

Mormon Views of Religious Resemblances

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Scholars have already worked out elaborate comparative studies of Christianity and the Asian faiths. At the purely religious level, and at least from one perspective, the opposition is fundamentally between the great biblical religions and the religions of India. It is the clash between theism and monism, between the appeal to a God who is Creator and Lord of all and the quest for unity with an impersonal divine principle. This carries with it a grave difference in the evaluation of the world and history. The biblical religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) accept the world as real, as having a definite origin and moving towards a definite termination at some future date; for monism it is *maya*, illusory, the present phase is a beginningless and endless series of cycles. The biblical faiths take pride in the fact that they have a historical basis: the exodus from Egypt, the crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, the Hegira. For the monists, general philosophical ideas replace historical events. The Hindu doctrine of man is metapsychological, a piece of subtle and—so it would seem to Latter-day Saints—unsubstantiated analysis.

Perhaps the most acute conflict has still to be mentioned. The historical Buddha may say that the difference between his way and that of the Jew, Moslem, or Latter-day Saint is so great that he must deny the word religion is really common to all. Gotama, the founder of Buddhism, acknowledges no God at all, but only gods who are caught, like men, in the net of karma; no future life, but only the bliss—or extinction—of Nirvana; no soul, but only the legacy of one life bequeathed to another that falls heir to it; no prayer, but only meditation as a form of spiritual discipline; no grace, but only man's resolve to tread the Noble Eight-Fold Path to the end. The ultimate doctrines of Buddhism, like those of Hinduism from which it sprang,

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are negative and pessimistic in terms of their response to the worth of this mortal life and the individual as the locus of value. Since Buddhists believe that underlying reality is one inclusive mind or stream of consciousness, Christ and judgment are imaginary, irrelevant, or "untrue." Could there be more serious conflicts and discrepancies than these?

But the restored gospel does not contradict Buddhism on every hand. In fact there are between the two a number of remarkable resemblances. Both Christ and the Buddha believed that covetousness and lust were at the root of human suffering; that men must shake the dust (the cares of this world) from the mirror of their minds, and seek to nourish the spirit of the inner man; both declared that freedom lies in following a way of life that is free from cruelty, falsehood, killing, stealing, and unlawful sexual relations. Parallels between the life stories and the reported sayings of Jesus and Gotama have intrigued the followers of these two religious leaders, as well as secular scholars at large, at least since the time of St. Jerome. Leaving aside for now the credibility of the narratives, and comparing only commonly accepted beliefs, how should Latter-day Saints explain the following resemblances?¹

1. Both were foreordained in a preexistent spirit world to come forth at a particular time, after preliminary examination and selection of the most favorable family, country, race, and mother into which to be physically born.

2. Both entered the womb of their mother in a miraculous manner, having no mortal father.

3. Both were born into a world whose inhabitants' bodies had become coarse and gross and who had lost much of their original brilliance because "a being of an inquisitive nature" had commenced eating a debilitating food.

4. Both had births accompanied by special heavenly illuminations.

5. Both were recognized in infancy by respective religious leaders as persons of great promise, with special missions to perform among mankind.

6. Both visited holy temples in their youth and displayed unusual precocity and wisdom before their elders.

7. Both launched their ministries early in their thirtieth year following periods of fasting and solitude.

¹These are drawn from W. Woodville Rockhill, *The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of his Order* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1884), which is derived from Tibetan works in the Bkah-Hgyur and Bstan-Hgyur, the Tibetan Tripitaka.

8. Both gained disciples under a fig tree.
9. Both were severely tempted by an Evil One (Mara and Satan).
10. Both selected a council of special disciples and joined with them in carrying out their religious ideals, by way of example.

In addition to these, agreements in thought and phraseology between the gospels of the New Testament and the Dhammapada of Buddhism include the following:

1. *From Christ*: "Now do ye Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and the platter; but your inward part is full of ravening and wickedness. Ye, fools, did not he that made that which is without make that which is within also?" (Luke 11:39, 40)

From the Buddha: "What is the use of platted hair, O fool? what of the raiment of goat-skins? Within thee there is ravening, but the outside thou makest clean."²

2. *Christ*: "Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14). "Our soul is escaped like a bird out of a snare of fowlers; the snare is broken, and we are escaped" (Psalms 124:7).

Buddha: "This world is dark, few only can see here; a few only go to heaven, like birds escaped from a net."³

3. *Christ*: "Let them alone; they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch" (Matthew 15:14).

Buddha: "As when a string of blind men are clinging one to the other, neither can the foremost see, nor can the middle one see, nor can the hindmost see. Just so, methinks, Vasettha, is the talk of the Brahmans verse in the three Vedas."⁴

4. Jesus spoke to the woman of Samaria that his salvation is as "living water" (John 4:10-14); in Saddharmapundarika (the Lotus Sutra), Gotama compares salvation to "water for all."⁵

In the face of such examples, how do Latter-day Saints explain religious similarities and parallels? Are these and other agreements imaginary? Are they only accidental coincidences? Are they simply remarkable illustrations of poetic license, or of distortions of language and culture at the hands of faulty translators? Should they be explained by reference to the similarity of circumstances under which both Christ and Buddha taught? Have the Buddhist legends and teachings derived certain of their elements from Christian sources? Or must Christians

²Dhammapada, 394, trans. F. Max Muller, *Sacred Books of the East*, ed. F. Max Muller, 14 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1901), 12:90. Hereafter cited as *SBE*.

³Dhammapada, 174, *SBE*, 12:147.

⁴Tevijja Sutta, trans. E. M. West, *SBE*, 11:15.

⁵Saddharmapundarika, trans. H. Kern, *SBE*, 10:chapter 5.

accept the allegation that certain things in the Gospel records have either derived from the earlier Buddhist legends, or from another common ancient source? Are these the work of the devil, of God, or of man? Is the identification and acceptance of religious resemblances a benefit or a disadvantage to the interests of the expanding Church? These are serious questions that carry highly significant implications and call for critical research.

In the restored Church the relationship of Christ to his prophets is clear. But within the context of world religions, their relationship to Buddha, Mohammed, Mahavira, Zoroaster, Confucius, or Lao Tzu is not so well defined. For Latter-day Saints, who are eager to see their faith disseminated worldwide and to see it effectively implanted among all peoples, and yet who wish to accept and encourage anything that is "virtuous, lovely or of good report or praiseworthy," questions of religious comparison between the cultures of man, East and West, are of great significance. Do religious elements that seem harmonious or even universal spring from a common source when once the pure gospel of Jesus Christ was known to our fathers? Are similarities to the gospel simply Satanic substitutes, counterfeit attractions suggesting that all roads lead to heaven? Or are there other explanations possible? How do Mormons handle non-Mormon religious beliefs, values, rituals, and symbols which seem to be not only compatible with true gospel principles but in some cases even appropriate manifestations of them? Are such resemblances an advantage or a disadvantage to those declaring a unique Latter-day Saint message?

Acting on the premise that religious similarities are indeed ubiquitous in the world, how have Mormons generally approached them? In this paper I shall examine five basic Mormon views of religious resemblances, the first two of which have been less argued and much less developed among members of the Church.

1. *Primordial Images—Echoes of a Preexistent State.* In Mormon theology human predispositions of thought and feeling may be viewed as "echoes of eternity," since all men lived together under common conditions with God in a premortal spirit world. After quoting Wordsworth's famous "Ode: Intimations of Immortality . . .," which suggests that the minds and spirits of mankind come to earth "Not in entire forgetfulness, . . ./But trailing clouds of glory do we come/From God, who is our home," Joseph Fielding Smith comments that "there may be times when flashes of remembrance of these former days come to us."⁶ Then he quoted Orson F. Whitney, a

⁶Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Way to Perfection: Short Discourses on Gospel Themes*

member of the Council of the Twelve, who explained that more than once, upon hearing a noble sentiment expressed, though unable to recall that he had ever heard it until then, he found himself in sympathy with it, was thrilled by it, and felt as if he had always known it. Elder Whitney referred to the Savior's statement that "My sheep know my voice," concluding that those things which are true and instinctively beautiful appeal to men everywhere because we were all acquainted with the gospel in a previous life before we came here, and it is this that gives to it a familiar sound.⁷ President Joseph F. Smith "heartily endorsed" Elder Whitney's observation that common experiences in the antemortal spiritual life predispose, influence, and guide human thoughts and preferences in this life, for "we often catch a spark from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights up our whole being as with the glory of our former home."⁸

Of course this is not the same as Carl Jung's view of the "collective unconscious," but there is much in that scholar's discussion of "basic archetypes" that nonetheless seems congruent with the Mormon view of preexistence, and that might well help explain resemblances of thought and belief among mankind. Jung taught that a symbol can express itself among large masses of people simultaneously.⁹ He saw parallels with mythological motifs among his patients. For example, a very young child would recite a dream to Jung which exactly paralleled some ancient Persian myth. The child could not have been taught the myth, for very few people who were not classical scholars even knew of it. After considerable study and deliberation, he found that general story outlines of myths were identical across cultural heritages which had no possible chance of contact. He concluded that there is a common, almost instinctual disposition among all men—including civilized men—to symbolize identical themes in their religious myths. Why are the story lines of religious fantasy and experience so common among all men? In 1919 Jung developed the term "archetype" to account for these expressions of "collective psyche." He did not suggest universal symbolism, but he did suggest universal archetypes. He did not see these archetypes as conscious images of the mind, but

(Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1943), p. 30.

⁷Ibid., p. 45.

⁸Orson F. Whitney, "The Undiscovered Country: A Dissertation on Spiritual Themes," *Improvement Era* 23 (December 1919):101.

⁹J. F. Rychlak, *Introduction to Personality and Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1973), pp. 143-47; see also C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, and Gerhard Adler (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); see particularly volume 9, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1959), and volume 11, *Psychology and Religion: East and West* (1958).

they did stand in the deepest reaches of the unconscious. He called them "primordial images"—congenital preexistent images, believing that the mind has inherited an *a priori* disposition to work in a certain way. The psyche is not passive; it is an active agent in the framing of meaning.

From a Mormon point of view, ways of thinking and acting can easily be interpreted as genetic from our existence with God; and perhaps, the so-called "psychic unity" of man that has been argued by so many may indeed go back to our preexistence, to our primordial, native intelligence. President Smith, Elder Whitney, and so many others of us in the Church from time to time have talked about "glimmers" and the "thin veil." We say that thoughts rise in our minds to make us feel that we have experienced this, felt that, or believed something else. And such "echoes of eternity" seem to be the common experience of mankind. Having common beginnings in the spirit world, naturally we should expect, if only at times in faint and wistful ways, common manifestations of those beginnings with God. In his Commissioner's Lecture of 1973, Truman Madsen concluded that only something of such magnitude can account for conscience and the full phenomenon of other powers inherent in man, and

... though presently a veil is drawn over specific images of that realm—we do not now recall our name, rank, and serial number—there is built in us and not quite hidden a "collective unconscious" that is superracial in character, a pool of such vivid effect, such residual power in us, that our finite learnings and recoveries are at best a tiny aftermath.¹⁰

And it is in this that one should be able to find explanations of resemblances in the beliefs and religious experiences of man.

2. *The Devil Invention Theory.* Milton R. Hunter draws attention to the work of the devil theory in his book, *The Gospel Through the Ages*. He observes that many of the pagan practices were so similar to those of early Christianity that many Christian apologists have concluded that all this had to be the work of the devil. Elder Hunter points out that Justin Martyr, about 150 A.D., after describing the Lord's Supper as given in the Gospels, reportedly remarked: "The wicked devils have imitated it in the mysteries of Mithra, commanding the same thing to be done." Tertullian, another Christian teacher (160–220 A.D.), stated that "the devil, by the mysteries of his idols, imitates even the main part of the divine Mysteries. . . . He

¹⁰Truman G. Madsen, *Conscience and Consciousness*, Commissioner's Lecture (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1973), p. 5.

baptizes his worshippers in water and makes them believe that this purifies them from their crimes.” And 1300 years later, Las Cases (1747–1566 A.D.), a Spanish Catholic missionary observing that the ceremonies of the American Indians closely resembled those of the Christians, concluded that the devil had arrived in America ahead of the Christians and implanted in the minds of the natives many teachings closely akin to Christianity.¹¹

In this view, the devil has exerted a powerful influence upon men in counterfeiting the true principles and ordinances of the gospel. Lucifer has fostered many clever imitations in an effort to lull mankind into satisfaction with partial truths, and to weaken the appeal of divinely authorized teachers. In the words of Jacob, the Book of Mormon Prophet, men can become angels to a devil, for Satan, who beguiled our first parents, is capable of stirring up the children of men with dreadful works of darkness by transforming himself “nigh unto an angel of light” (2 Nephi 9:9).

Thus, similarities to the gospel are considered Satanic substitutes—counterfeit attractions suggesting, among other possibilities, that all roads lead to heaven.

3. *Diffusion.* Among Latter-day Saints, by far the most popular and compelling explanation of religious resemblances is the belief that religious elements that seem harmonious or even universal spring from a common source when once the pure gospel of Jesus Christ was known to all our fathers. Adam, the first man, was taught the fulness of the gospel. In turn he taught it to others. But men, yielding to the temptations of the evil one, sinned and departed from the truth. The original, true doctrines were changed and warped to suit the appetites of evil, ambitious men. Thus the principles of the gospel have appeared in more or less perverted form in the religious beliefs of mankind. The gospel was again taught to the world in its purity in the days of Jesus Christ. Again, willful men changed the doctrine, and a host of Christian parties came into being. The many religions among the human race are an evidence of the magnitude of apostasies from the simple, easily understood revelations of God.¹²

The pioneer Mormon study of Mormonism in a world religious setting was Thomas C. Romney’s. Consistent with his diffusionist approach, he suggested that doctrines of trinity as applied to Deity

¹¹Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel Through the Ages* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1945), p. 40.

¹²Which is the theme of John A. Widtsoe’s introduction to Thomas Cottam Romney, *World Religions in the Light of Mormonism* (Independence, Mo.: Zion’s Printing and Publishing Company, 1946).

reach back into the remotest past and are universally espoused. The numerous examples of trinitarian belief among ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Babylonians, and Sumerians are all reflections of an original authentic model—the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.¹³ Romney argued that both blood and bloodless sacrificial offerings of the Vedic gods of India (Indra, Agni, Varuna, Vishnu, and Krishna); the libations to Confucius in the traditional ceremonies of the state cult of China; the sacrificial offerings to the gods of the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as those many Jewish and Christian sacrifices to deities for the purpose of placating their wrath or of placing the worshippers in happy accord with unseen and ineffable powers, are all evidences of “common bonds of union”—universal religious patterns—that in the main at least “sprang originally from a common source.”¹⁴ Anciently mankind offered sacrifices without really knowing the roots of their own practices, which are found in the original sacrifices of Adam and his posterity, which were in similitude of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, even Jesus Christ. The scripture explains:

And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me. And then the angel spake saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth. (Moses 5:6-7)

In like manner, the doctrine of reincarnation, transmigration, and rebirth in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, is actually a modified and “strange type of immortality.” Romney points out that the early Rig Veda, the earliest book of the Indo-Aryans, makes no mention of reincarnation. This belief developed much later. Only after the people were forced to face the enervating climate of the region of the Ganges, the myriads of insects and other forms of animal life, and the difficulty of extracting a decent living from the soil, did a new drab outlook upon this life develop.¹⁵ And this new negativism vitally affected the Indian view of immortality. Life was no longer an experience to be thankful for, another step in the process of eternal development which, if rightly lived, will lead toward God. In a widening disparity, the ultimate goal of Nirvana in Hinduism and Buddhism is a form of annihilation to be reached only after countless

¹³Ibid., pp. 64-72.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 217.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 77-78.

incarnations, during which the soul gradually attains the power to negate the desire to live, not eternal individualized progress.

Elder Alvin R. Dyer, another exponent of the diffusion view, concludes that religious confusion in the world has resulted from deviations from established principles, from mutations of original truth. Items: The Hindu worship of Dyaus Pitar, a nature god of the sky or heaven, can be thought of as "a legendary perversion of the teachings of Abraham and Moses concerning preexistence and of God our Eternal Heavenly Father."¹⁶ Despite the original illustriousness of the teachings of Confucius and Lao-Tzu and the mystical and ornate rituals of earlier Buddhism, all of which seized the instincts of the Chinese race, there have been long periods of transition which have resulted in a "universal apathy" among that people. All life and vitality in the religious thought and sentiments of the Chinese have now disappeared;¹⁷ as also those of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, and Islam have fallen under "the lash of departure" from their own original doctrines. Modern Taoism is quite different from the high theories of its founder. It presents a pathetic history. It started with some admirable features of truth, but it has degraded fearfully into polytheism, demonolatry, witchcraft, and occultism.¹⁸ Shinto has become so vague as to be undefinable in the minds of either priests or philosophers. Originally there was a pure and righteous "law of the birthright," which existed among the families of the ancients. This patriarchal order was established by God. It was a call to responsibility. Through a long process of mutated developments, this great principle was later expressed in southern Asia as the Hindu caste system. And in like manner, the Moslem belief in *jihad* or holy war against the unbelieving infidels, and the sense of superiority associated with state Shinto in Japan, by which the Yamato race claimed an inherent right to rule over others by force and bloodshed if necessary, are all decadent expressions of the ancient law of the birthright.¹⁹

By far the most influential and effective Mormon spokesman of a diffusionist view is Hugh Nibley of Brigham Young University. In all his prodigious scholarship, there is an underlying view of an unchanging God who in his dealing with man follows a constant pattern. God repeatedly reveals his will, his unchanging truth, to selected peoples of the earth. Resemblances and ties which seem to exist among all the religions of antiquity reappear in history primarily

¹⁶Alvin R. Dyer, *This Age of Confusion* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1964), p. 15.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 98.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 105-10.

¹⁹Ibid., p. viii.

because of a pattern of divine restorations and human apostasies. And since the teachings and powers of God to chosen peoples have often been deliberately imitated in every age of the world, and in other ways disseminated among men, a diffusion of truth from a single center has continued to recur. What has been done in one dispensation has often been foreshadowed in another. In Nibley we have an eschatological pattern of history which is also prominent in Jewish and Christian scriptures, and in apocryphal writings as well: a periodic repetition of certain characteristic events—a “visitation,” as it was called, from heaven; the making of a covenant; the corruption and wickedness of men, leading to the breaking of the covenant; the bondage of sin, then the coming of a prophet with a call to repentance; the making of a new covenant; and so around the cycle.²⁰ God is at the helm of history. Thus, at the base, religious parallels are rooted in the mind and will of God, in repeated revelations. Parallels between the history of the restored Church and the doings of the ancients are not consciously contrived imitations; the analogies that can be drawn between the sufferings, wanderings, and spiritual aspirations of the Mormon pioneers and those of the people of ancient Israel cannot be drawn because the former wanted it so. The Mormons were pushed around entirely against their own will. All along, the whole history of the Church has been the will of God. Resemblances to earlier beliefs and experiences have an extraordinary force among Latter-day Saints because they have not been intentional and they actually are the fulfillment of prophecy.²¹

In his most recent book, faced with resemblances between the LDS temple endowment ceremony and ancient Egyptian endowment rites, Nibley sees these as an example of countless parallels, many of them instructive, among the customs and religions of mankind. But they are imitations of earlier gospel models, and little more. The Egyptian rites “. . . are a parody, an imitation, but as such not to be despised. For all the great age and consistency of their rites and teachings, which certainly command respect, the Egyptians did not have the real thing, and they knew it.”²²

4. *The Common Human Predicament.* There are Mormons who believe that the diffusion theory explains religious parallels only in a limited way. They readily agree that God revealed original principles and ordinances of the gospel, and bestowed the authority

²⁰Hugh Nibley, *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954), p. 213.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 214, 215.

²²Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), p. xii.

and power of the priesthood to Adam, and that in the course of time as populations expanded and as peoples moved away from one another and became independent they took with them some of their original features and applied them in new settings. But to these Latter-day Saints this is a handy explanation that fails to cover much of the ground. At best such a view explains common religious forms only within limited geographical areas.

William A. Wilson, the Mormon folklorist, observes that if all stories develop out of the original story in the Garden of Eden, then we should be able to find in the Bible account all the materials that have generated other stories as they fragmented and broke into parts.²³ But this cannot be done. Moreover, folklore studies indicate that certain kinds of stories and beliefs are limited to particular peoples. They do not circulate worldwide. In a study of folk beliefs among peoples of the Indo-European languages, that is, from Ireland to India, one can find common themes. Wherever Indo-Europeans have travelled, parallel beliefs have been widely diffused. Similar ideas can be found in North America, South America, and other parts of the world by travellers who have taken them there. But such diffusion is limited; the elements of Indo-European folk tales, for example, are not found in Southeast Asia. Diffusion from a single source answers only part of the problem of religious parallels worldwide.

The view here is that there are certain things that are fundamental to all human beings—arising out of the common human predicament—that explain many of the similarities of thought and practice so widely experienced here on earth. All men face problems of birth, life, sex, disease, death, joy, disappointment, and grief. All men ask, Why must we die? Why must we be sick? Why must we grow old? Why must we suffer? What happens after death? Common beliefs and practices arise from the common predicament of man in responding to his circumstances. Parallels to the experience of Job in the Old Testament are everywhere.

This polygenetic view that religious beliefs and rituals have arisen spontaneously and independently in various countries, but have generally followed uniform patterns of development, offers special insights into the uses of religious symbols, rituals, and ordinances among mankind. Mircea Eliade, the great professor of comparative religion at the University of Chicago, says that human actions have no intrinsic value. Human actions become valuable only insofar as they unfold according to divine patterns. If human life is to have any

²³In a tape recorded interview.

ultimate meaning it must somehow transcend this human predicament. It must somehow become identified with the transcendental, the divine. If things remain earthly, they have only limited earthly value. Eliade concludes that human beings all over the world carry out festivals, rituals, and ordinances, as an aid and an effort to transcend the ordinary human predicament.²⁴ Victor Turner, and others, speaks of these as "periods of timeless time," wherein men, through the language of ritual, transcend the arbitrary human world, and connect themselves, their relationships, their institutions, and their social order with something beyond this life.²⁵ Thus, religious symbols are the means by which they establish contact with the divine. And without such ordinances and rituals the provisional and arbitrary arrangements of this world have no ultimate value. If life is to have intrinsic value it must be derived from some external transcendental source. People all over the world realize this. And this common realization brings about similarities in religious belief and practice.

Since our mundane world has no ultimate meaning until it is connected with something beyond this, frustration and pain are relieved primarily through extraordinary rituals and symbolic expressions. And in this, God is not a God of one point in time, or of one people, or even one genetic line.

Latter-day Saints may be exclusive in ways that they are not aware of all the time. Other peoples have basic operating principles in their religious systems that find expression in terms of their own cultural idiom. We differ from these people culturally; the vehicles of our expression are different. But when we deal with others at similar levels of meaning or seek to communicate according to similar principles rather than expecting to use similar cultural idioms, we reach common ground. We find similarity. Thus Merlin Myers has observed that it may well be that for the celestial kingdom, the symbolic vehicles and the underlying principles must be adapted to each other in ways that preclude variation there. He believes that:

. . . no doubt there are cultural vehicles that are peculiarly adapted to the celestial order of things. Truth can be given expression in a variety of cultural and symbolic vehicles, and can provide valid functions and services for those who receive them, but the cultural symbols of man can also be regarded as vehicles to aid people in reaching higher means of expression in the celestial kingdom.

²⁴See Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1959).

²⁵Victor Witter Turner, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among Ndembu of Zambia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). See especially p. 5ff.

Within the Church there are instrumentalities by which such levels of insight are encouraged and achieved.²⁶

In the 84th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord explains that the greater priesthood holds the keys of the mysteries of the kingdom and that "without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh" (D&C 84:21).

John A. Widtsoe repeatedly emphasized that man lives in a world of symbols, and some not so beautiful and pleasing, but that their forms are of relatively little consequence. In the end, it is what they suggest and teach that counts: "No man or woman can come out of the temple endowed as he should be, unless he has seen, beyond the symbol, the mighty realities for which the symbols stand."²⁷

For those Mormons who give credence to "the common human predicament" view, there is superiority in the rites and ordinances of the priesthood, but at the same time peoples all over the world are trying to accomplish similar goals within the framework of their own world view. They have their symbols and ordinances, too, and through these symbols they seek to transcend their earthly predicament. These people seek to break through this mundane realm and realize the supernatural by means of them. In other words, all men bear the stamp of the entire human condition; the similarities of their concern and their response to the needs and conditions of this life is not essentially a question of either divine or nefarious forces emanating from another world; but of the harsh realities of this one.

5. *The Light and Spirit of Christ.* In Mormon theology, the spiritual influence which emanates from God is not confined to selected nations, races, or groups. All men share an inheritance of divine light. Christ himself is the light of the world; even those who have never heard of Christ are granted the spirit and light of Christ. In the Book of Mormon, Christ told the brother of Jared, "In me shall all mankind have light" (Ether 3:14). In a revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord explained:

Whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ. And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man through the world, that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit. (D&C 84:45-46)

And in the "Olive Leaf" revelation of 1832 we are told that this Light of Christ

²⁶I am indebted to Professor Myers, not simply for his insights, but for the insights he has stimulated within me in our taped discussions.

²⁷John A. Widtsoe, "Temple Worship," *Utah Genealogical Magazine* 12 (April 1921):62.

... proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space—
... [It is the light] by which all things are governed, even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne, who is in the bosom of eternity, who is in the midst of all things. (D&C 88:12-13)

If any man acts according to this inspiration, he progresses from grace to grace, learning precept upon precept, until he receives full enlightenment.²⁸ That every man ever born enjoys the light of Christ was reiterated by Brigham Young, who taught that there has never been “a man or woman upon the face of the earth, from the days of Adam to this day, who has not been enlightened, instructed, and taught by the revelations of Jesus Christ.”²⁹ This allows each individual to recognize truth, and the associated results often lift men to new and higher insights than were traditionally known among a given people.

Since God has thus inspired men of all cultures and creeds, the possibilities are staggering. Such religious reformers as Martin Luther and John Wesley—despite their personal frailties and errors—may be looked upon as instruments of God’s will. Likewise, a whole continuum of Christian mystics in medieval European history, some of whose ideas seem at times to closely resemble Mormon teachings today, show the extent to which they separated themselves from the “orthodox” thought of the Catholic Church. These include St. Francis of Assisi and St. Bernard de Clairvaux, to name only two. Also, Christian devotionism represented by Thomas a Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ* (1426), on the way in which a true Christian should behave, and the development of Christian art and architecture in Russia, beautifully express a diffusion of inspiration and light among the peoples of Europe.

Among Mexicans, Latin Americans, and Spaniards, in Europe as well as in the Western Hemisphere, contributions to civilization are monumental and countless. Called the “Greeks of the New World” because of their advanced culture, the Maya Indians created a calendar that has the reputation of being more nearly perfect than those devised elsewhere in the world. The works of Diego Rivera and Rufino Tamayo, as well as Francisco Goya and Diego Velázquez, in the fields of literature and painting, are celebrated worldwide for their illuminations and beauty. From Spain, Miguel de Cervantes’ classic, *Don Quixote*, has provided inspiring insights that have encouraged and sustained men of all lands to seek for betterment in life. Mexican

²⁸See Charles W. Penrose in *Journal of Discourses* 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1855-86), 12:85. Hereafter cited as *JD*.

²⁹Brigham Young in *JD*, 2:139.

achievements in establishing the first university in North America and in publishing the first book in the Western Hemisphere (in 1539 by Juan Pablos), have been a great blessing to all those who have been able to come under their influence.

Columbus and the Pilgrims were moved upon by the "Spirit of God" to sail to the New World. The founding fathers of the United States were also moved upon by the Spirit. Great western scientists and poets were likewise inspired.³⁰

INSPIRATION OF "HEATHEN" PHILOSOPHERS,
RELIGIOUS LEADERS, AND PEOPLES

It follows, then, that God inspires not only non-Mormons but also non-Christians as well. God has raised up inspired teachers and great reformers in various cultures throughout history—not only Jewish and Christian spokesmen. In this Mormon view, all peoples and even all religions possess elements of truth. To illustrate, all of the following religions or philosophies profess a statement of moral principle in essentially the same wording as the Christian golden rule: Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, Shinto, Socratic Philosophy, Confucianism, Taoism, and Jainism. John Taylor affirmed: "The Catholics have many pieces of truth; so have the Protestants, the Mahometans, and Heathens. . . ."³¹ George Albert Smith reiterated this theme,³² and Brigham Young observed:

"Do you suppose the Hindoos have the light of the Spirit of Christ?" I know they have; and so have the Hottentots, and so has every nation and kingdom upon the face of the earth, even though some of them may be cannibals.³³

Latter-day Saints believe that America was divinely prepared as a haven for the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; that Columbus was inspired to discover this promised land, and that the Constitution of the United States was instituted of God. But they also teach that the Omnipresent Spirit moved upon the thinkers of Greece and Rome, and upon the Protestant reformers of European history. Likewise artists and thinkers in Asia have been moved upon by inspiration from God: Ferdosi of Persia; Kalidasa, Asoka, and Gandhi of India; Mencius, Tu Fu, and Po Chiu-I of China; Sejong and Cong Mong-ju of Korea; Basho and Chikamatsu of Japan;

³⁰This is elaborately emphasized by Charles W. Penrose in *JD*, 23:346.

³¹*JD*, 1:154-59.

³²Conference Reports, 5 October 1931, p. 120.

³³*JD*, 2:140

and José Rizal of the Philippines, to name only a few at random. God's Spirit has rested upon other inquiring and imaginative men who have produced incomparable Shang bronzes, T'ang pottery, Sung landscapes, Koryo celedans, and magnificent buildings, mosaics, paintings, and sculptures in India and in the Middle East; it has also lead to the invention of Arabic numerals and the Indian zero, and in China, Korea, and Japan to the spinning wheel, paper, the first ironclad ships, the foundations of modern chemistry, and the first printing presses with moveable type.

Although there may be Latter-day Saints who believe that God's operations are confined to their Church, in the teachings of the Church leaders, this is a mistake; for God operates among his children in all nations.³⁴ The living prophet and president of the Church communicates God's will to those within the Church and to all men who are prepared and able to listen; for those outside the Church, God often employs other spokesmen. Brigham H. Roberts explained, "It is nowhere held that this man [the living prophet] is the only instrumentality through which God may communicate his mind and will to the world."³⁵ All who seek God are entitled to further light and knowledge, regardless of historical or cultural setting. Thus, John A. Widtsoe's view helps explain the impetus for various religious developments:

Spiritual outreachings are not peculiar to one country. Instead, in every land men have sought the gifts of the spirit. . . . Men have arisen in every land, who have tried to formulate the way to happiness, for the benefit of themselves and their fellow men. . . . The religions of Egypt, China, India, and Persia, are examples.³⁶

Brigham Young believed that even idolatry arises from the actions of men of faith.³⁷

Orson F. Whitney taught that Zoroaster, Mahavira, Gotama Buddha, and Confucius ". . . were servants of the Lord in a lesser sense, and were sent to those pagan or heathen nations to give them the measure of truth that a wise Providence had allotted to them" who, along with others "have been used from the beginning to help along the Lord's work—mighty auxiliaries in the hands of an Almighty God,

³⁴JD, 24:60.

³⁵In B. H. Roberts, *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1907), 1:514.

³⁶John A. Widtsoe, "Is There a Master Race?" *Evidences and Reconciliations* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1947), vol. 2, *Gospel Interpretations* (1947), p. 216.

³⁷JD, 6:194.

carrying out his purposes, consciously or unconsciously.”³⁸ Brigham H. Roberts summarizes:

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is established for the instruction of men; and is one of God’s instrumentalities for making known the truth yet he is not limited to that institution for such purposes, neither in time nor place. God raises up wise men . . . of their own tongue and nationality, speaking to them through means that they can comprehend; not always giving a fulness of truth such as may be found in the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ; but always giving that measure of truth that the people are prepared to receive. Mormonism holds, then, that all the great teachers are servants of God; among all nations and in all ages. They are inspired men, appointed to instruct God’s children according to the conditions in the midst of which he finds them. Hence it is not obnoxious to Mormonism to regard Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher and moralist, as a servant of God, inspired to a certain degree by him to teach those great moral maxims which have governed those millions of God’s children for lo! these many centuries. It is willing to regard Gautama, Buddha as an inspired servant of God, teaching a measure of the truth, at least giving to these people that twilight of truth by which they may somewhat see their way. So with the Arabian prophet, that wild spirit that turned the Arabians from worshiping idols to a conception of the Creator of heaven and earth that was more excellent than their previous conception of Deity. And so the sages of Greece and of Rome. So the reformers of early Protestant times. Wherever God finds a soul sufficiently enlightened and pure; one with whom his Spirit can communicate, lo! he makes of him a teacher of men. While the path of sensuality and darkness may be that which most men tread, a few, to paraphrase the words of a moral philosopher of high standing, have been led along the upward path; a few in all countries and generations have been wisdom seekers, or seekers of God. They have been so because the Divine Word of Wisdom has looked upon them, choosing them for the knowledge and service of himself.³⁹

George A. Smith believed that Mohammed “was no doubt raised up by God on purpose to scourge the world for their idolatry.”⁴⁰ Parley P. Pratt, in a General Conference address, declared that

. . . with all my prejudices of early youth, and habits of thought and reading, my rational faculties would compel me to admit that the Mahometan history and Mahometan doctrine was a standard raised against the most corrupt and abominable idolatry that ever

³⁸*Conference Reports*, 3 April 1921, pp. 32, 33. See also *Cowley and Whitney on Doctrine*, comp. Forace Green (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), pp. 292-93.

³⁹Roberts, *Defense of Faith and Saints*, 1:512-13.

⁴⁰*JD*, 3:32.

perverted our earth, found in the creeds and worship of Christians, falsely so named.⁴¹

Moses Thatcher, another member of the Council of the Twelve of the Church, was "... struck by the profound philosophy, pure morality, and comprehensiveness exhibited in the writings of Confucius and Mencius and the Chinese sages" as "divinely inspired, far-reaching and heavenly doctrines."⁴² Likewise, in a KSL radio address in 1927, Elder Matthew Cowley expressed his belief that "Confucius understood the doctrine of repentance" and that on the basis of his teachings on purity and virtue "one would almost believe that the gospel was borrowed from Confucius."⁴³

Thus in this Mormon view, God has inspired men to think and write according to the conditions in the midst of which he finds them; Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shinto, and Buddhism have within them inspired and inspirational principles, and the peoples of these lands will be judged by God in accordance with their individual willingness to abide by them, as they are not totally subversive of gospel values, but are striking evidence that God has spoken "to all nations of the earth," and that mankind will ultimately be judged by that which they have been inspired to receive, at least until a fulness of the gospel has been provided.⁴⁴

James E. Talmage saw authentic comparisons between Mormonism and Buddhism, believing that the latter provided a constructive path that could consistently lead upward to the fulness of the restored gospel:

We believe that man may advance in righteousness and become more nearly perfect; even as the followers of Buddha teach, that by the "Holy Path" [Hinayana] or by the "Pure Path" [Mahayana] men may walk in the light and become Buddha.

We believe as you do, my beloved readers in Japan, that some will follow the path of Hinayana and others the higher road of Mahayana—each choosing for himself, according to inclination and capacity; and, sad to say, yet others use that God-given freedom of choice and follow the path of sin that leadeth downward to perdition.⁴⁵

The distinction thus made is significant and impressive, and it is in effect the difference between the Mosaic law and the gospel of Jesus

⁴¹JD, 3:40

⁴²Moses Thatcher, "Chinese Classics," *The Contributor* 8 (1887):301.

⁴³Matthew Cowley, "The Gospel of Repentance," KSL Radio Address, Sunday evening, 31 April 1927.

⁴⁴Cf. 2 Nephi 29:7-12.

⁴⁵James E. Talmage, "In the Lineage of the Gods," *Improvement Era* 8 (August 1905):726-27.

Christ. Better to live by Hinayana—in obedience to the stern commands, “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not”—better to do good through hope of reward and eschew evil through fear of punishment, than to do evil and reject good. But better still, far better is it, to imbibe the spirit of righteous law—to walk by Mahayana—to make right living the natural mode of life, and through inspiration and divine love, rather than because of the law’s demands, rise to exalted rank.

CONCLUSION

Each of the five Mormon views elaborated here provides useful and meaningful insights into questions of religious resemblances. But none of them covers the whole ground alone, and all of them together fall short of explaining all such parallels. My own feeling is that only inspiration from the Lord can provide the answers as to which of these five possibilities should be dominant in a particular case. Regardless of the relative importance of each of the five in a particular setting, we must decide from a tactical point of view whether the work of the Church will be more effective if we emphasize the diabolic nature of the similarities between the gospel and the native faiths, or if we emphasize the heritage of the pre-earth life, or of the light of Christ, or of a partially accurate deposit of faith and truth from ancient times, or of whatever else. But this much is certain, the view one takes has important implications for the future of the Church.

Our reactions to religious similarities not only influence our perceptions of the religions of Asia but also our feelings for missionary work in that part of the world. With even a little familiarity with other religions, we can be much impressed by what seem to be duplications of elements usually assumed to be totally unique to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. To come upon these parallels in the remains of cultures long dead (Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Ugaritic, and others) is one thing. To come upon them in the scriptures of living world faiths which compete with us for the hearts and minds of men—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—or in Confucian and Taoist teachings honored among the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese—this may be more difficult to handle. A little such familiarity with non-Christian religion can breed confusion and concern. And some may be tempted to turn to sheer relativism, to believe that one faith is as good as another, or that all faiths express the same truth in variant cultural trappings.

This is one of the pitfalls often associated with polygenetic “human predicament” and “Light of Christ” approaches to the whole problem of religious resemblances. Some men have seized upon the

resemblances of Christ to other men of his age and to other so-called hero figures of all time, and upon resemblances between Joseph Smith and Mohammed, or some other religious leader, to prove that these two were simply two of many. That makes the Savior and the Prophet much easier to explain. Hugh Nibley has warned us that by diligent research one can match all the Christian teachings with the teachings of others; and these have been pointed to repeatedly by students of comparative religion in order to bring Christ and his prophets down to the level of everyday experience and supplant the miraculous and embarrassing by the commonplace and reassuring. As to the process of gaining a sure knowledge of the Lord and his prophet, I heartily agree with Nibley's colorful and cryptic statement:

One does not compose music with a sliderule, and the divinity and truthfulness of Christ were never meant to be proved by history, since we are told from the beginning that that knowledge comes to one only by direct revelation from the Father in heaven.⁴⁶

There is one aspect of the diffusionist approach that I find particularly challenging to Mormon students of comparative religion. Diffusionists tend to think in terms of dispensation patterns as a framework for understanding the religious experience of mankind. At least by implication we are told that the human story is a conflict between two states of mind, between those who have been rebellious, indifferent or hostile to God, and those who have been custodians of truth, the lovers of God. This is the yardstick by which the various religions may be measured. Therefore, in each case we must ask ourselves how much it has preserved of the primitive, original revelation—and what are its known historical links. After Israel (Judaism), how should the great religions be ranked? Should first place be assigned to Zoroastrianism, because it hands on and recasts a tradition of remote antiquity, of severe truth and high morality? Should Zoroaster be followed by the rishis of the vedas, Brahmins by birth, who spring from Seth's descendants by one line or a class of men chosen by God, who though somewhat crippled or degenerated, are still devoted to God's service, as E. L. Allen has contended?⁴⁷ Or, on the other hand, shall we agree that among the nations of antiquity who stood nearest to or at least, very near to the source of primitive revelations from God, the Chinese must hold a distinguished place? Among the Chinese are there not many remarkable vestiges of eternal

⁴⁶Nibley, *The World and the Prophets*, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁷E. L. Allen, *Christianity Among the Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 61-62.

truth to be found in their classical works and in their time-honored religious traditions⁴⁸ As Latter-day Saints begin to seriously investigate the source of Japanese religion, and lay claims of finding extraordinary links between them and the peoples of the Old Testament and Book of Mormon, does this require a significant revision of our perceptions of that people's place in the unfolding of God's work in the Latter Days, as so many of our students have suggested in recent years?⁴⁹

Among those Latter-day Saints who underscore the manifestation of God's influence among all men on an independent and personal basis—either through his spirit or in response to common needs and problems in the human condition—the universality of God is stressed. The whole race of man, in every land, of every color, and every stage of culture, is not only the offspring of God, but in the vast compass of his providence all are being supported by his love to reach within the limits of their powers a knowledge of the Supreme. Not only in this is God thought of as having a more universal and direct involvement in the lives of all his children on an individual basis, but also the sense of community among human beings is enhanced. On the other hand, diffusionists tend to stress the eternal struggle between truth and error between eternal truth and local culture, between God's chosen people and those who are not so chosen, between the revelations of God and the ways of the world. Implicitly, this calls for a primary focus on the ways in which Latter-day Saints are different from others, rather than upon their common humanity or their dependence on a common Father. Among diffusionists there is always the temptation to construe a narrow, exclusive, and arrogant view of themselves and of the Church that militates against true brotherhood—the pure Love of Christ—the expansion of Zion in “nethermost” places in the earth, the full acceptance of gospel values in alien heathen cultures, and full recognition that the God of Israel is also the God of the whole earth.

For those of us who seem ready to see God's handiwork throughout the world, and even in the lives of wise teachers, poets, philosophers, and scientists, and who are happy to believe that they all

⁴⁸One delightful example of this proposition is Gerrit Gong's, “We are Waiting the Impact of Chinese Ancestor Worship,” a typescript with slide illustrations, which argues that the Chinese have enjoyed the Spirit of Elijah (i.e., a great tradition of salvation for the dead) from times of remote antiquity.

⁴⁹This is a popular theme among some Japanese Latter-day Saints, and particularly among *nisei* Japanese, and missionaries returned from Japanese fields of labor. Some of the ramifications are suggested in my article, “Did Christ visit Japan?” *BYU Studies* 10 (Winter 1970):135-58; see also “In Search of [Japanese] Identity,” in my forthcoming book, *Every Nation, Kindred, Tongue, and People*.

have a work and mission under an overruling Providence, there are two final cautions I would like to make. First, although the Spirit and power of Christ is manifest worldwide, this is not to suggest that the founders and teachers of the great religions of man have a full endowment either of light or power. They have not. They did not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost or the keys and authority of the Holy Priesthood, and without these they could not receive revelation and authority to perform more than preparatory principles and ordinances for their people. Gotama Buddha has been a light for Asia, but he could not be the light of the world. He was not appointed or empowered to that position. I believe that Mohammed was an inspired man, a prophet without priesthood, who performed a particular mission, at a special time, among a people with special needs. But God has a living Prophet who heads up his universal kingdom in the earth—The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The President of the Church is God's mouthpiece; a universal mouthpiece, endowed with the keys of presidency over all affairs dealing with a fulness of God's power and authority throughout the earth.

As Latter-day Saints we cannot dismiss Buddhism out of hand simply as a false religion. The light of Christ shines in it too. But there is danger here. A friendly and appreciative approach to non-Mormon religions in Asia carries with it an intrinsic temptation to think that in places like Thailand we must at least symbolically, if not literally, dress the Mormon missionaries as Buddhist monks. But recognition of religious parallels does not imply the need or advisability of such a course. In seeking for that which is "virtuous, lovely, and praiseworthy" within the native faiths, we are not seeking accommodation or compromise. Others have tried this with no effective benefit. There is no value to the Church nor to the people of Asia in allowing Jehovah to be accepted into the Buddhist pantheon; and there is no gospel benefit in having Jesus Christ identified as an avatar of a Hindu god, as an incarnation of the Buddha, or in any way less than the Son of God, "the only name given among men" whereby we must be saved. But despite the prospect of this negative result, the positive implications of using good things in Asia as building blocks for bringing people into a fuller realization of their own spiritual possibilities must not be ignored.