



# ON HOLY GROUND

INTER-FAITH ENCOUNTERS AND  
THE RESTORED GOSPEL  
OF JESUS CHRIST

**JAMES D. HOLT**

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## THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

With any discussion of faith and how members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints explore it, it is imperative to begin with the role of Jesus Christ. Joseph Smith taught:

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it.<sup>4</sup>

In exploring our faith and belief, Jesus Christ as the Savior is “non-negotiable.” The centrality of Christ is taught throughout scripture: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

Christ’s Atonement is the way to salvation and to exaltation. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is reconciliation. Every part of that message, for Latter-day Saints, means that humanity is being drawn back into a relationship with God. The Atonement of Christ is not just about the forgiveness of sins, but also the removal of pains and sicknesses. The whole of Jesus’s life, not just the cross upon which He was crucified, becomes part of His Atonement. It was necessary for Christ to experience all of the trials of humanity to be a perfect example, but also to be able to bear the burdens of humanity. By rejecting the temptations He faced, Christ was not subject to the spiritual death caused by Adam’s transgression. Christ’s perfection enabled the relationship with the Father to be continued even during mortality. The Father’s purposeful removal (see Mark 15: 34), both in Gethsemane and Calvary, was therefore a crucial part of the Atonement for Christ as well as for humanity. Gethsemane was where Christ first encountered the effects of spiritual death, sin, and the associated pains of mortality to the degree where He was left alone by the Father, causing Him to be “amazed” at the strength of sin (Mark 14:33). Especially important are Gethsemane and the cross. In Gethsemane, and then

again on the cross, Jesus suffered for all the pains, sicknesses, and afflictions of humanity, performing an eternal and infinite Atonement.

## THE CHURCH IS TRUE

Alongside the place of the Savior as central to everyone's salvation is an associated teaching that the Church is a vehicle to help people understand the truth about Christ, to draw close to Him, and to ultimately receive exaltation. The foundational event of the Restoration came to be known as *The First Vision*. In the 1838 account of that vision, Joseph Smith records:

I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. . . . When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other – This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him! (Joseph Smith—History 1:16–17)

It is through the lens of this event that the Church, and many of its members, view the teachings and doctrines of the Church, and also of other religions. Along with the centrality of Christ and His Atonement, they could be said to form the spectacles through which truth is weighed. The view of the Godhead as three separate beings, rather than the Trinity of most other Christian faiths, is essentially determined by the events of the First Vision.

Other aspects of the First Vision provide the framework through which other religions are viewed:<sup>2</sup>

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19)

This can be read alongside other scriptures, such as:

. . . the only true and living Church upon the face of the whole earth (Doctrine and Covenants 1: 30).

And it came to pass that I beheld this great and abominable church; and I saw the devil that he was the founder of it (1 Nephi 13:6; see also 1 Nephi 14:10; 1 Nephi 22:13; 3 Nephi 27:8).

Using the metaphor of a lens again, in reading these passages it is possible to adopt an exclusivist hermeneutic lens. In this way, other religions are viewed in a negative light. The resultant attitudes from adopting such a binary lens are problematic and could create a sense of theological superiority that goes against the warning of President Gordon B. Hinckley that we should disagree “without being disagreeable.”<sup>6</sup>

In an interesting juxtaposition, Latter-day Saints have traditionally seen the claim that they are not Christian as an “extreme” example of intolerance.<sup>7</sup> Blomberg argues that it is not necessarily so. Indeed, some statements by Latter-day Saints could make them equally extreme in their rejection of other forms of Christianity. Latter-day Saints can be seen to place themselves as a supersessionary form of Christianity, seeing all other forms to be in error, and not “true” Christians:

. . . just as the early Christians believed they had found the only proper way to be Jews, so the early followers of the Mormon<sup>8</sup> Prophet believed they had found the only proper way to be Christians. . . . The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is best understood as a form of corporate Christianity . . . in much the same way that early Christianity was related to Judaism.<sup>2</sup>

A logical outworking of such beliefs is given in a personal essay by Jana Reiss:

Recently, my husband, who is Episcopalian, came with me to testimony meeting, where a very sweet guy expressed his profound gratitude for being a member of “the only true and living church on the face of the earth.” Phil and I grinned at each other, and I whispered, “Sweetheart! Look at the time. You’d better hurry up or you’re going to miss the 10 o’clock service at your false and dead church.” I’m sure if we asked that nice LDS brother what he meant by asserting his membership in the world’s only “true and living church,” he would soft-pedal, and so he should. I worry that many Mormons have absolutely no inkling of the logical consequences of their words. How do we imagine that such rhetoric is going to be heard outside the Mormon enclave?<sup>10</sup>

This can sometimes be evident in paternalistic and theologically superior language used to describe “other” religions, and this is problematic. However, it would be wrong to suggest that there is not a strand of teaching within the

Church that can be used to justify it. Living in a pluralist world, a world where Latter-day Saints are in the minority, requires us to be more thoughtful in the attitude and approach we take. In actuality, this is even more true in an environment where Latter-day Saints are in the majority. The way that we are and the way that we interact with others is crucial. This was highlighted further by President Hinckley:

But this does not put us in a position of superiority. Rather, it should humble us. It places upon us an unforgiving responsibility to reach out with concern for all others in the Spirit of the Master, who taught, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 19:19). We must cast out self-righteousness and rise above petty self-interest.<sup>11</sup>

This is not diluting our doctrine; rather, it is interpreting our language and theology in a way that is truer to the overall message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## RECOGNIZING TRUTH IN OTHER RELIGIONS

One of the fundamental aspects of the restored gospel is the plan of salvation. Douglas Davies has called it the “meta-narrative” of Mormonism. It is the narrative that helps us make sense of who we are in relation to our heavenly parents and to the Godhead more widely, and also to each other. One aspect of the plan of salvation that can often be overlooked is that it is reflective of a continuum of knowledge. Latter-day Saints see the pursuit of truth and exaltation as a developmental process. In the same way intelligences progress to spirits, to mortality, to resurrection, and to godhood, so individual people progress in knowledge and experience in preparation for fulfillment in exaltation. The plan of salvation is about the accumulation of knowledge and truth: The scientist Henry Eyring wrote, “[t]his provides an interesting perspective on eternal progression. There is apparently no end to learning and no end of things to learn.”<sup>12</sup> Latter-day Saints therefore see other religions as somewhere on the continuum of knowledge.

The truths evident in other religions are to be utilized in the development of knowledge. This, however, is dependent on us recognizing that there is inspired truth in other religions. It is possible to outline a number of different sources that have been given as sources of truth in other religions.

- *Diffusion*. Based on our common ancestors and the family of Adam and Eve, it is to be expected that there are remnants of these truths that have survived.
- *Common Human Predicament*. All of humanity face the same questions, including: Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? It is to be expected that our minds can construct meaning and answers that are approximations of the truth.
- *Primordial Images*. In a similar way to Jungian archetypes, there are elements hardwired into our minds that are passed on through the human race.
- *Divine Inspiration*. The truths that we see are inspired by our Heavenly Father to draw people closer to Him.

- *The Devil.* The devil is the author of anything that is in opposition to the Lord. He may make an approximation of truth, but it is nothing more than “the philosophies of men mingled with scripture.”

Each of these is feasible based on scripture and the writings of Church leaders. Returning to the consideration to avoid theological superiority and express Christlike love, it is best to adopt the view that is most Christlike. In this way we recognize that religious people and religions are honest in their search for God, and that they are inspired by a Heavenly Father who loves all of His children. In so doing, we recognize the role of the Light of Christ:

[F]or every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.

But whatsoever thing persuadeth men to do evil, and believe not in Christ, and deny him, and serve not God, then ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of the devil; for after this manner doth the devil work, for he persuadeth no man to do good, no, not one; neither do his angels; neither do they who subject themselves unto him. (Moroni 7:16–17)

To be open to learning from other religions means that we need to recognize that there is truth in them. The First Presidency suggested in their 1978 Easter Message that Muhammad and other non-biblical religious leaders and philosophers “received a portion of God’s light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations.”<sup>13</sup> We also need to recognize that those following these religions are not simply *others*, but fellow children of God at a different point in their eternal progression, and that these religions are providing their adherents with the opportunity to respond to the Light of Christ.

Joseph Smith argued that engagement with other religions is about developing relationships; he felt that people should build one another up in their faith and “cease wrangling and contending with each other and cultivate the principles of union and friendship in their midst.”<sup>14</sup> This also means that when we engage with other religions, they should recognize the value and purpose of such dialogue. President Hinckley suggested that in such encounters members should “Look for their [those of other religions’]

strengths and virtues, and you will find strengths and virtues in your own life.”<sup>15</sup>

Latter-day Saints have faith in a loving Heavenly Father who seeks to bless all of His children. To recognize the “value” of other religions in salvation we must recognize that it is on the basis of their ethical guidelines that a person will be judged. Joseph Smith taught:

But while one portion of the human race are judging and condemning the other without mercy, the great parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care, and paternal regard; he views them as his offspring; and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes “his sun to rise on the evil and the good; and sends his rain on the just and unjust.” He holds the reins of judgment in his hands; he is a wise lawgiver, and will judge all men, -[not according to the narrow contracted notions of men, but]- “according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil;” or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey India: he will judge them “not according to what they have not, but according to what they have;” those who have lived without law, will be judged without law, and those who have a law, will be judged by that law; we need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the great Jehovah, he will award judgment or mercy to all nations according to their several deserts, their means of obtaining intelligence, the laws by which they are governed; the facilities afforded them of obtaining correct information; and his inscrutable designs in relation to the human family: and when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess, that the Judge of all the earth has done right.<sup>16</sup>

One of the Articles of Faith allows all people “the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of [their] own hearts” (1:10). In essence, we should treat those of other religions positively, judging them at their very best. In light of this, the very best would be observing a person’s religion as a helpful mechanism on the way to exaltation. The resultant attitudes and actions

. . . may at times be to encourage Marxists to become better Marxists, Jews and Muslims to become better Jews and Muslims, and Buddhists to become better Buddhists (although admittedly their notion of what a “better Marxist,” etc., is will be influenced by Christian norms). Obviously this cannot be done without the most intensive conversation and cooperation.<sup>17</sup>

This might appear to be problematic to some. But it is a natural outworking of the teachings of Christ to love all people. It does not mean that we do not stand for truth, but that we receive it from whichever source. We might see that a person is truly living the gospel as they help others live their religion without fear of condemnation. They would have the responsibility “to treat those with differing views with the dignity and respect they deserve.” This could be seen to recognize the writings of Joseph Smith:

The Saints can testify whether I am willing to lay down my life for my brethren. If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon, I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denominations who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Judging religious beliefs as helpful mechanisms will enable attitudes toward, and engagement with, other religions to be grounded theologically in friendship and cooperation. As recently reiterated by President Russell M. Nelson: “Religious liberty is essential if we are to raise up righteous children. Morally responsible families will not marginalize religious liberty, they will nurture and protect it.”<sup>19</sup> It is not enough for Latter-day Saints to have freedom of religion and belief; this same right must be afforded to all people. Although in countries such as the UK where Latter-day Saints are in a minority, an observer may understand the need for a “minority” group to seek protection and freedoms under the law; this is just as important and is indeed apparent in places such as Utah, where the Church is the predominant religion. This relates to the call of Jesus Christ to be the salt of the earth and to seek to bless the whole of humanity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is radical in nature and seeks to include those who might be considered on the margins of society. A call to discipleship is a call to service. Everyone in society needs to be protected. Just as Joseph Smith was as willing to die for a Catholic as for a member of the Church, so Latter-day Saints today should be willing to fight for the rights of others just as passionately as if those same rights were being denied them.

We still remember the time when Latter-day Saints were violently persecuted. The early history of the Church is replete with opposition to Latter-day Saints and the free expression of their religion. Perhaps the most heinous of that persecution was the extermination order executed by then-Governor Lilburn Boggs of Missouri. It was not, however, solely in response to such opposition that Joseph Smith highlighted the importance of freedom of religion and belief to his followers. His view of the expansiveness of the human experience and the love that God has for all of His creations led to the recognition of the value that the free expression of religion and belief can bring to individuals.

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