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DIALOGUE: RELIGION AS PEACEMAKER

ROBERT A. REES AND GORDON C. THOMASSON

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ROBERT A. REES

Gordon Thomasson and I have been friends and colleagues for many years. Our hope in this dialogue is to have an exchange of ideas about war and peace as it relates to Mormonism. We would like to frame this conversation in light of the Jewish concept of *Tikkunolam*, which means "repairing the world," an ethic also found in the Latter-day Saint tradition. The origin of *Tikkunolam* can be traced to the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Isaac Luria, who taught that when God created the world, he sought to light it by shaping special lamps or vessels to hold his light. "But as God poured the Light into the vessels, they catastrophically shattered, tumbling down toward the realm of matter [that is, the earth]. Thus, our world consists of countless shards of the original vessels entrapping sparks of the Divine Light. Humanity's great task involves helping God by freeing and reuniting the scattered Light, raising the sparks back to Divinity and restoring

the broken world."[1] One of the ways in which we can participate in "freeing and reuniting the scattered Light" is by working for peace. Making and keeping peace is the shared, sacred work of God and humans.

As followers of the Prince of Peace, peacemaking is our collective calling. The face of peace is dramatically different from the face of war, as I try to illustrate in the following poem, titled "The Face of War," based on a photograph I saw in the newspaper many years into our current war in the Middle East:

> On a sunny day in Basra or Baghdad,
> a child's face is fractured beyond
> anything human, as if God
> shaping an image of himself
> had dropped the clay on stones:
> eyeless and a bloody rupture
> where a mouth had been.
> The child's face gone
> and with it all we count
> of ourselves so long
> out of the arroyos and savannahs:
> our songs and sonnets,
> our cantatas and cathedrals,
> skyscrapers and spaceships,
> our science and our psalms—
> all are nothing without
> the face of this child.

I have admired Gordon Thomasson for many years. Gordon has been one of the most incisive, penetrating, and thoughtful thinkers in LDS culture over the past half-century. He is a scholar whose faith and intellect have made a significant contribution to the Mormon intellectual and spiritual life. Gordon and I worked together during the sixties when both of us experienced opprobrium from some of our fellow Latter-day Saints over our opposition to the war in Vietnam. Gordon assembled and edited a collection titled *War, Conscription, Conscience, and Mormonism*, which

helped a number of Latter-day Saints who considered becoming or who became conscientious objectors during that misbegotten war.

GORDON C. THOMASSON

I was privileged to learn from and study with Hugh Nibley. One of Hugh's greatest contributions was to remind the Saints of our obligation, in the words of the Doctrine and Covenants, to both "renounce war and proclaim peace."[2] Few here might remember the controversy that erupted during that time over Nibley's open opposition to war, which was unpopular among the majority of Latter-day Saints but profoundly influential on a few, including me. Others who influenced my ethic of peace include two of my professors at UC–Santa Barbara—the Roman Catholic scholar Thomas O'Day and the Methodist pacifist minister Robert Michelson. Both of them respected and sustained me in my own faith as well as enriched my understanding of what it means to be a Christian peacemaker in a world that seems always to be waging war. I am thankful for the fact that there are people of that sort today at various colleges and universities who are looking out for our children in the way these men looked out for me. As members of a Latter-day Saint community, we need to recognize and be thankful for the good men and women of the earth who work for peace. It is a real blessing we enjoy, and we do not mention it often enough to each other or in our prayers of thanksgiving.

My career includes Southeast Asian studies. I have also worked in Mexico and sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Liberia and in southern Sudan. As a result, I have seen enough conflict to last a lifetime. There were military involvements all around me when I served as a missionary in Mexico in the early 1960s but much more so in southern Sudan and other places I have lived. We have been blessed in the United States to be protected from the worst of those kinds of conflicts. We really have little sense of what it means to live in an environment torn by war with no place to turn for safety or escape.

Occasionally, one hears the sentiment that religion is the greatest cause of war. Historically speaking, that is nonsense. It makes religion a scapegoat for humanity's problems. To me, the greatest cause of war is greed. Greed for wealth, for territory, and for power. The fact is that

whatever else is involved, religion has been much more of an ameliorating force than a causal force of the world's problems. Whenever I have studied so-called "wars of religion," I have found people using religion to justify their own agendas, which were anything but religious. One needs to be very distrustful of such a simplistic explanation, because it goes against the fundamental principles of the world's religions.

It is popular today to demonize our Muslim brothers and sisters as warlike because a small group of Muslims have waged what they call *Jihad* against the United States. The Muslims with whom I have been familiar over the years have been adamant that *Jihad* really refers to self-mastery and to putting oneself in harmony with God, not to attacking others. The fact is that most of the people of the earth desire peace and wish to love their brothers and sisters regardless of their faith and tradition.

The most important questions any of us can ask are, "What can I do personally to make peace?" and "How can I work with others in building and sustaining peace?" I have found that there is an enormous hunger among people of all faiths for a better world, a world that is promised if we take care to see everyone as Heavenly Father's child.

ROBERT A. REES

I agree with what Gordon says about the impulse for peace one finds in other faith traditions. I teach at a theological university and also at a public university. My students come from many religious traditions, and it is wonderful to learn from them. I also learn much about peace from colleagues and friends of other faiths. In a recent lecture titled "Reimagining the Restoration," I asked those in attendance, "If you could change one thing about the Church, what would you change?" In this conference devoted to peace, I reframe the question: "If you could change one thing about the world that would lead to peace, what would it be?" My own answer is that we would have a better chance of creating a peaceful world if more of the leaders of nations were women. That is not said in jest. I believe that women are much more inclined to solve problems through peaceful means than by waging war than are men.

In 1976, Latter-day Saints were somewhat surprised to hear President Spencer W. Kimball refer to us as "a warlike people, easily distracted

from our assignment of preparing for the coming of the Lord." Speaking of Americans in general and by implication Latter-day Saints, President Kimball was even more specific: "When enemies rise up, we commit vast resources to the fabrications of gods of stone and steel—ships, planes, missiles, fortifications. . . . When threatened, we become anti-enemy instead of pro-kingdom of God."[3]

It is interesting that President Kimball characterized Latter-day Saints as warlike, implying we are more eager to support war than to oppose it. Many Latter-day Saints may not be aware of the fact that during both the first and second world wars, respective First Presidencies issued strong declarations against the United States entering those wars. In truth, both ancient and modern prophets have consistently opposed war.

In the Doctrine and Covenants, we are commanded to "renounce war and proclaim peace." Hugh Nibley said, "'Renounce' is a very strong word. We are not to try to win peace by war or merely call a truce but to renounce war itself, to disdain it as a policy by proclaiming peace without reservation."[4] We often hear that truth is the first casualty of war, but peace is really the first and also the last casualty of war.

Historically, one of the attitudes that leads to war is exceptionalism—the belief that we are a chosen people. This attitude is something we are susceptible to as both Mormons and Americans. Exceptionalism can easily seduce us into thinking of ourselves as better than others, as more favored of God and as more entitled than others. Exceptionalism can lead to the belief that we are justified in going to war and in doing so are always serving the cause of truth and justice. The following is a poem, titled "Famine and Scarcity," about one of my grandchildren, and it exemplifies a nonexceptional attitude about war:

> My grandson, seven,
> head bent over his crustless peanut-
> butter and honey sandwich,
> bowl of grapes
> and cup of juice,
> says these very words:
> "Heavenly Father,
> bless that there will be no war, famine

or scarcity in the land."
And I wonder where this
pocket prophet, this junior Jeremiah
heard such a biblical phrase
and how in his sabbath year
he seems to understand.
On the evening news I see
bone piles of the vultures of war
and beneath a tangled bush in Africa,
a woman holding her ghost child—
a collapsed puppet.
At night I say my clichés
for the wrecked and wretched of the earth
who speak holy words
to the world's vast darkness.

GORDON C. THOMASSON

In 1970, my body was in no shape or form draftable. I had some forty fractures in my face and skull from multiple accidents—always as a passenger. If you ride in a car I am riding in, your insurance premiums go up! Thus, I was witness to and the subject of a great deal of injury. Because of the power of priesthood blessings, I was brought back to life and healed in ways I still marvel at. That said, my suffering was insignificant by the time the doctors had taken the stitches out, and I witnessed the suffering of others in the hospital.

In one accident, my best friend died. My testimony that he was in a better place did not change the fact that his parents were suffering terribly over the loss of their son. When I knew I was going to live, my attention turned immediately to others affected by the accident—and other accidents and maladies and the myriad conflicts raging across the world. Surviving those accidents renewed my desire to make a better world for the Lord's children, and that led me increasingly to become involved in international studies and to work for peace.

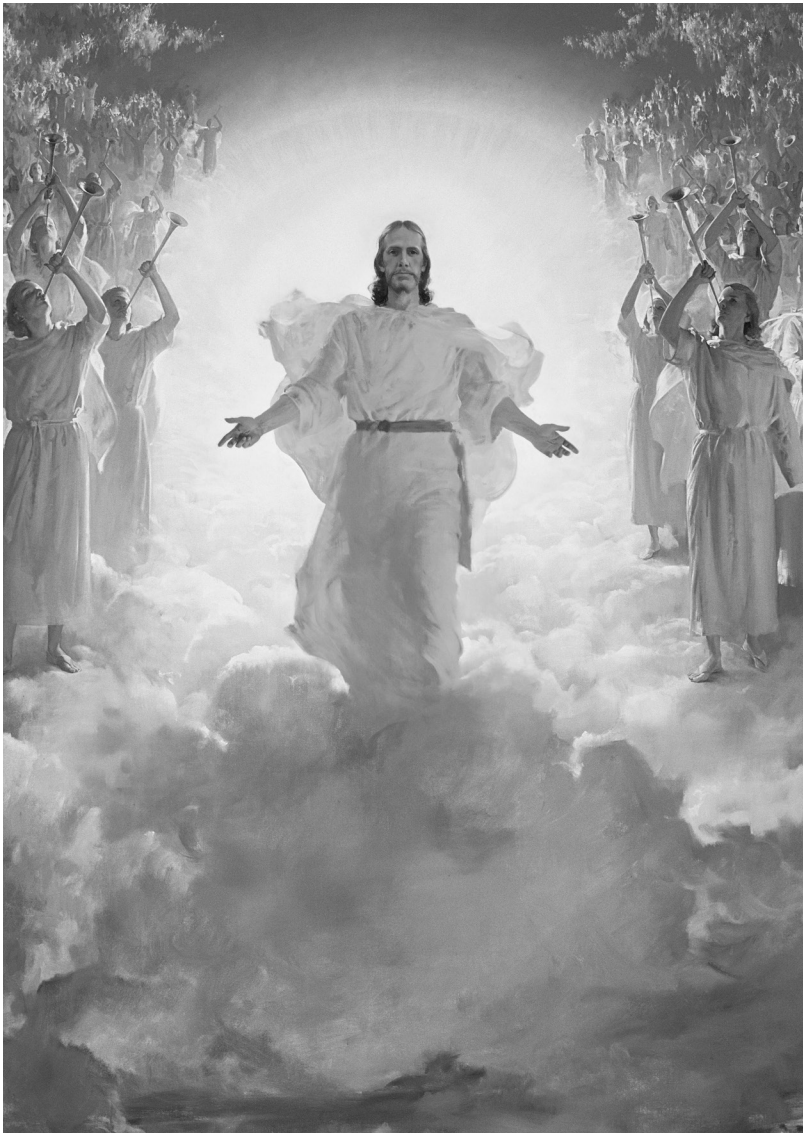
When you spend time in a place like southern Sudan, it does not take long for you to recognize how blessed your life is. Being there and in similar countries made me much more aware of my own personal blessings, but it also led me to focus on how I could bless others, including the people who live in such places. It also led to larger questions about how to spend my time and money, how to best serve others and how to better devote my life to the Prince of Peace.

Many argue that war is necessary for attaining peace. Ultimately, such an argument leads to the logic that there can be no peace without war, and that leads us to do what President Kimball warned us against: devoting so much of our resources to building and enhancing the machinery of war.

ROBERT A. REES

One of the things I appreciate about Gordon is the extent to which he has studied the Book of Mormon, including the subject of war and peace. It is not uncommon for Latter-day Saints to justify war from the pages of the Book of Mormon. Hugh Nibley was clear that the essential message of the Book of Mormon is that war is not only hell, it is outer darkness. One of the great lessons about war in the Book of Mormon is found in the attitude of the Nephites toward the Lamanites. As much as the Lamanites try to destroy the Nephites, the Nephites continue to refer to them as their "beloved brethren."[5] I wonder how many of us could say that about our enemies, including those in ISIS who are so bent on our destruction.

I have been thinking about a seminar I have been invited to participate in at BYU this summer on "Developing a Latter-day Saint Ethic of War and Peace." It seems to me that consideration of such an ethic should begin and end with the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew. The imperative of that scripture is that we see those whom we consider least in the world as if they were Christ himself. By and large we do not think about this parable when it comes to war. The reality is that today in the Middle East there are hundreds of thousands of people, many of them innocent civilians, who are victims of our bombs and bullets. There are many children whose lives are completely shattered as a consequence of our going to war. In Matthew's gospel, Christ asks us to imagine an Iraqi child killed or maimed by one of our drones as if it were him, or to imagine a Syrian family displaced



Christ is the world's greatest example of the virtues we need in order to make peace. (Harry Anderson. Courtesy of Intellectual Reserve, Inc.)

by the war that is devouring that country as if it were our family or his family. I always feel condemned before this particular scripture because it

is extremely difficult to do what Christ asks us to do—to consider everyone as if he or she were Christ. In other words, He is saying, "Inasmuch as you have failed to make peace with others, you have chosen to make war with me."

I would like to conclude with a story that illustrates what I am trying to say about love—and about forgiveness. Raymond Carver's "A Small Good Thing" is a story of a couple, the Weisses, and the birthday celebration they are planning for their only son, Scotty. The mother orders a cake from the local bakery. On the day of the party, the boy is hit by a car and lapses into a coma. The parents wait anxiously by the bedside day and night, but their son never awakens and, after a few days, he dies. The baker, unaware of the accident, continues to call the parents to come and pick up their cake. Grieving, they do not return his calls. He continues to call and becomes abusive and even threatening. Finally, one night they go to the bakery to express their outrage at the baker's behavior. When they tell him that their son is dead, he is embarrassed and ashamed. A simple man, he does the only thing he can think of—he offers them some of his fresh-baked bread and rolls. As they sit in the darkened bakery eating, he reveals his own life of loneliness, of being childless, of working sixteen hours a day baking thousands of wedding and birthday cakes and imagining the celebrations surrounding them, none of which ever touch him personally.

Not knowing what else to do, he takes a fresh loaf of dark bread from the oven, breaks it open and offers them some. "Smell this," he says. "It's a heavy bread but rich." Carver writes, "They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the florescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving."[6]

This is a powerful story of loss, grief, death, conflict, forgiveness, and redemption. It is also a story about empathy, sympathy, and compassion. The association in the story of bread with light reminds us of Christ, who is both the Bread of Life and the Light of the World and who is the world's greatest example of the virtues we need in order to make peace, as Gordon and I have discussed. Partaking of the bread of life each week, we too taste

of his light. It is a small, good thing we do every Sunday and is akin to all of the other small gifts of kindness, generosity, and forgiveness we give to one another. Those acts of love, it seems to me, have their genesis in the Light of Christ, which is in every one of us.

I feel fortunate that while I did spend some time in the military, I did not have to go to war. My father was not so fortunate. He was in some of the worst battles of the Pacific and saw death and destruction that plagued him the rest of his life. Visiting the Pearl Harbor Memorial in Hawaii recently, I thought of my father and all those others, American and Japanese, who lost their lives or were wounded in that and other wars. On the way home, I wrote the following poem:

Pearl Harbor

"Those are pearls that were his eyes."
[Shakespeare, *The Tempest*]

Beneath these waters
their bones lie in repose,
buried
in an instant
by bombs and torpedoes.
At that moment, in a small Arizona town,
my father,
fresh from milking,
sits down to late breakfast
and listens to the radio.
We are too young to
understand
but recognize
a fear we know
from dreams.
Later their voices erupt,
strafing the night.
She begs him not to go, but
my father's fierce will
is adamant.

Soon he sails
from San Francisco
to islands of death
across the Pacific.
In the museum I look up
at the plane
suspended from
the ceiling
and remember the story:
a Kamikaze bomber
heading straight
for my father's ship
at the last moment
changes course
to hit a nearby destroyer.
There is nothing he can do
while eternity is suspended in time.
My father sees blood and fire,
bodies in the water,
a severed arm,
Images no whisky
can wash away.
Looking at the placid sea,
I bow my head
for all that unfolded
from that day
when I was six
and the world
twisted on its axis
to this.

Had that plane not changed directions at the last moment, I would not be here today. My father came home from that war and rescued me from a foster home and taught me the gospel of Jesus Christ. It changed my life dramatically and indelibly. At the memorial, I thought of all of those children whose fathers did not come home from the war and all of

those children whose fathers might go to war at some future time. It is not inevitable that they will be required to do so—peace is always a choice. Working for peace, making peace, is something we all can do. Stopping war is a choice we always have. The Beatitudes do not say, "Blessed are the peace lovers" but rather, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."[7] The shards of light that Isaac Luria spoke about as being in all of us can help us transform the darkness of war into the light of peace. It is a choice we always have. It is a choice I believe Christ calls us to make as members of his peaceable kingdom.

NOTES

1. Joseph Naft, "Tikkun Olam: The Spiritual Purpose of Life," http://www.innerfrontier.org/Practices/TikkunOlam.htm.
2. Doctrine and Covenants 98:16.
3. Spencer W. Kimball, "The False Gods We Worship," *Ensign*, June 1976, 6.
4. Hugh Nibley, "Renounce War!" *BYU Daily Universe*, 26 March 1971.
5. See Jacob 4:2–3.
6. Raymond Carver, "A Small Good Thing," *Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 376–405.
7. Matthew 5:9.