



Trusting God's Hand in History

How has God influenced the unfolding of history? Providential history explores the divine role in human affairs in ages past.

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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We are living in a troubled world with **prophesied** “wars and rumours of wars” and death, devastation, and suffering on every side. We are witnessing the formation of a new world order with shifting alliances, and economies thrown into spasms by the rising price of oil and the transforming power of AI. The outbreak of war in the Middle East, on the heels of several existing armed conflicts, has posed all of these questions with even greater poignancy.

In a changing world, the thoughtful observer may wonder if God is still at the helm. Does God influence the unfolding of history?

Latter-day Saint providential history is an approach to history that acknowledges that He does. Anchored in scripture and the teachings of modern prophets and apostles, Latter-day Saint providential history explores the divine role in human affairs in ages past and affirms that He will continue to influence the unfolding of events in days to come!

In the Latter-day Saint **optic**, providential history views history within the perspective of Heavenly Father's plan for the salvation of His children. The thesis is that God, working through human agents, has shaped world history for the accomplishment of His purposes. As Moroni **proclaimed**: "The eternal purposes of the Lord shall roll on, until all his promises shall be fulfilled."

In the great work of salvation, God's chief purposes in the modern era include (1) the **Restoration** of the gospel of Jesus Christ and (2) its **dissemination** to all the world in preparation for the Second Coming of the Messiah. Christ's millennial reign will then be ushered in, and the great redemptive work of administering saving ordinances for the untold myriads who have lived on earth without a knowledge of the gospel will be accomplished.

As the work of the Lord's Church progresses, the gathering of the house of Israel according to God's ancient covenants is being accomplished in its spiritual dimension, while the literal gathering of the house of Israel continues to unfold. Jesus Christ is **the God of the whole earth**, and in his divine role, has not worked with just one people but, as ancient and modern prophets have indicated, has **given all nations** light and knowledge as He has seen fit. One may thus conclude that while God's intervention has not always been very visible, He has played a major role in guiding the affairs of the human family.

The literal gathering of the house of Israel continues to unfold.

This article focuses on God's hand in advancing His salvific purposes. It reserves for another discussion questions about the problem of evil or God's apparent nonintervention in the face of suffering, and it does not seek to excuse horrifying wrongs that have been committed in history. Rather, it considers how God, even through imperfect people and circumstances, has prepared the way for the fulfillment of His divine purposes.

Themes of God's Influence

Modern prophets and apostles have attested that the hand of God has been at work in several aspects of Western history, including the intellectual awakening of the Renaissance, the discovery of America, the religious renewal of the Reformation, the development of representative constitutional government and human rights in Britain, and the rise of freedom in America.

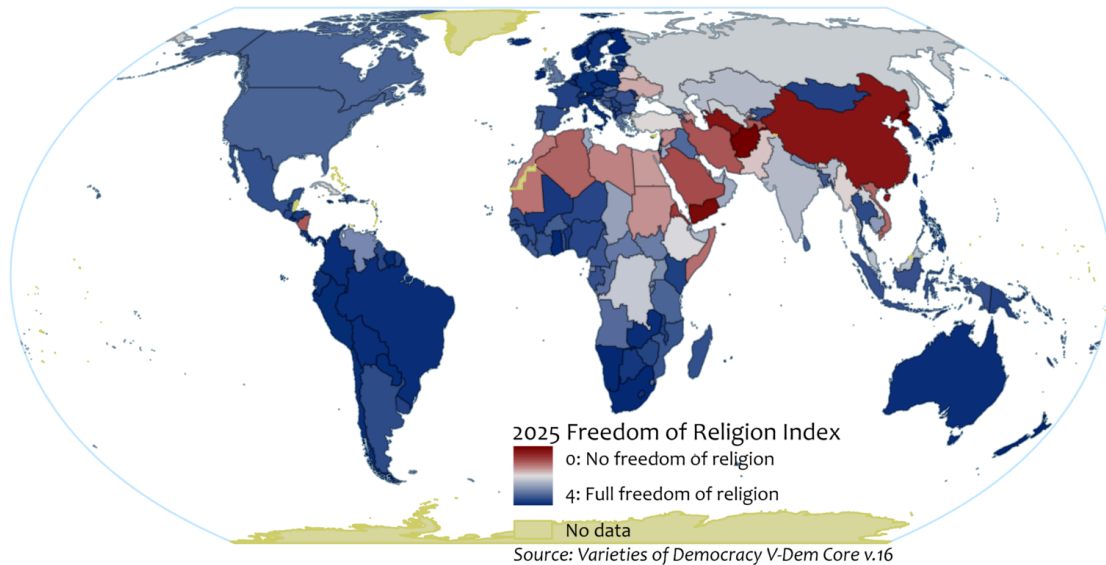
While several themes emerge when we view the modern era in the light of divine purposes, two emerge as prominent. First is the rise and spread of freedom, which will be the focus of this article. Among these developments, the rise of freedom in America has long been identified as a necessary preparation for the Restoration. As The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has extended its reach across the earth, this theme of freedom has taken on even broader meaning. The development of freedom in the Western world—the United States, in particular, but also in other countries—and its spread in one form or another to the peoples of the earth, has facilitated the worldwide preaching of the gospel.

A second theme that has taken on greater importance is the unparalleled disbursement from heaven of scientific and technical knowledge in the modern era. This heavenly endowment has blessed all of mankind and greatly accelerated the Lord's work. It has provided systems of transportation and communication for a worldwide church, information technology for spreading the gospel and administering church affairs, and resources for family history research and temple work—to mention but a few. (This aspect of divine intervention will be treated in a subsequent article.) The **hastening** of the Lord's work as manifested by the rapid progress of the Church has allowed it to assume by degrees its worldwide mission of spreading the gospel "**unto** the ends of the earth, as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth."

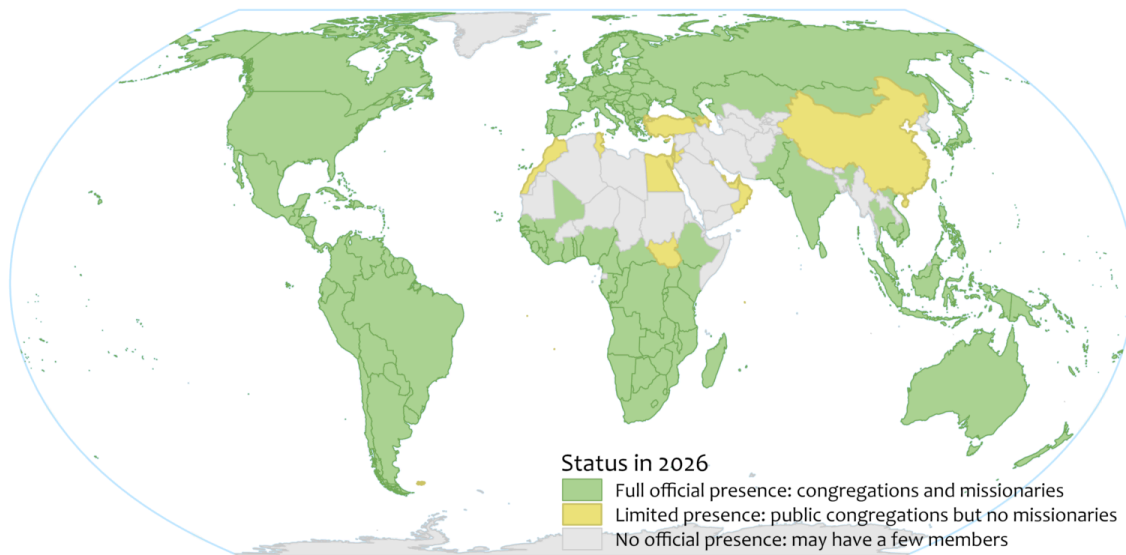
The Rise of Freedom

The extension of the Church across the world has been closely correlated with the extension of religious freedom worldwide. The maps below demonstrate this. In several countries, including some areas in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, which have limited religious freedom, the Church has a recognized presence, with branches and members,

but without missionaries and proselytizing. In other countries, without religious freedom, there is no recognized Latter-day Saint presence. The spread of freedom among the nations of the earth is a prerequisite for preaching the gospel. A comparison of the maps, Global Religious Freedom and The Global Church, is highly instructive on that point.



A map showing the 2025 Freedom of Religion Index. Source: Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, et al. 2025. "V-Dem Dataset v15." Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project; adapted by Dr. Brandon Plewe, Brigham Young University.



A map showing Latter-day Saint presence by country. Source: Dr. Brandon Plewe, Brigham Young University.

Modern prophets and apostles have offered insight into the divine role in the spread of freedom. President John Taylor **affirmed** that “There is an inherent principle of right planted in the human bosom, which God has placed there . . . an innate, inalienable principle of justice and equity, in every age and among all nations.” President Joseph F. Smith likewise **declared** that God has inspired “all who have in ages past contributed to the progress of civil and religious freedom.”

By prophetic witness, the rise and spread of freedom has involved many nations, several of which prophets have identified by name. While the prophetic record does not allow us to identify specifically the spread of freedom to every country around the world as divinely inspired, we do have the general **reflection** of President David O. McKay that “The history of the world with all its contentions and strife is largely an account of Man’s effort to free himself from bondage and usurpation.” Obviously, there are no perfect purveyors of liberty among the nations of the world, and the histories of those which have been so identified are sometimes fraught with much injustice and oppression. But God appears to have used imperfect nations, just as He has used imperfect people, for the accomplishment of His purposes. A few of those nations and regions that prophets have identified are described below.

Britain

At the rededication of the London Temple in 1992, President Gordon B. Hinckley **acknowledged** the divine hand in the development of British liberties which have spread worldwide: “We recognize that it was at Runnymede, in this county of Surrey, in the year 1215, that the Magna Charta was signed. . . . Through all of the centuries that have followed, these rights have been preserved, implemented, and enlarged. They have spread from here and have been incorporated in the constitutions and charters of other nations across the earth. . . . Freedom to think, to speak, to assemble, and to worship is basic to the happiness of mankind. We acknowledge thy divine hand in the establishment and preservation of that freedom in this the United Kingdom.”

The United States

Prophets have also identified that America has a special mission to perform in the spread of freedom. With amazing prophetic insight, Joseph F. Smith taught in a 1903 General Conference about the future destiny of America at a time when the United

States had not yet entered the realm of the great powers. He **said**: “This great American nation the Almighty raised up His hand has been over this nation, and it is his purpose and design to enlarge it, make it glorious above all others, and to give it dominion, and power . . . to the end that those who are kept in bondage . . . may be brought to the enjoyment of the fullest freedom and liberty of conscience possible . . .”

This prophecy has been realized by degrees in the course of the twentieth century, as the United States evolved from an emerging great power to a world superpower and has championed the cause of freedom around the world. The United States played a particularly significant role in advancing freedom after the Second World War and during the fall of the Iron Curtain. But, as the Book of Mormon has **revealed**, alternate blessings and cursings are upon the Americas. For the inhabitants to be “free from bondage, and from captivity, and from all other nations,” they must “serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ.” The warning is severe. Should the inhabitants of the land sink to “the fulness of iniquity,” they will be “swept off.”

France

Another of the “**great democracies**” alluded to by President Hinckley, France, has played a significant role in the spread of freedom across the world. Highlighting France as a purveyor of freedom, John Taylor **observed** that the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was “almost verbatim” to the inspired American Declaration of Independence, which affirmed the eternal truth that “all men are born free and equal and have a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Latin America

The countries of Latin America have likewise been favored of God. In 1979, Elder Ezra Taft Benson, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, **taught** the Saints in Bolivia that “God raised up wise leaders among your progenitors which afforded Latin American countries political freedom and independence. . . . I believe it was very significant that when independence came to the countries of South America, governments were established on constitutional principles—some patterned after the Constitution of the United States. I believe this was a very necessary step which preceded the preaching of the gospel in South America.”

Spreading the Gospel

Evil is rampant in the world, and vice and evil often flourish simultaneously with the extension of freedom. Yet God, with foreknowledge, has used the extension of freedom to enable the preaching of the gospel, proving that God's "wisdom is greater than the cunning of the devil."

President Spencer W. Kimball further expounded on the theme of freedom in relation to missionary work. Speaking in the mid-1970s, when much of Europe and Asia was under Communist control, he taught that the expansion of freedom would follow the efforts of Church members to preach the gospel. "The Lord has indicated that we can expect His power to be with us when we proclaim His word," he said. "There are no impenetrable 'iron curtains,' or 'bamboo curtains' or national curtains or neighborhood curtains so far as teaching the gospel is concerned. I see no good reason why the Lord should open doors we are not prepared to enter, but I believe He *will* open every missionary door we *are* prepared to enter."

America has a special mission to perform in the spread of freedom.

The fall of the Iron Curtain and the spread of freedom in Eastern Europe in the almost bloodless revolutions of 1989 was a dramatic manifestation of this principle. The miraculous fall of the Iron Curtain and the consequent extension of freedom, allowing populations previously under communist rule to hear the gospel, was lauded in 1990 during the First Presidency Christmas Devotional by President Gordon B. Hinckley, then First Counselor in the First Presidency, as a manifestation of the divine will. "The Spirit of Christ is brooding over the whole earth," he said. "We have witnessed miracles undreamed of only a short time ago. Like a glorious sunburst through dark clouds, there is emerging freedom of worship, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression."

The last two decades of the twentieth century also saw a resurgence of freedom in Latin America and Africa as a bevy of authoritarian regimes were swept aside and more democratic regimes were installed. One of the most significant moments in that resurgence was the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 and the subsequent adoption of a new constitution in 1996, which extended equal rights to all citizens.

The expansion of missionary work largely mirrored these developments of freedom. The 1978 revelation on the priesthood opened missionary work in much of Africa and accelerated it in Brazil, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. At the same time, expanding political freedom made possible the preaching of the gospel in Eastern Europe, Russia, other former Soviet states, and throughout Latin America and Africa.

By 2000, Freedom House [reported](#) that “almost 60 percent of the world’s population live[d] in free societies, where basic rights and religious freedom flourish. . . that whereas 100 years ago, no nation on earth had universal voting rights for its citizens, now 119 of 192 nations have elected representatives. The group could find only 18 nations in which civil liberties were suppressed the year previous (1999) by the military or their rulers.” Freedom House also [reported](#) that when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, 69 countries were democratic; by January 2000, that number had grown to 120. Although the number has fluctuated since then, it has largely hovered near 120.

In the Middle East and Northern Africa, widespread popular uprisings dating from the Arab Spring in early 2011 forced autocratic rulers in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, and Libya to relinquish power, but many of these countries have returned to autocratic rule. More recently, the U.S.-Israeli bombing of Iran and the ensuing war in the Middle East provides a prospect of increased freedom of democracy, but the struggle for freedom in the Middle East and elsewhere is an unfinished story with much still to be done. Those areas where there is no formal Latter-day Saint presence, as shown on the map, which include much of North Africa and the Middle East, still lack the necessary freedom for preaching the gospel, although small groups of Latter-day Saints are found in several of these countries.

The last decade-and-a-half have seemingly seen the rise of more [autocratic](#) regimes. We must trust that this is only temporary, for as Joseph Smith [declared](#) in the Wentworth letter, the gospel message will go forward until it has been preached in all nations, “and the great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”

The rise of freedom, despite its accompanying challenges, is a major theme that prominent secular historians have identified in the development of the modern world. This theme is intertwined significantly with the rise of Western society and the spread of its political and social ideals, its technology and economic models, and, in many cases, Christianity. The imperialistic spread of Western society over the centuries has

tragically entailed many injustices and suffering, death, and destruction on a massive scale.

Yet even amid injustice and wrongdoing, God has frequently brought good from evil. The development of parliamentary government, democracy, and human rights stands among the lasting fruits. In the long term, the integration of these more positive aspects of Western society, it may be argued, has in large measure prepared the way for the accomplishment of the Lord's work of salvation.

God's Plan to Deliver the Saints in the Latter Days

When we discern God's hand in history, we gain confidence that He will continue to direct events according to His purposes. Even so, the promise of the coming "great and dreadful day of the Lord" with its foretold calamities can stir anxiety. But reflection on His past deliverance provides assurance that His sustaining care will remain with His Saints in the days ahead.

As Christ spoke with His Apostles about the events preceding His Second Coming, He **predicted** a time when "nation shall rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilence, and earthquakes in divers places." During his second visit to Joseph Smith on the night of September 21, 1823, the Angel Moroni similarly **told** Joseph of "great judgments which were coming upon the earth, with great desolations by famine, sword, and pestilence."

But Nephi provided words of reassurance for the time "when all the proud and they who do wickedly shall be as stubble; and the day cometh that they must be burned." "The righteous need not fear," he **declared**, "for thus saith the prophet, they shall be saved, even if it so be by fire." Likewise, the Lord told **Enoch**, "As I live, even so will I come in the last days, in the days of wickedness and vengeance... and great tribulation shall be among the children of men, but my people will I preserve."

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The mighty works of God in the past provide us with reassurances of His comforting and guiding hand in the future. Nephi **declared** that he "read many things [to his

people], which were engraven upon the plates of brass, that they might know concerning the doings of the Lord, in other lands, among people of old." Knowing of the Lord's doing in times past strengthens our faith. As God has taught in the [Words of Mormon 1:4](#) and [Isaiah 46:9-10](#), having fulfilled his promises in times past, He will certainly fulfill those yet to be fulfilled.

President Russell M. Nelson warned that there are difficult times ahead and that the time will come when Saints can only survive the cacophony of conflicting voices if they have the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But he also predicted a time of great manifestations of the Lord's power prior to the Second Coming. He [taught](#), "Our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, will perform some of His mightiest works between now and when He comes again. We will see miraculous indications that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, preside over this Church in majesty and glory."

Who can doubt that the redefinition of the Church's mission as home-centered and church-supported, just prior to the Covid pandemic, was other than providential?

While providential history cannot supplant the prophetic voice in providing comfort to a troubled age, the compilation of prophetic statements of God's intervention in human affairs can increase our faith and provide reassurances that He is still much interested in our welfare, and that He has been much involved in human affairs, in many ways we may not have fully appreciated. A fuller awareness of divine intervention in times past will provide assurance that His guiding and protecting influence will be over us in the troubled times yet to come.

About the author



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