy in author's possession.

⁵⁶ Blomberg and Robinson, 77.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 78.

⁵⁸ Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions*, (SLC: Deseret Book, 1998): 156.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 158-160.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, 165.

⁶¹ *ibid*, 166-167.

⁶² *ibid*, 170.

Question: Does the gospel embrace all truth? Answer: No. Innumerable truths have no bearing on that sacred body of truth we call the gospel. ... Similarly, any principle that does not require the Spirit of the Lord to teach can be taught as well by a faithless man as a learned, as well by students of faith as by those who are making no effort to accord their lives with the standards the Lord has set. Such a truth is not a gospel principle and will be of no value in the world to come.⁶³

Needless to say, these positions are at odds with the progressive doctrines of earlier LDS leaders. Yet given the popularity of these two books, it is clear that many, if not most, modern Latter-day Saints are comfortable with these views.

The End of Decline

As mentioned above, bemoaning the decline and degradation of modern society has become a common fare in both academic and LDS discourse. But tilting against the tide of human progress is a dangerous thing to do, since progress generally triumphs over decline. In this regard, it is interesting to note these recent developments:

1. There has been a dramatic decline in crime in the U.S. during the past decade.⁶⁴ Criminologists are at a loss to explain these declines, which have now continued for eight consecutive years (although rates now appear to be bottoming out). Further, the good news is not limited to the U.S. -- similar but less dramatic declines have been reported in Europe.⁶⁵
2. Rates of abortion and teenage pregnancy have declined recently in the U.S., now reaching the lowest levels since the federal government began to collect statistics in the 1970s. Teen sex is also declining from its peak in the early 1990s.⁶⁶ One factor behind these favorable developments is that young people (particularly young women) are brimming with ambition, due to improved education and an optimistic outlook for the future.⁶⁷
3. Drug use is declining, particularly the usage of dangerous drugs such as cocaine and heroin, and teenage attitudes towards drug use are becoming more disapproving.⁶⁸ Alcohol usage among young people is also declining -- the percentage of 12- to 17-year-olds in the U.S. using alcohol in the previous month dropped from 50% in 1979 to 20% in 1997. Among 18- to 25-year-olds, the rate fell from 75% to 60%.⁶⁹
4. Progress in scientific research continues unabated. Some recent highlights include the discovery of the "accelerating universe;" a rapidly growing catalog of human, animal and plant DNA sequences; dramatic advances in knowledge of the planets and moons in the solar system;

⁶³ *ibid*, 223.

⁶⁴ Michael J. Sniffen, "Report: Serious Crime Falls in 1999," *Washington Post*, Nov. 22, 1999.

⁶⁵ Ian Burrell, "Crime Rates Fall Fast, but Fear Still Grows," *Reuters News Agency*, Oct. 14, 1998.

⁶⁶ Randolph E. Schmid, "Teen Births Drop to Record Low," *Associated Press*, Apr. 17, 2001.

⁶⁷ Tamala M. Edwards, "The Opposite of Sex," *Time*, vol. 152, no. 2 (July 13, 1998), 39.

⁶⁸ Christopher S. Wren, "More Teenagers Disapprove of Drug Use, Survey Finds," *New York Times*, Nov. 22, 1999.

⁶⁹ Jeffrey Kluger, "How to Manage Teen Drinking," *Time*, June 18, 2001, 42.

brehtaking photographs of distant stars and galaxies; and the discovery of elegant fundamental physical laws governing the basic constituents of matter. In the medical arena, recent developments include promising breakthroughs in the treatment of cancer,⁷⁰ and the discovery of an agent that may retard aging.⁷¹ Even more exciting developments are expected in the years ahead.

5. A wave of new information technologies, notably the Internet, is providing people around the world with unprecedented access to educational, scientific, artistic and religious materials. These modern information technologies also serve to expose and inhibit the misdeeds of tyrants, seemingly in fulfillment of LDS scriptures that promise “their iniquities shall be spoken upon the housetops, and their secret acts shall be revealed.”⁷²

6. There is a widespread perception, both within the LDS Church and elsewhere, that church attendance and religious belief significantly declined during the twentieth century. But a recent study indicates that according to several specific measures, religiosity has not declined, but in fact is nearly the same as 50 or 100 years ago.⁷³ In fact, there are some indications of a revival in religious belief at the present time. A separate study of American research scientists (physicists, biologists and mathematicians) produced a similar result -- the percentage who believe in God today is not significantly different than in 1916.⁷⁴

I do not wish to imply that all is well with our society. In this day of unprecedented wealth, millions of people worldwide still live in hunger, and millions more needlessly die due to inadequate sanitation and health care. The success of the Internet is stained by fraud and hard-core pornography. A quality education is not available to a significant fraction of the younger generation, even in the U.S. Long-term environmental damage, including global warming and species extinction, are grave concerns. But unlike the deep pessimism that prevailed during the cold war era, there is a growing sense that these problems can be solved. The idea of progress is very much alive.

⁷⁰ Nicholas Wade, “Scientists View New Wave of Cancer Drugs,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2001.

⁷¹ Christine Gorman, “An Attack on Aging,” *Time*, vol. 151, no. 3 (Jan. 26, 1998), 35-36.

⁷² D&C 1:1-3.

⁷³ Andrew M. Greeley, *Religious Change in America*, (Harvard University Press, 1996), 14.

⁷⁴ “Poll: 40% of Scientists Believe in God: It Indicates Faith Coexists with Quest for Natural Law,” *New York Times*, Apr. 3, 1997, 7A.

Some Personal Thoughts on Progress

Charting the course of the LDS Church through the shoals of modernity has never been an easy task, and it is clear that it will be even more difficult in the future. Meeting these challenges will require prayerful consideration on the part of many in the Church. To that end I humbly offer these thoughts, recognizing that others may see things differently.

First of all, it must be recognized that many of the concerns that have been expressed through the years by various Church leaders regarding moral decline are well justified. For example, almost everyone in the Church today would agree that child abuse, pornography and media violence are causes for concern. Further, it must be acknowledged that some previously accepted notions in secular and scientific scholarship have been overturned by more recent research. Thus some degree of separation from modern society, as well as some measure of reserve towards modern secular and scientific scholarship, are entirely appropriate.

But if the Church only emphasizes the negative developments of society, and downplays or dismisses the positive, its message may fail to resonate in an era when progress is evident on many fronts. There is much that is “praiseworthy and of good report” in the world around us, and focusing only on the negative isolates the Church and discourages potential converts.

Secondly, if LDS discourse continues to drift away from its traditional concept of a progressing, co-existent God, and emphasizes instead the sectarian notion of an absolute and unchanging Being, beyond time and space, wholly beyond our comprehension, then LDS theology may lose much of its distinctive appeal. It is also likely to become ensnared in many of the philosophical difficulties that have afflicted traditional Christian theology for centuries.

Along this line, if the Church loses sight of its traditional notion of a God who works within the realm of natural law, it may lose its unique doctrinal foundation for finding harmony between science and religion. Do we believe in a capricious Magician who has placed evidence throughout the universe to mislead diligent seekers of truth? Or do we believe in an intelligent, rational God who is pleased when we discover the elegant laws by which the universe is governed? In any event, it is essential that we do not teach doctrinal views that are clearly at odds with well-established principles of modern scientific or secular scholarship. To do needlessly places many Latter-day Saints, especially college-age youth, in severe conflict with the intellectual world.

Some in the Church today dismiss modern secular and scientific scholarship as mistaken and irrelevant, claiming that the world to come will operate on completely different principles, which are beyond our present comprehension (see for example some of the quotes cited above). In addition to being unacceptable to many intellectually-minded Latter-day Saints, this philosophy has the difficulty that the Church’s teachings then appear to be of questionable relevance to those who seek solutions to the troubling challenges of this life. Mormonism has always been a practical religion, one as concerned about our welfare here and now as in the world to come, and this is one reason for its success. It thus seems unwise to adopt a highly other-worldly approach to doctrinal issues.

In a similar vein, if the possibility for progress in the world to come is discounted or downplayed in the Church, it may lead some who have faltered to lose hope. Hope for the future has always been a source of comfort and direction, both for those who have been able to meet the challenges of this life, and for those who have not. Maybe we should take the “law of eternal progression” more seriously.