COMMENT ON

THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF HISTORY

Michael L. Mickler
Unification Theological Seminary

Discussant Response to Hans-Martin Sass

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Professor Sass has responded to the chapter on history in Unification Thought by elaborating his own theoretical reflections on "The Meaning and Purpose of History." He (2) admits that his presentation relates "only briefly and in general" to Unification Thought and, in fact, invites participants to suggest specific points worth further exploring. In this response, I will summarize Professor Sass's basic ideas, engage them critically, and suggest, as he requests, some specific points worth exploration.

Paper Summary:

Professor Sass's paper divides into three major sections. In the first section, he argues for the significance of history and historical understanding. He asserts, for example, that "orientation in history is as much a basic need for us humans as "nutrition, information, and communication" (1). More than that, he maintains that the quest for meaning in history is a basic human right.

Stories and histories, according to Professor Sass, "form the map in which we orient ourselves" (3). Storytelling, thus, does "not just satisfy curiosity" but "has consequences." However, various kinds of stories and histories orient us differently,

> Fairy tales discover the mysteries of ontology, time and eternity, might, guilt and pain, desire, suffering and the Divine. Curricula vutae of individuals present official versions of personal and carrier history, while dreams and nightmares present the hidden story behind the surface. National history provides more of less sublime or differentiated forms of patriotic identification, similar to the hermeneutics of identification in church history, corporate history and philosophical forms of historiography, including the historiography of history. Even the history of academic philosophy is full of stories (3).

Orientational history, as Professor Sass undertands it, helps shape our worldview, communicates moral principles, and predetermines actions. He mentions four separate stories--one of the German philospher Lessing, one of Seattle, chief of the Duwamish Indians, one of an early industrialist John T. Etzler, and the "Unification story"--to illustrate the correlation between our concepts of history and distinctive behaviors.

The second section of Professor Sass's paper distinguishes between two fundamental historical orientations. In a section entitled, "Revolving Wheels and Revolutionary Marches," he contrasts natural history (the revolving wheel) with salvation history (the revolutionary march). Natural history, according to Professor Sass, "appreciates the eternal suprahuman powers of nature over mortal human beings" and offers "No word of improving moral actions and social relations by changing the rules, by destroying or manipulating the old and erecting the new" (6). It was only "relatively late" that Charles Darwin "changed the image of nature from the 'return of the same' to the 'survival of the fittest" (7). Such "revolutionary

forms of natural history," according to Professor Sass, "gave orientational support to racism, work ethics based capitalism, socio-Darwinism, genocide progroms, and forms of radical Islamic and Jewish prophetism" (7).

Salvation history, in contrast, always "calls for change, including change of the existing order" (7). However, "Change can occur in evolutionary or revolutionary terms" (7). Professor Sass is decidedly partial evolutionary mode, particularly as evidenced in Hegel's "concept of dialectical progress." He is skeptical of Augustine's "Manichean model" and positively contemptuous of Marxism-Leninism which he terms "the biggest and most immoral Human Experimentation of humans on their fellow humans, driven by secularized messianism" (7-8).

Salvation history becomes dysfunctional, according to Professor Sass, "When individuals identify themselves as the subjects of historical progress" (8) He suggests that if, with Hegel, individuals understood "some other agent behind the scenes to be the final force," they would be less radical, as "final responsibility" would not rest with them and "higher forces" might be responsible for failure (8). He also maintains that "If goals are in the other world, political radicalism in this world might be less dominant." However, "if the changes in this world are all what is needed, then soteriological historiography and its interpretation might result in incredibly radical actions" (8-9). Professor Sass, clearly, is more sympathetic to those theories of history which are socially adaptive than

to those which are revolutionary in orientation.

He develops these points further in a section on "Prophetic History and the Cunning of Reason." Prophetic history, which has its basis in subjective revelation, is a subset of salvation history. Highly suspicious of prophetic modes of engagement, Professor Sass waxes cautionary, even sermonic in his discussion of "false prophets" who promise "paradise on earth" but who in actuality "destroy the fabric of natural and cultural networks" (10). He writes with alarmist vigor of the necessity to recognize "false prophets" and to "fight them," a task which he understands to be especially pressing at this time. As he puts it,

> In a world becoming smaller and smaller, more interdependent in media communications, in the results of moral or immoral action, in cultural priorities, in commerce, and the promotion and application of science and technology, false prophets can have a much more devastating role than in former times. Given the shortage of genuine leaders and exemplary role models in the contemporary world, there is a hunger among people of all cultures and all ages ... for leadership by value and example. False prophets have a great chance to lead not only small sects, but entire populations and eventually 'all members of the human family' into temptation, into the establishment of the 'empire of evil' and subsequently into selfdestruction (11).

Identifying the false prophet, Professor Sass asserts, "can be done easily ... If they destroy the fabric of natural and cultural networks, such as family, neighborhood [and] basic human rights ... then these prophets are false prophets' (10). Additional criteria include their tendency to "sacrifice nature, the present, and values established in the course of cultural and moral history" (11-12).

The third section of Professor Sass's paper offers an

alternative to the radical scenarios presupposed by salvation and prophetic histories. Even "if people disagree about the true character of revelation and of absolute values," he suggests that they are "able to formulate and to implement objective values or mid level moral principles such as the right to privacy and the right to free speech and to disagree" (12). Citing Jesus' story of the Samaritan and the Neoplatonic doctrine of the "logos spermatikos" as support, he asserts that humankind can agree on essential mid-level principles, like "good neighborhood," even while upholding "different, even opposing sets of absolute values" (14). It is here, however, that the utilitarian component of Professor Sass's exposition become more apparent.

In applying these ideas to our historical understandings, he contends that "theories and meanings in history" ought to be judged "by their outcome for peace, love and the effect on nature and cultures, and not by their revelational or otherwise epistemological superiority over others" (14). He concludes by stating that we might "avoid misleading conclusions and ... protect ourselves ... against false prophets ... by improving our historical literacy, i.e., by studying the richness of different cultural heritages, by starting cross-cultural dialogues, and by improving overall our value literacy and value management competence" (15).

Response:

I will respond to each section of Professor Sass's

paper in turn. First, the significance of history and historical understanding. I must confess that although having completed my graduate study in this area, I had never before considered historical studies to be either a biological necessity or a natural right. Many of my acquaintances consider it to be their innate inclination and right not to study history. However, I have noticed that at both individual and collective levels, people (or peoples) deprived of their histories do not long survive. In this sense, I would concur with Professor Sass that historical self-understanding is integrally connected to our identity at the most primal levels.

I also agree with Professor Sass that one's concept of history has consequences in terms of shaping worldview, communicating morality and to some degree in predetermining actions, although I would not insist on as direct a link as he does. Sidestepping for a moment the frequently acrimonious debate between intellectual and social historians, it, nonetheless, seems obvious to me that one's sense of the past offers abundant resources for coping with present contingencies. This is certainly the position of Unification Thought.

Although I agree in the main with Professor Sass's perspective on the significance of history and historical understanding, there is one point at which we disagree. Professor Sass rightly acknowledges that "The stories we tell about our past and the dreams we dream about our future do not necessarily match the reality" (3). However, he

continues by asserting that "dreams of the future and the images we have created of our past are of much more significant nature than past 'reality' or future 'probability'" (3). To me, this is reminiscent of the assertion that it really doesn't matter whether this or that historical figure (usually Jesus) actually existed. In fact, it does matter. This may be a subjectivist-objectivist split. Nonetheless, it is here that the historian in me and the philosopher in Professor Sass part company.

Moving to the second section of the paper, I find Professor Sass's distinction between "natural" and "salvation" history to be for the most part fairly drawn and similar to the distinction in Unification Thought between the "history of recreation" and the "history of restoration." I do, however, have problems with his specific historical judgements and principles. In particular, I disagree with Professor Sass's generalizations about the determinants of radical behavior. He, for example, argues that if individuals perceive of history as dependent on their actions, they become radical whereas if they see some force or agent behind the scenes as determinant, they will be less radical. In fact, one could just as easily argue the opposite. Those who perceive themselves privy to grand historical forces often tend to be blithely confident and radical whereas those who bear actual responsibility for historical outcomes more frequently are unduly circumspect, politic, and, on occasion, paralysed.

I also disagree with Professor Sass that an otherworldly orientation necessarily tempers radicalism. This fails to take into account the zeal for martyrdom in both ancient and modern times or radical behaviors undertaken to precipitate supernatural interventions (Jesus of Nazaerth's attack on Temple moneychangers is sometimes interpreted in this way). Finally, I disagree with Professor Sass that "false prophets" necessarily have an easier time of it today than in former times. It seems to me that contemporary circumstances (media communications and the like) are just as likeley to have a damaging effect as anyone who viewed Sadaam Hussein's television performances during the recent Gulf conflict might attest.

These differences over particular historical interpretations are symptomatic of a more basic issue related to the ease and directness with which Professor Sass sees various historical views incarnating themselves in human activity. T.S. Eliot wrote that between impulse and act lies the shadow. This shadow is darker and more extended with respect to the distance between theories of history and their embodiments in social structure. Most "orientation" histories are personal, unoriginal or in other ways idiosyncratic and lack social appeal. Those that are seminal and form the basis of social movements tend to get reshaped, revised or even discarded as new forces come into play. For this reason, it is extremely difficult to determine a direct line of historical causality as Professor Sass seems to do in holding Darwinism responsible for

racism, genocide and the like (7).

A related issue has to do with Professor Sass's contention that "identifying [a] false prophet ... can be done easily." Simply note, "If they destroy the fabric of natural and cultural networks ... [or] basic human rights, then these prophets are false" (10). It seems to me that far from being easy, these kinds of violations are extremely difficult to sort out, especially when they are occuring. Some, depending on their interest, tend to magnify alleged abuses out of all proportion. Others reduce them to nothing or deny that anything is even happening. Still others are tempted to scapegoat innocent parties. Aside from these ambiguities, even if one were wiling to heap responsibility for social dislocations on the shoulders of a single individual (Professor Sass, here, seems to buy into the "Great Man" theory of history), the designation "false prophet" unnecessarily prejudices our perspective and, therefore, possesses only marginal utility as a category of social scientific, historical, or philosophical analysis.

The major reservation I have with the concluding section (and, indeed, with much of Professor Sass's paper) relates to its conservatism. This, to some extent, is derivative of what I take to be his essentially functionalist and utilitarian approach to the study of history. "[M]eanings in history," he contends, are to be judged not by their claimed (or actual) truth content but rather by their outcomes for peace, love, and the effect on natures and cultures" (14). Functionalist and utilitarian

approaches of this type have long been criticized for supporting conservative ideologies in that they typically line up phenomena in functional or dysfunctional relations to an existing status quo. This criticism seems applicable to Professor Sass's approach. He is approving of orientational histories which cohere with "values established in the course of cultural and moral history" (12). However, he is deeply suspicious of historical interpretations which undercut those norms or threaten social structure. He, thus, cites Jacob Burckhardt to the effect that "more often than not humanity was protected and restored not by the driving forces of ... revolutionary guards ... but by ... the 'suffering, striving, and acting human, the way he is, the way he was, and the way he will be'" (14).

Were this simply a matter of disposition, the matter might rest there. However, it seems to me that presentations such as Professor Sass's serve <u>political</u> ends as well, buttressing dominant class interests. Simply stated, his essay is not the type one would expect to be written by the disinherited, the disadvantaged, the discriminated-against, or the dispossed-and-angry. Another way of putting this would be to assert that it is easy to speak of universal civility from the standpoint of privilege. Professor Sass mentions nothing about retributive justice or "indemnity" to borrow a Unification term. He rather states that we might "protect ourselves and our fellow sisters and brothers against false prophets ...

"prophet" is a true or a false one are all relevant questions within the context of Professor Sass's analysis. Having surfaced these considerations, Professor Sass is duty-bound to help us sort them out.