

“... Of Countries and of Kingdoms”

Jeffery R. Holland

When Latter-day Saints speak of the “brotherhood of man,” that phrase has special meaning. It means literally that we are all sons and daughters of an eternal father, spiritual kin who once participated in a spiritual family setting. There were no unfamiliar races, no confusing tongues, no cross- or counter-cultures. There was, nevertheless, conflict. But most of the family stayed together.

That kindred relationship continued for the faithful through the mortal parenthood of Adam and Eve by which we renewed our relationship as brothers and sisters, this time in a physical sense. Still there were no unfamiliar races, no confusing tongues, no cross- or counter-cultures. But there did remain the possibility of conflict and loss of more of the family. To nullify that conflict and loss as much as possible, and to weld (as Joseph Smith said) a saving link between these parents and their children, these brothers and sisters, the principles and ordinances of the gospel of Jesus Christ were immediately introduced. A spiritual family which became a physical family would now with effort and faith become an eternal family. May I quote from George F. Richards, the late president of the Council of the Twelve. Underscoring the truths taught in the fifth chapter of Moses, he said,

The gospel of Jesus Christ was taught to Adam. This is a unique doctrine among the world's followers of Christ. Yet it is one of the basic truths revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith by the eternal father.

This knowledge explains the course of human history. Man from the beginning was taught the gospel. The Lord did not initiate his work on earth by leaving [him] in darkness, but men yielding to the temptations of the evil one departed from the truth. Thus came a succession of apostasies and restorations.

Jeffery R. Holland is commissioner of education for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Thus also it happens that the simple doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ appear or have appeared . . . in the religious beliefs of mankind. Fragments of the truth have been handed down through the ages.

This doctrine amply substantiated . . . becomes a powerful evidence for a common source of religious truth, and for the existence of gospel knowledge from the beginning of earth history.¹

The significance of this distinctive Latter-day Saint doctrine cannot be overstated. Yet it would be foolish to propose that all the world's religious beliefs came from such a common and truthful source. But much of what we study and learn historically comes from that experience, an experience which stems back through the accumulation of races, tongues, and cultures—and conflicts—this human family has witnessed since Adam and Eve stepped out of the Garden of Eden.

Students of comparative world religion, in their own way, seek to perform a Haleyan—"Haley" as in "Alex," not "comet"—a Haleyan task. As I see it they, too, are searching for *roots*. LDS students assist by undertaking to define and trace the branches of a family and doctrinal tree, a tree now grown very large, a tree in years past hardly recognizable from limb to limb. Theologically speaking, we know many branches have been inappropriately grafted in and will have to be cut away. Other, truer branches have received too little attention and they will have to be nourished. But with all the searching, and tracing, and watering, and pruning that may need to be done before a final harvest, there is nevertheless before us, restored and continually reaffirmed in our present dispensation, the gospel of Jesus Christ—that age-old tree of Adam's faith and Adam's family.

In this day of Church activity which is, by a prophet's declaration, going to take us to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people we do well to aid that process and facilitate our friendships by sharing here, in just such a symposium, our mutual experience, our knowledge of "countries and of kingdoms" as the Lord has commanded (D&C 88:79). Even in the early and difficult days of this dispensation, with more than enough hardships and temporal travail to go around, the Lord nevertheless urged our forefathers to "study and learn and become acquainted with all good books and with languages, tongues, and people" (D&C 90:15). In the same way

¹George F. Richards in Milton R. Hunter, *The Gospel Through the Ages* (Salt Lake City: Stevens and Wallis, 1945), p. v.

and presumably at the same time we declare ourselves to be seekers after anything that is "virtuous, lovely, of good report or praiseworthy" (Thirteenth Article of Faith). That search is now taking us to countries and kingdoms, cultures and corners of the world our fathers never knew and our grandfathers never dreamed of. The rich opportunity of our time suggests that we move as rapidly and as resolutely into these "new" frontiers as we are able. (They are, of course, very old frontiers.) I am, in short, trying to suggest that what you are doing here today in this comparative religion symposium is not simply a nice intellectual exercise or just another praiseworthy educational experience. For me it is part of a personal dream in terms of what the Center for Religious Studies at BYU may yet do. It is deeply theological, it has eternal implications, and it will play its own part in the process of international brotherhood. Ultimately it will play its own part in preparation for that blessed day—again in a theological framework—when the lamb shall lie down with the lion and we shall beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruninghooks. Then, says the Lord, "they shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 2:4; 11:9).

Now just a few specifics about the agenda of this symposium.

Faith seems to be, one way or another, the first principle in any man's devotional life. As far back as anthropologists document, man has worshipped and often believed that he had an immortal soul. (I have spent some time here suggesting why that should not be surprising to Latter-day Saints.) William Howells describes man's impulse to worship in what we would consider to be almost uniquely Latter-day Saint language. He says that man, unlike other animals, is the "creature who comprehends things he cannot see and believes in things he cannot comprehend."²

Obviously it will not take even an alert Latter-day Saint ear to recognize the echo from the opening line of the 11th chapter of Hebrews: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1) or from the 32nd chapter of Alma: ". . . faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if you have faith you hope for things which are not seen which are true" (Alma 32:21). Or Elliot Landau's classic response to his fellow Jews after his conversion to Mormonism. In answer

²As cited in Paul Hutchinson, "How Mankind Worships," *The World's Great Religions* (New York: Golden Press, 1967), p. 9.

to the persistent “why?” he confessed, “My heart told me things my head did not understand.”

That reach for faith—and to Latter-day Saints that is specifically faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—takes us into considerations of deity, of worship, of death, and much more. Reassuringly, the response to that faith is extended to the whole of the human family. In scope, Christ’s plan of salvation as taught in the restored doctrines of this dispensation includes not only every living creature on the earth but every ancestor before us and every remnant of our posterity to come. In every age and in every area each living soul will have an opportunity to hear and accept the fulness of the doctrine of Christ. That opportunity is unlimited. Christ’s was, according to Amulek (Alma 34:10), an infinite and eternal sacrifice and its blessings will be available to every man, woman, and child from the north to the south, the east to the west, and every island of the sea.

Part of that universal opportunity includes a universal way by which all might respond to it. Every man shares an inheritance of divine light, an influence emanating from the Godhead which is not confined to select nations, races, or peoples. “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 84:46).

President Brigham Young once said:

The spirit of the Lord, the light of Christ, and the inspiration of the Almighty are given to every man . . . I do not believe for one moment that there has 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. “What? the ignorant heathen?” Yes every human being who has possessed a sane mind. . . . No matter what the traditions of their fathers were, those who were honest before the Lord, and acted uprightly according to the best knowledge they had, will have an opportunity to go to the kingdom of God. . . . No matter whether we are Jew or Gentile . . . No matter whether we believe in the Koran as firmly as we now believe in the Bible; . . . if we are honest before the God we serve.³

The key words are, of course, honesty and opportunity. And the history of gospel activity indicates that many have been honest and will take the opportunity when it is presented to them, in this life or the next.

³*Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1855-86), 2:137, 139. Hereafter cited as *JD*.

Let me just quickly give a brief (and incomplete) inventory of some quotations that reinforce the objectives of your symposium. Charles W. Penrose explained,

For the inspiration of God in olden times was not confined to the men who wrote the Jewish scriptures. God has permitted his spirit which is the light of truth and which manifests truth, to be poured out upon all the inhabitants of the earth to some extent; . . . There have been inspired bards and sages and poets who have uttered words of truth, words of inspiration concerning things of which they had been enlightened of God and many things that such men wrote have been recorded and handed down and scraps of them may be found among all nations and peoples. His spirit has enlightened mankind in all ages to a certain extent; for the spirit of the Lord, which gives light to the human understanding is the spirit by which we live; it is the spirit of light; it is the spirit of life . . . [That] spirit is not confined to one race of people, or to one country, or to one age or generation, but it is universal; it is the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.⁴

Orson F. Whitney once said before a general conference of the Church,

God is using not only his covenant people, but other people as well, to consummate a work, stupendous, magnificent, and altogether too arduous for this little handful of saints to accomplish by and of themselves. . . . Outside of the pale [of the Church] are other good and great men, not bearing the priesthood, but possessing profundity of thought, great wisdom, and a desire to uplift their fellows, [who] have been sent by the Almighty into many nations to give them not the fullness of the gospel, but that portion of truth that they were able to receive and wisely use. Such men as Confucius, . . . Zoroaster, . . . Buddha, . . . Socrates and Plato, . . . these all had some of the light that is universally diffused, and concerning which we of this day [hear]. They 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 has allotted to them.

[They have been] mighty auxiliaries in the hands of an almighty God, carrying out his purposes, consciously or unconsciously.⁵

Parley P. Pratt once said that Mohammed, a son of Abraham, was on the side of truth in teaching "the true and living God" and that his was, in its day "a standard raised against the most corrupt and abominable idolatry that ever perverted our earth."⁶ In 1853 John

⁴JD, 23:346.

⁵Conference Reports of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 5 October 1931, p. 120.

⁶JD, 3:40

Taylor confirmed, "The Catholics have many pieces of truth; so have the Protestants, the Mohammedans and the heathens."⁷ Nearly a century later George Albert Smith stated, "I meet members of the Catholic, the Presbyterian, the Baptist, and the Methodist, and all other churches, and I find in these men and women virtues that are most beautiful to me."⁸

After mentioning that all religions have some truth, Joseph Smith said: "We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true Mormons."⁹

This is not an attempt to be encyclopedic or exhaustive or even boring but it does recall the prophet Alma: "For behold the Lord does grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have" (Alma 29:8). And perhaps it helps say in a variety of ways how much we need to do and how broad our sources and opportunities are. I include on that scroll of sources some of the "languages, tongues, and people" to which these prophets have referred. They will all make their appropriate appearance in the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times.

Let me use just one specific example which Spencer Palmer and I have discussed, a principle on which he has improved my thinking. Some of what follows will be Professor Palmer's own language. I speak of the doctrine of meditation, so often identified with a tradition like Buddhism. I do *not* speak of popularized transcendental thought or teenage Zen Buddhism. I speak simply of quiet, uninterrupted, thoughtful consideration of God's will and goodness to us. This is one of the Lord's basic teachings seldom practiced enough in the West. Even Latter-day Saints sometimes seem to have too little time for it. Yet the Savior set the example when, after feeding the 5,000, he went to the mountain for solitude and "when the evening was come, he was there alone" (Matthew 14:23). During the hour of his greatest agony, he sought seclusion in the Garden of Gethsemane where he had "oft times resorted" (John 18:2). When assembled believers on the American continent failed to understand his message, he commanded them:

⁷JD, 1:154, 159.

⁸*Conference Reports*, 5 October 1931, p. 120.

⁹Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:517. Hereafter cited as *HC*.

Therefore, go ye unto your homes, and *ponder* upon the things which I have said, and ask of the Father, in my name, that ye may understand, and *prepare your minds* for the morrow, and I come unto you again. (3 Nephi 17:3; italics added)

North American members and missionaries often express concern about the Eastern inclination toward the contemplative life, yet as a scriptural principle and in their purest form, such contemplation and prayer are usually prerequisites for revelation from the Lord. David *meditated* on the law of the Lord day and night (Psalms 1); he first *considered* God's heavenly creations, then *pondered* upon the significance of man (Psalms 8:3-4); Nephi was caught away in the Spirit only after he sat *pondering* in his heart (1 Nephi 11:1). The voice of the Lord commanded Nephi to "get thee into the mountain for prayer," and there he cried unto the Lord. He did go oft *into the mountains* where he prayed often (1 Nephi 18:3). His heart *pondereth continually* upon spiritual things (2 Nephi 4:16). Out with nature, Enos reported that the truths of eternal life *sunk deep into his heart* (Enos 3); Helaman frequently *pondered* privately (Helaman 10:1, 3); Oliver Cowdery was told that he had not understood the nature of revelation and must first "*study it out*" in his mind before answers could come (D&C 9:7); President Joseph F. Smith received the great vision of the redemption of the dead only after he had spent "*many hours pondering* over the scriptures and *reverting* his mind to the writings of the ancients, then were the eyes of his understanding opened, and the Spirit of the Lord began to rest upon him."¹⁰ Joseph Smith, Jr., prepared his mind through "serious reflection," and on the crucial passage in James 1:5 he "reflected again and again." "After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me, and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer the desire of my heart to God" (Joseph Smith 2:8, 12, 15).

President David O. McKay in a 1967 general conference address emphasized the importance of meditation as an essential feature of worship in the lives of Latter-day Saints:

I think we pay too little attention to the value of meditation, a principle of devotion.

In our worship there are two elements: one is spiritual communion rising from our own meditation; the other instruction from others, particularly from those who have authority to guide and

¹⁰"Vision of the Redemption of the Dead," Pearl of Great Price. See Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), p. 472, for background.

instruct us. Of the two, the more profitable introspectively is meditation.

Meditation is the language of the soul. Meditation is a form of prayer. We can say prayers without having any spiritual response.

Meditation is one of the most secret, most sacred doors through which we pass into the presence of the Lord.¹¹

The Lord's revelations teach us that we should repair to our own spiritual gardens, our own sacred groves; that we should seek our solitude, on mountaintops, if necessary. We must feel the presence of God in our lives. In a Church where love of God is taught as the highest quality of the human soul, Latter-day Saints must always remember the value of reflection upon spiritual things. We can receive such gentle reminders even from those not of our faith.¹²

Paul Hutchinson made a perceptive comment in his informative little essay entitled "How Mankind Worships." He observed:

. . . there is a tendency, a product of the egotism in all of us, to mock the unfamiliar in other men's faith and worship. Such words as "heathen," "idolatry," "superstition" are used more often as smear words or in derision than in their legitimate meanings. They are the words we hurl at others. . . . Yet every man should command respect in the moment when he bows before God. We may believe that his conception of the divine lacks valuable, even essential, elements. His forms of worship may appear to us bizarre, sometimes even repellent. But in that moment of prayer, every man is at his best; if we are as wise as we like to think ourselves, it is then that we will attempt to understand him.¹³

Of course in our zeal for identifying the revealed light of truth and hearing faint echoes of a common past, we need to be careful not to be confused by what is *not* truthful and what may have wandered greatly from the pristine purity of earlier dispensations. We have our standard works—which are standards—and above all we have living prophets who are the oracles of God, the defenders and the teachers of eternal truth. Scriptures and Prophets are always our safeguards against error. In a lesser way, others may also help in making crucial distinctions, including scholars like Hutchinson who notes that neither Confucius nor Lao Tzu dreamed of founding religions, and that the rites which have been spoken of as religious, both Confucian and Taoist, have only slight connection

¹¹David O. McKay, "Consciousness of God: Supreme Goal of Life," *Improvement Era* 70 (June 1967):80-82.

¹²Spencer J. Palmer, "Why Study Asia?" *Asia* 4 (1971):1-9, esp. 6-9.

¹³Hutchinson, "How Mankind Worships," pp. 9, 10.

with anything the great masters taught. "Both Confucius and Lao Tzu were philosophers. The former was as mundane and pragmatic a thinker as ever lived, and the latter an idealist and mystic whose teachings are so elusive and intangible that it is hard to reduce them to coherence, at least for western minds."¹⁴

Hutchinson continues that insofar as Confucianism is regarded ritualistically it may be seen as no more a religion than "Memorial Day appearances of the American President at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier or a meeting of the Society of Mayflower Descendants." As for what has become of Taoism, with "its hoards of nearly illiterate, rapacious priests," one is sobered by the summary of Edmund Davidson Soper. His comment is undoubtedly overstated for effect, but it does suggest the need for caution. He says:

Taoism today . . . is a mass of puerile superstitions. It is the worst side of Chinese religion . . . theoretically, the business of the ignorant priests is to help the people live in accord with Tao, i.e., the Way, but practically it is magic run mad. Soothsaying in every imaginable form . . . is carried on by a priesthood which has become skillful in working on the superstitious fears of the people.¹⁵

The academic and socioreligious world generally asserts that no great religion has swept into world prominence since Islam some thirteen hundred years ago. Perhaps not a new religion but surely a restored and purified one, is moving to take its rightful place as a "world religion," indeed, as *the* "world religion." The Prophet Joseph Smith said:

I calculate to be one of the instruments for setting up the kingdom of Daniel by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the world. It will not be by sword or gun that this kingdom will roll on: the power of truth is such that all nations will be under the necessity of obeying the gospel.¹⁶

It is in that sense that I speak of the value of knowledge of countries and of kingdoms, of languages, tongues, and people, of symposia on comparative views of deity, worship and death—and much more. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is compellingly on a course wherein we will need to know all people everywhere. We need to love them and listen to them, and, wherever possible, teach them. They are in every instance our brothers and sisters.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁵As cited in Hutchinson, "How Mankind Worships," p. 12.

¹⁶HC, 6:365.