



Photo by Saksiri Saksirisathaporn.

Religion as a whole is beneficial to civilization, and it provides a solid foundation for ethical behavior.

## Learning about Other Religions: False Obstacles and Rich Opportunities

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*Christianity has been my central meal from the start, but I'm a strong believer in vitamin supplements, and what I have gained from these other traditions is tremendously enriching.*

—Huston Smith, comparative religions scholar<sup>1</sup>

Although I have not been studying and experiencing the world's religions for over seventy years as Huston Smith has, I fully concur with his conclusion. In my case, the central meal has always been and continues to be Mormon Christianity. At the same time, I believe that it is important for Latter-day Saints to learn about, appreciate, and be nourished by the good of other religions. Why? Both pragmatic and spiritual reasons are central to what I am proposing, yet in what follows I am able to offer only a few markers in a discussion that certainly ought to extend beyond a single article.

I begin my remarks by briefly highlighting one motivation, of particular contemporary relevance that has strong *pragmatic* connotations, before turning to address three perceived obstacles that prevent a gospel-driven *doctrinal* appreciation of the light and truth of different religions. My hope is to demonstrate that these obstacles, which emerge every so often in the Mormon

cultural milieu, skew what I deem to be a proper LDS perspective on other religions. I conclude my analysis by listing three principles, articulated by the late Lutheran theologian Krister Stendahl, which can assist Latter-day Saints in relating to other faiths. Ultimately, I base my remarks on a firm conviction that the gospel of Jesus Christ generally requires balance between true principles such as balance between a sympathetic approach to other faiths and loyalty to one's own, and balance between openness to learning from the "religious other" and the ability to share Mormonism's truths in love.

### Religious Freedom and Interfaith Collaboration

In recent years, General Authorities have repeatedly addressed the topic of "religious freedom" in a variety of settings.<sup>2</sup> The Church has also produced online print and video resources that deal with this very topic. These resources are now available on the website [mormonnewsroom.com](http://mormonnewsroom.com), for members and nonmembers alike.<sup>3</sup> A clear message of these speeches and videos is that religion as a whole is good and beneficial to civilization, that it provides a solid foundation to ethical behaviors, and that it should be given a voice in contributing to important public discussions about morality. Furthermore, these messages underscore the importance of freedom for the many consciences shaped by religious teachings while also recognizing that our society's multiplicity of perspectives requires patience, understanding, and respect for opinions that often conflict with each other. In short, our leaders have stressed the fact that religious freedom is not a "denominational" issue; instead, it is a value commonly shared by people *of* all faiths that must be defended by the united efforts of people *from* all faiths.

If Mormon history has taught us anything, it is that religious freedom is not to be taken for granted and that its preservation requires forces which are larger than a single religious denomination.<sup>4</sup> Whether the attacks originate from rival religious groups or from nonreligious secularists, like the "new atheists" who want to remove all religious influences from the public sphere, preserving the religious freedom of all is the best way to preserve one's own religious freedom. Latter-day Saints obviously have a vested interest in this process, particularly when responding to the claims that distinctive Mormon teachings on the family and society are incompatible with the rights of individuals in a secular world. Yet religious freedom is a universal principle with much deeper roots in the restored gospel than what may be suggested by a single focus on the need to preserve the Church's rights in

the present circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Joseph Smith and other prophets have repeatedly taught about the significance of religious freedom, not only by recognizing it as a founding principle of the US Constitution, but also more broadly by highlighting the sacred role played by agency in leading people to God or to any principle of truth.<sup>6</sup> In other words, within the plan of salvation, religious freedom is a necessary means that leads not only to the ultimate truth of Mormonism but also to any other "religious" truth that is contained and expressed by other religions. Religious freedom is good, because various manifestations of religion will function, to different degrees, as tools of spiritual progression for individuals throughout the world.

Therefore, learning about other religions is a pragmatic necessity rooted in a spiritual foundation for Latter-day Saints who want to build effective and mutually fulfilling relationships of collaboration with members of different faiths. Whether the issue that brings us together is the defense of religious freedom, humanitarian work, some other commonly shared value, or simply friendship, working teams are most successful when individual members trust each other. Mere tolerance will not do; people will experience and extend trust only in an atmosphere of emotional and intellectual respect, including respect for deeply held beliefs with which the other may ultimately disagree. It is one thing to disagree with a particular belief while recognizing that it has some value and credibility (thus retaining respect for the believer); it is another thing to reject that same belief as utterly absurd or as the product of lazy motivations. In other words, even while disagreeing on specific doctrines or theology, deep respect among cooperating people of faith will emerge when interlocutors detect the good motivations, upright values, and at least enough credibility in the doctrines of the "other" to make his or her religion respectable. Thus Latter-day Saints cannot really build strong collaborations and deep friendships with committed members of other faiths without stretching beyond generalizations, stereotypes, or caricatures of other religions, which only hamper mutual understanding. Indeed, the fruits of mutual respect will only grow on foundations of reciprocal sympathetic attitudes with engaged education about the beliefs and practices of the religious other as a key element of the process of interaction.

Here one may justifiably ask whether I am suggesting that other religions should only be approached sympathetically, and not be approached critically. Furthermore, could such an approach potentially weaken the unique claims of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as its missionary

commission? There is obviously a need for balance between the recognition of the light and truth that can be found in other religions and a personal commitment to the unique and all-embracing truths of Mormonism. To be sure, finding this balance may be challenging, and in this context we do not need to look too hard to find examples of two very different kinds of excesses. On the one hand, overzealousness and skewed conceptions of loyalty close the door to dialogue with the “religious other,” thus allowing prejudice to reign supreme. On the other hand, radical liberality of thought reduces all differences among faiths to naught and gives rise to conversations built more on fears of offending than on desire to learn and to be challenged. Latter-day Saints are not immune from the difficulty of finding an appropriate balance. Yet Mormonism advocates equilibrium, and the gospel may be rightly viewed as a harmony of correct principles that ought to be kept in fruitful tension with each other.<sup>7</sup> It is then balance between the faith’s exclusive claims and its liberal recognition of the general goodness of religion that allows Mormonism to be both particularist and inclusive.<sup>8</sup> When we fail to live in this tension and do not experience this balance, we risk losing the full perspective of the restored gospel.

### False Obstacles to Learning and Appreciation

There are sound doctrinal reasons for learning about other religions and for appreciating the truth they contain. I am going to address these core reasons somewhat indirectly by responding to some perceived obstacles to a sympathetic and engaged approach to other religions, obstacles that sometimes emerge among Latter-day Saints. In so doing, I should highlight that I am not referring to official prophetic pronouncements or to authoritative exegesis of scripture. Instead, I am focusing on a *cultural* level of theological interpretation which I have encountered primarily through personal experience, particularly in conversation with members and students. It is not my intention to argue that these lines of reasoning are the most prevalent within the Church—in fact, I do not have the tools to measure their frequency—but my experience suggests that they are prevalent enough. Therefore, I think that they need to be addressed, since they function as *false* obstacles to the appreciative learning of other religions in the direction of excessive exclusivism.

Of course, uncritically positive approaches to other faiths would also miss the balance, but in the present context I am not going to address that side of the equation, since in some ways it is more explicitly dealt with in official

LDS teachings. My main concern is to address those claims, occasionally heard among some Latter-day Saints, which affirm an inherent incompatibility between a positive approach to other religions and the foundational principles of the restored gospel. Specifically, I have encountered at least three kinds of arguments, loosely interrelated and usually based on particular scriptural passages, which purportedly highlight the dangers of approaching other religions favorably. I will label these arguments the “fullness,” the “only true church,” and the “creedal abomination” arguments respectively, an ordering which also reflects the increasing rejection of the study of other religions that they advocate.

### Fullness

The “fullness” argument is perhaps the most common and the least negative of the three. It centers on the idea that Mormonism possesses the fullness of saving truth, namely of the truth that leads to the greatest happiness in this life and to exaltation in the life to come. According to this line of reasoning, *fullness of truth* or *fullness of the gospel* is mostly synonymous with completeness or perfection, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the unique possessor of this repository of perfect knowledge, doctrine, ordinances, and authority, which enable individuals to obtain salvation in its highest possible form. Therefore, the argument goes, whatever is good or admirable in other religions is already possessed by the Mormon fullness or is included in it. To study other religions, in the best-case scenario, is like reviewing the multiplication tables once you have started working on calculus; it is not bad, but it is mostly a waste of time because it focuses on a lower level of knowledge now redundant. Thus the study of other religions is mostly an irrelevant enterprise, and time and effort would be better spent in studying the gospel as taught in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which would ensure greater salvific returns. The most memorable illustration of this particular approach in my personal experience emerged in a conversation I had with a Latter-day Saint with whom I have been acquainted since childhood. At that time I was studying interfaith dialogue at a Vatican university in Rome, and when I shared with him the subject of my studies he responded, “When you have the fullness of truth, there cannot be any dialogue.”

I find the conclusions of this argument to be unsatisfactory, both in a broad philosophical sense as well as in the more specific LDS doctrinal context, even though I concur with some of its premises. On the one hand, it is

quite appropriate, even anticipated, that a person should hold one's own religion to be preferable to other religious alternatives, contrary to the politically correct dogma which requires value equality of all concepts, statements, and organizations. As a Latter-day Saint, I also believe that my religion has something unique and additional in relation to what other faiths have to offer; it is one of the reasons I am a Mormon and one of the reasons I served an LDS mission. Thus identifying hierarchies of truth is inherent to the human experience and is not in itself an indication of arrogance; some of the humblest people I have ever met have also been among the most devoted to the fixed standards of truth found in their respective religions. On the other hand, one's strong commitment to a particular ideology becomes suspect if it hides an unwillingness to listen to or to encounter any potentially problematic evidence and if it is rooted in a sense of personal superiority that admits no challenge. Therefore, when the fullness argument is used to masquerade this kind of rigidity and is motivated primarily by a fear-driven refusal to step outside one's comfort zone, it becomes a serious problem. True, all humans, whether religious or not, experience some of the laziness, pride, and accompanying anxiety which are inherent in this refusal to look beyond the familiar, but this approach belongs to "the natural man" rather than to the person enlightened by the fullness of the gospel.

Furthermore, the argument's conclusion is problematic above and beyond the specific motivations that may be driving it. The first issue is that the argument implies a definition of fullness that is excessively closed and static, thus being in conflict with the foundational LDS principle of continuing revelation. If *fullness of truth* or *fullness of the gospel* means that all the answers relative to God and to eternal salvation are already found in the teachings and practices of the Church as presently constituted, there would be no need for additional revelation, whether institutional or personal. If we have all the answers, then we have no questions, and if we run out of questions, then we cease to learn or to seek for divine guidance. Joseph Smith often denounced similar approaches to truth inherent in established traditions or in well-defined definitions of beliefs, since what they underlie is a completion and restriction of learning. He warned the Saints against "setting up stakes" that limit God's revelation and emphasized the open-ended progression in knowledge and understanding by stating, "We believe that He [God] *will yet reveal* many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." What, then, is the fullness of the gospel? Without delving into the different possible

definitions of the term *gospel*, I would suggest that the term *fullness* should be more closely associated with an idea of sufficiency rather than of completeness. The Church administers all the necessary ordinances and teaches all the key principles which lead to eternal life, but it does not claim that additional, expanded, or reworded knowledge of truth would be useless in the process of achieving this same objective. In short, *fullness* understood as perfection or completion, whether in knowledge or action, is always necessarily an objective ahead of us, not a condition already achieved.

Indeed, the great majority of those who have expressed the fullness argument to me are very much aware of their need for development in knowledge, character, and understanding. They do not feel that they "have it all" and do not object to the need for greater and more refined truth, particularly in matters relating to salvation. What they argue, however, is that the unique source of this knowledge is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which is the divinely chosen channel for the conferral of additional light and truth to the world. Then, since the Church already gathers all the partial truths taught by other religions, the argument continues, no additional truth of salvific value can be found in other faiths because all knowledge of this kind is already available through official Mormon teachings. In my view, however, the meaning and the sources of truth are quite broader than what this particular interpretation implies. While I subscribe to the belief that the prophetic authority of the Church ensures a preferential revelatory channel, and even an exclusive authority in the realm of doctrinal declarations, I also understand truth to involve more than mere propositional statements or declarations of beliefs. Truth includes actions, thoughts, emotions, and many other visible expressions of the created world; channels of divine influence and communication, with greater or lesser intensity, are spread throughout history, geography, and religions. In short, I believe that any manifestation of goodness and light, whatever its specific source, is of some salvific value inasmuch as it embodies a witness of the divine's connection to the world.<sup>10</sup>

Several Mormon prophets have also expressed an understanding of truth which emphasizes great breadth. For example, John Taylor once stated, "I was going to say I am not a Universalist, but I am, and I am also a Presbyterian, and a Roman Catholic, and a Methodist, in short, I believe in every true principle that is imbibed by any person or sect, and reject the false. If there is any truth in heaven, earth, or hell, I want to embrace it, I care not what shape it comes in to me, who brings it, or who believes it, whether it is popular or



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Someone could become fascinated with the practice of Buddhist Zen meditation and want to include it into his own practice of spiritual development.

unpopular.” In another context he declared, “If there are any religious ideas, any theological truths, any principles pertaining to God, that we have not learned, we ask mankind, and we pray God, our heavenly Father, to enlighten our minds that we may comprehend, realize, embrace and live up to them as part of our religious faith. Thus our ideas and thoughts would extend as far as the wide world spreads, embracing everything pertaining to light, life, or existence pertaining to this world or the world that is to come.”<sup>11</sup> Wilford Woodruff put it succinctly in these terms: “If any man has got a truth that we have not got, let us have it. Truth is what we are after. . . . If we have not the truth, that is what we are after, we want it.”<sup>12</sup> More recently, President

Gordon B. Hinckley exhorted: “The learning process is endless. . . . It therefore behooves us, and is our charge, to grow constantly toward eternity in what must be a ceaseless quest for truth. And as we search for truth, let us look for the good, the beautiful, and the positive.”<sup>13</sup>

There is no reason to think that other religions should be excluded from this rich picture of available knowledge, which does not necessarily emerge from standard Mormon channels. Even when accounting for missing or distorted elements in these religions’ teachings, there remains much in their distinctive expressions of faith that is uniquely beautiful. There is much that we Latter-day Saints can learn from them. For example, the lives and spiritual experiences of many devotees from most religious traditions can be a source of inspiration as they reveal much that may be worthy of emulation.<sup>14</sup> Poetic, musical, and scriptural writings of various kinds may also highlight a degree of commitment and adoration of God, which any person of faith can find uplifting. Certainly, unique formulations of beliefs or interesting connections among various aspects of theology and religious practices can provide enlightening intellectual insights. In short, there are many possible areas of learning which are visible, available, and open to discovery as soon as one seeks for this encounter. Does it not make sense that jewels of divine inspiration can be found in many different cultures and settings when God is truly viewed as an eternal, loving Father who meets his children in their agency and at their levels of understanding? Indeed, when recognizing that the present LDS population accounts for about 0.2 percent of the current world population, it would seem quite provincial to believe that God’s hand should not be manifested in some visible and magnificent manner among faithful followers of the world’s faiths, even in their unique beliefs and practices. Then why would any believer be indifferent or even opposed to such divine evidences simply because they emerge from a different religious or cultural context than the one to which one is accustomed?

### *The Only True Church*

The “only true church” argument is a second argument commonly used by those Latter-day Saints who struggle to reconcile the study of other religions with the restored gospel. It overlaps somewhat with the fullness concern in its emphasis on exclusivity, but it presents additional challenges for the starker language with which it juxtaposes Mormonism to other religions. At its core it claims that since The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “the only

true church” on the face of the earth, other religions are at best a mix of half-truths and distorted knowledge and at worst a tool of the adversary to spread lies and falsehood in the world. As a result, if one approaches these faiths at all, it is often with the goal of identifying their unique problems rather than with the desire to learn anything from them. Indeed, those who espouse this argument feel the need to add a qualification, a “but” of some sort, which underlies a problem or significant failure in the other faith, if anything positive about it happens to be mentioned. For example, after mentioning a visit to the beautiful cathedrals in Europe, a member quickly added, “but the Spirit was not there,” and a fellow Mormon spoke highly about a neighbor while feeling the need to specify, “but he is not a member.” True, emphasizing the negative or the deficient in other religions further legitimizes Mormonism as the only true church and functions as a way of expressing one’s full commitment to its truths, but these juxtapositions also convey a very black-and-white picture, which does not do justice to the gradations of truths found in other faiths.

Again, the problem with this argument is not its emphasis on the uniqueness of Mormonism or its status as the *truest* religion; instead, it is its failure to explicitly recognize any truth or salvific value in alternative religious paths. Perhaps this is not what most members want to communicate when they justify their indifference to the world’s religions through the “only true church” argument, but it is certainly difficult for any non-LDS observer to feel that Mormonism is sympathetic to other faiths when remarks on different religions regularly culminate in patronizing criticism. If asked whether other religions are considered to be primarily good (although somewhat misguided) or primarily evil, I would hope that most Latter-day Saints would opt for the former choice. Yet many members of different faiths would be confused in hearing Mormons state that theirs is “the only true church,” particularly when these words are used as a set formula without additional explanations. They would probably understand it to imply that non-Mormon religions are false and possibly evil because the “only true church” formula underlies the claim that truth is exclusive to Mormonism. To use an illustrative analogy, if the Church is the only true original *Mona Lisa* painted by Leonardo, then other religions are cheap imitations which falsely claim to be what they are not; they are frauds. Any LDS clarification articulating the significance of priesthood authority or the claim of historical continuity with the early Christian

church would then need to be included to prevent misunderstandings of this kind.

It is also enlightening to examine the scriptural passage from which this particular statement has traditionally been extracted. Doctrine and Covenants 1:30 indeed states that the Church is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth,” and those who see in this statement a divine condemnation of other churches often point to the following clause “with which I, the Lord, am well pleased.” However, the text does not necessarily imply that the Lord is not *at all* pleased with other churches, only that he is “well pleased” or “very satisfied” with the church to which he is speaking. Furthermore, the qualifier that follows, “speaking unto the church collectively and not individually,” seems to be a warning against the use of this formula in support of personal pride or self-righteousness. In fact, the cross-referenced scripture in Doctrine and Covenants 50:4 recognizes that God can also be unhappy with his church when it states that “I, the Lord, have looked upon you, and have seen abominations in the church that profess my name,” with the context obviously indicating that the church being referenced is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints of that time. In short, whatever interpretative tool one chooses to employ in understanding this particular passage, I do not see a sweeping divine condemnation of other religions or a warning to keep one’s distance from them.

Certainly, President Ezra Taft Benson saw God’s involvement in the world to be much broader than the “only true church” when he stated that “God, the Father of us all, uses the men of the earth, especially good men, to accomplish his purposes. It has been true in the past, it is true today, it will be true in the future.” In the same general conference speech he then cited the late Apostle Orson F. Whitney, who stated: “Perhaps the Lord needs such men on the outside of His Church to help it along. They are among its auxiliaries, and can do more good for the cause where the Lord has placed them, than anywhere else. . . . God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of His great and marvelous work. The Latter-day Saints cannot do it all. It is too vast, too arduous for any one people. . . . They [the Gentiles] are our partners in a certain sense.”<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, Elder William Bangerter posed the question: “Do we believe that all ministers of other churches are corrupt? Of course not. . . . It is clearly apparent that there have been and now are many choice, honorable, and devoted men and women going in the direction of their eternal salvation who

give righteous and conscientious leadership to their congregations in other churches. Joseph Smith evidently had many warm and friendly contacts with ministers of other religions. . . . Some of them who carried the Christian attitude of tolerance did not join the Church. There are many others like them today.”<sup>16</sup>

### *Creedal Abomination*

Still, a few Latter-day Saints find it particularly difficult to see much or any truth in other religions. Their focus is exclusively on the evil; in fact, they would be the first to suggest that important scriptural evidence indicates that God condemns other religions, especially apostate Christianity. For lack of a better term, I have labeled this particular obstacle to the study of other religions the “creedal abomination” argument, even though a different focus than the creeds may characterize some of its expressions. Where the fullness argument explicitly emphasizes the perfection of Mormonism (while implying the irrelevance of other religions), and the “only true church argument” explicitly emphasizes the exclusive truth of Mormonism (while implying the falsehood of other faiths), there is nothing implicit in the “creedal abomination” argument. Every religion has some members who feel so threatened by a different faith that when they encounter the “religious other,” they can only condemn it as evil. I have experienced this in a few instances with some who use scriptural references to state unequivocally that we should refrain from studying other religions, because God has condemned them. Specifically, a few have quoted the Joseph Smith—History account of the First Vision, where the Prophet reports, with reference to the Christian sects and denominations of his time, that “the Personage who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight.”<sup>17</sup>

There is no question in my mind that God has indeed condemned some of the beliefs and actions found in various religions throughout the history of the world. For example, my experience and understanding of God are such that I could not possibly conceive that he would require actual human sacrifices to take place in his name (the word *actual* accounts for the near-sacrifice in the Abraham and Isaac story). There has been, there is, and there will continue to be evil in humanity, which is contrary to God’s will and which God utterly rejects and condemns. Some of this evil may even receive religious sanction. However, before condemning something as evil simply because it emerges from a different religious context than one’s own, it is important

to be aware of our human tendency of seeing only the bad in the *other* and only the good in *us*. For example, in relation to the previously quoted passage in Joseph Smith—History, retired BYU professor Roger Keller once stated, “There is a tendency to understand the word *creed* here as a *confession* of faith, such as the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. The whole context negates this interpretation, however, for that which precedes and follows this passage deals entirely with the religious people of Joseph’s day. Thus, their creeds were their *professions* of faith, which had few outward manifestations of love.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it is interesting to notice the more amiable tone used by the Prophet Joseph in his later 1842 account of the same vision, where he reports that the Personages “told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom.”<sup>19</sup> There is no “condemnation” or “abomination” in this latter passage, thus possibly suggesting that the more polemical language used in 1838 may have emerged as a direct consequence of the persecutions the Prophet and the Saints suffered in Missouri by the hand of so-called Christians.

Still, regardless of specific scriptural interpretations, arguments of this kind possess significant psychological strength because they protect and legitimate one’s identity as it is rooted in a specific worldview. At least for a few of the Saints, it seems that a focus on the positive that exists outside of Mormonism represents a threatening challenge to the claims and commitments associated with one’s own faith. Hence, the more the religious other is understood to be bad, the more one’s religion shines in comparison as the ultimate good. An effective illustration of this particular human tendency is a conversation I once had with a student who was attending one of my courses on Islam. He came to speak with me about his difficulty in reading the course textbook, which he attributed to the reading process being so emotionally charged that it took him hours to complete every assignment. He specifically mentioned the anger and internal arguments he had experienced when finding in the textbook such expressions as “the prophet Muhammad,” “the revealed Qur’an,” and so forth (the book was authored by a non-Muslim who wrote sympathetically about Islam). While reading these words, he had felt driven to continuously deny them in his mind by retorting the exact opposite, namely that “Satan had inspired the Qur’an, and Muhammad was clearly a false prophet.”

As we continued our conversation, I realized that attaching any possible degree of divine inspiration to the Qur'an or to Muhammad would represent a challenge to his belief in Christ, Joseph Smith, and the Book of Mormon. He said, for example, that just as the Book of Mormon could only be either of God or of the devil, so the Qur'an must either be from God or from the devil, and it was obviously the latter. Moreover, if Jesus is truly the Savior, and Joseph Smith is a true prophet of God, then Muhammad must be a false prophet; it was all very logical in his mind, as he was simply reasserting his commitment to his faith while denying the truthfulness of a religion which advances competing claims.

I praised him for his devotion, but I began to challenge his core assumption. When I asked him whether he thought it possible that he could hold his commitment to Mormonism firm while at the same time being able to identify God's hand within a different religion, he seemed very skeptical. So we turned to a statement of the First Presidency dated February 15, 1978, which affirms, among other things, that "the great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals."<sup>20</sup> I reiterated to him that viewing individuals, sacred texts, and religions as either perfectly inspired by God or satanically motivated is a false dichotomy, because God can confer various degrees of light and knowledge as he sends portions of his Spirit to individuals and groups.<sup>21</sup> In short, the interaction of God's perfect light with the imperfect human filters who function as its receptors gives rise to many different intensities of light, some brighter and some darker. To recognize, to love, and to commit to the brightest of these lights does not require the denial of light in any of its other manifestations.

I do not know whether that student was completely convinced when he left my office, but I do know that looking for light rather than for darkness is a more rewarding experience when studying other religions. Obviously, there is a point and a time when error should be recognized and when disagreement is the only option, but since we are already trained and naturally accustomed to find problems in the religious other, we are probably better off in withholding judgment to begin with by giving a religion the benefit of the doubt, so to speak. If we set out with the desire to understand and identify what is true rather than false about a particular faith, then when we finally are

in a position to evaluate it more broadly, it is more likely that our criticism will be fair. This is probably what we would want people to do when they approach the study of our own faith: we would hope that their preconceived notions would be suspended long enough to allow them to truly listen to our message. In that way they will be able to experience what Mormonism has to offer that is exciting, beautiful, and true. Similarly, if we listen and study primarily with the desire to learn rather than to criticize, we will be able to expand our own understanding as well as to offer an informed and less prejudiced judgment when needing to do so. Hence, if approached with the right attitude, the study of world religions can be a fascinating, enlightening, and ultimately faith-promoting experience. Conversely, the "fullness," "only true church," and "creedal abomination" arguments, although correct in some of their premises, ultimately hamper true appreciation by emphasizing the irrelevance or falsehood of other religions.

Therefore, there is no incompatibility between the sympathetic study of other religions and a solid commitment to the truths of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. On the contrary, there are several pragmatic and spiritual benefits that are likely to emerge from this enterprise. Pragmatically, learning about different beliefs and practices will only facilitate communication and mutual understanding with individuals of different religious persuasions with whom we are increasingly likely to come into contact. Better education on other faiths will facilitate trust and respect as we join hands in the defense of religious freedom and of other foundational values like morality and the family. It will further assist us as we continue to expand our missionary efforts by endowing us with a better understanding of the cultural and religious backgrounds of the people we will teach. I find the best evidence of this conclusion in the many returned-missionary students in my classes who remark at the end of each semester that they wish they had taken a world religions course prior to their missions.

As far as spiritual benefits are concerned, we will be able to deepen our friendships with family, friends, and neighbors of different faiths by appreciating more fully the truth and beauty that they have embraced in their lives and by being able to express without prejudice our own enthusiasm for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Additionally, we will be able to enlarge our own repository of light and truth as we encounter revealed knowledge in other faiths that will shine even brighter when combined with the light of the gospel that



we have already internalized. In short, learning about the truth and goodness of other religions will help us become better people and better Mormons.

### Three Rules for Religious Understanding

In 1985, during a press conference associated with the construction of the LDS temple in Stockholm, Krister Stendahl, the Lutheran bishop of the Swedish capital, spoke in defense of the Mormons' right to erect the sacred building. Those who opposed the temple's construction had used reports based on anti-Mormon publications to criticize the Church, its beliefs, and its practices. In that context Stendahl, who had previously served as the dean of the Harvard Divinity School, expressed what have come to be known as his three rules for religious understanding.<sup>22</sup> These rules provide a solid philosophical and ethical foundation for any engagement in comparative religions and thus are particularly beneficial to any discussion about LDS approaches to other faiths. Indeed, they are useful for the broader context of dialogue and personal interactions of any kind, whether focused on potentially divisive issues like politics, religion, and athletics, or when applied to daily interactions within families and communities. If more people in the world would abide by these rules, there would not be as much conflict and misunderstanding, and greater dialogue and harmony would certainly ensue.

The first rule states that *relevant information about a religion should be gained from the very source* and not from a competitor or a secondhand account. A student of a particular faith should go to that church's official literature or ask committed members of the same church when wanting to become educated about its beliefs and practices. In other words, it is better to err on the side of internal bias than on the side of external prejudice. As it relates to an LDS approach to another religion, this means that we will want to describe a religion in such a way that if a believer of that faith were to drop into our discussion unexpectedly he or she would not consider what was being presented to be a caricature of that religion. It also means that if we are ever uncertain about the details of what a religion believes or practices, we should refrain from assuming, generalizing, or judging prior to having acquired solid evidence to support our conclusions. Unfortunately, I have often heard both Latter-day Saints and members of different faiths comment ignorantly on a different religion when it was obvious that they had never taken the time to seriously try to understand it. Therefore, the first rule reminds us that it is important to do our studying and focus that study on the appropriate sources.

The second rule addresses the comparison between one's religion and the religion being studied, which often follows the initial stage of information gathering. This comparison should not take place too early in the process, otherwise the religion under analysis will not have sufficient time to speak for itself. For us it means that we do not want to express an LDS perspective on a particular faith until we have had the time to examine and understand it. When this time arrives, Stendahl's second rule reminds us that we need to be fair, namely to *compare our best with their best and not our best with their worst*. It is too easy and too human to pick and choose the best that one's community has to offer and juxtapose it with what is most controversial and problematic in a competing group. It happens in sports, national politics, and international relations, and religion is no exception. Certainly most Mormons would protest if a focus on controversial historical issues like plural marriage or the pre-1978 restrictions on priesthood ordination for blacks would be used as a starting point of comparison between Mormonism and another faith, especially if great humanitarian achievements or virtuous and heroic lives originating from the other religion were to function as the other side of the juxtaposition. Similarly, if we were to compare Mormonism to Catholicism, for example, it would not be fair to highlight the great good that is brought about by bishops, missionaries, and other LDS priesthood leaders while painting the whole Catholic priesthood as abusive and corrupt by focusing exclusively on the recent scandals associated with a minority of priests. In short, whether we are dealing with human frailties, attractiveness of beliefs, or devotion to particular practices, we should extend to other faiths the same kindness and benefit of the doubt that we are prone to show ourselves.

Finally, after encouraging us to obtain the correct information about another faith and subsequently to err on the side of goodness and generosity in evaluating it, Stendahl asks us to open ourselves up to being changed by *borrowing* something of value from the religious other. Indeed, his third rule tells us to *leave sufficient room for "holy envy,"* namely a feeling of deep respect and admiration for some aspect of the other religion that we could integrate into our own life in whatever form may be compatible with our own faith. For example, a Latter-day Saint could feel motivated to improve his daily prayers after learning about the daily devotions of Muslims, of Catholic religious orders, or of a number of devotees from different religious traditions. Some other member of the Church could become so fascinated with the practice

of Buddhist Zen meditation to want to include it into her own practices of spiritual development, whereas others still could find great inspiration in the writings of the Sikh guru Nanak or of any of the other religious founders whose sacred literature they may have spent some time reading. Obviously, holy envy is built on the assumption that we are indeed able to identify something in the other faith, whether relating to history, sacred texts, beliefs, devotions, or other practices, that is lacking in our own or which finds better expression in the other religion. It also presupposes that our own religion is open to such forms of cross-religious learning and that our commitment to our own faith is not in question as a result.

Even though a theme of embracing all the truth is quite prevalent in the restored gospel, we Latter-day Saints probably struggle the most with this third rule. Some feel that they would manifest a lack of loyalty to their own religion if they allowed themselves to admire some aspect of a different faith to this extent. A Catholic friend of mine once put it simply when he said that believers have feelings of love and commitment towards their own religion that are similar to the feelings they hold for their own mothers. Hopefully, most people feel that their own mother is the best mother there could ever be, but recognizing that someone else's mother may have done a few things a little better than ours does not diminish the value of our mother or our love and commitment to her.

A second obstacle to holy envy that may emerge among the Latter-day Saints was once expressed to me by one of my students in these terms: "Holy envy applies to people from religions which are incomplete; my religion is perfect and complete, thus there is nothing out there which I do not already have." I have already addressed this issue in a previous section, so I will only add that for most people the concepts of "religion" and "church" are not completely separable from the individuals who embody their beliefs and lifestyles. Thus, if we enlarge our understanding of church or religion to include the words, actions, and lives of its devotees, we will at least be able to find something admirable and worthy of emulation in another faith even when unable to identify holy-envy material in their theologies or doctrine. In short, we are a special people—but not that special! We do not have a monopoly on goodness; we cannot claim the absence of problems among us or boast that we have nothing to learn from different faiths.<sup>23</sup>

It is then in the spirit of these rules that I believe we could and should approach other religions as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of

Latter-day Saints. Although it may at times be difficult to find the perfect balance between openness to the truth of other faiths and firmness in our commitments to distinctive LDS doctrines, indifference and rejection of light in other religions are not doctrinally sound options. We can overcome false obstacles and follow Stendahl's guidelines for comparisons, but more than anything else, it will be the excitement of the discovery that will push us forward, not in spite of our Mormonism but because of it. Many Latter-day Saints have already enjoyed this experience, and in so doing they have enlarged their circles of friendships while joining hands with others in defending faith, family, and society. Indeed, this is a time when we should feel more threatened by some aspects of the world, such as materialism, sexual immorality, pride, violence, and faithlessness, than by any religious competitor.

We will also notice that as we listen and sincerely desire to understand others we will be better listened to, and we will be better understood by others. In so doing we will share the gospel message in the spirit of President Hinckley's words: "God bless us as those who believe in His divine manifestations and help us to extend knowledge of these great and marvelous occurrences to all who will listen. To these we say in a spirit of love, bring with you all that you have of good and truth which you have received from whatever source, and come and let us see if we may add to it."<sup>24</sup> He added, "Love and respect will overcome every element of animosity. Our kindness may be the most persuasive argument for that which we believe."<sup>25</sup> **RE**

## Notes

1. Huston Smith, *The Way Things Are: Conversations with Huston Smith on the Spiritual Life*, ed. Phil Cousineau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 143.
2. Elders Dallin H. Oaks and Quentin L. Cook are the two Apostles who have probably spoken the most on this subject. See Elder Quentin L. Cook, "The Restoration of Morality and Religious Freedom," BYU-Idaho commencement, December 16, 2011, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/the-restoration-of-morality-and-religious-freedom>; Elder Dallin H. Oaks, "Transcript of Elder Dallin H. Oaks' Speech Given at Chapman University School of Law," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/elder-oaks-religious-freedom-Chapman-University>; Elder Dallin H. Oaks, "Truth and Tolerance," *Religious Educator* 13, no. 2 (2012): 1–15; Elder Quentin L. Cook, "Lamentations of Jeremiah: Beware of Bondage," *Ensign*, November 2013, 88–91. Other Apostles and General Authorities have also spoken on this issue: see Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, "Faith, Family, and Religious Freedom," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/files/Elder-Holland-Address-Faith-Family-Religious-Freedom/elder-holland-faith-family-freedom.pdf>.
3. "Religious Freedom," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/official-statement/religious-freedom>.

4. Mauro Properzi, "LDS Understandings of Religious Freedom: Responding to the Shifting Cultural Pendulum," *Journal of Mormon History* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 128–47.
5. "Selected Beliefs and Statements on Religious Freedom of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/beliefs-statements-religious-freedom>.
6. "As the ruling principle of conduct in the lives of many millions of our citizens, religion should have an honorable place in the public life of our nation, and the name of Almighty God should have sacred use in its public expressions. We urge our members and people of good will everywhere to unite to protect and honor the spiritual and religious heritage of our nation and to resist the forces that would transform the public position of the United States from the constitutional position of neutrality to a position of hostility toward religion." "First Presidency Warns Against 'Irreligion,'" *Ensign*, May 1979, 108–9. Also see W. Cole Durham Jr., "The Doctrine of Religious Freedom," in *BYU Speeches, 2000–2001* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2001), 213–26.
7. Terryl Givens, *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3–63.
8. Mauro Properzi, "The Religious 'Other': Reflecting upon Mormon Perceptions," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 3 (2010): 41–55.
9. B. H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 5:529–30; 5:554; 6:57; 6:184; Articles of Faith 1:9.
10. "But behold, that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God. Wherefore, take heed, my beloved brethren, that ye do not judge . . . that which is good and of God to be of the devil" (Moroni 7:13–14).
11. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 1:155; 14:337.
12. Wilford Woodruff, in *Journal of Discourses*, 17:194.
13. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something* (New York: Times Books, 2000), 62, 64.
14. "Many Christians have voluntarily given sacrifices motivated by faith in Christ and the desire to serve Him. Some have chosen to devote their entire adult lives to the service of the Master. This noble group includes those in the religious orders of the Catholic Church and those who have given lifelong service as Christian missionaries in various Protestant faiths. Their examples are challenging and inspiring, but most believers in Christ are neither expected nor able to devote their entire lives to religious service." Dallin H. Oaks, "Sacrifice," *Ensign*, May 2012, 19.
15. Orson F. Whitney, as quoted in Ezra T. Benson, "Civic Standards for the Faithful Saints," *Ensign*, July 1972, 59.
16. William G. Bangeter, "It's a Two-Way Street," in *1984–85 BYU Speeches of the Year* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Publications, 1985), 161.
17. Joseph Smith—History 1:19.
18. Roger Keller and others, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View*, rev. ed. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1997), 199.
19. Karen Lynn Davidson, David J. Whittaker, Richard L. Jensen, and Mark Ashurst-McGee, eds., *Histories, Volume 1: Joseph Smith Histories, 1832–1844*, vol. 1 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2012), 494.

20. "God's Love for All Mankind," First Presidency Statement, February 15, 1978. This statement is referenced in an April 2006 general conference talk given by President James E. Faust, entitled "The Restoration of All Things."
21. Doctrine & Covenants 71:1.
22. "Interfaith Relations," <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/interfaith>.
23. "Of course, our church does not have a monopoly on good people, but we have a remarkable concentration of them." Dallin H. Oaks, "The Gospel in Our Lives," *Ensign*, May 2002, 33–35.
24. Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith," *Ensign*, November 2002, 81.
25. Gordon B. Hinckley, "We Bear Witness of Him," *Ensign*, May 1998, 5.