

Chapter 19

The Paradox of Religious Pluralism and Religious Uniqueness

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I WOULD LIKE to thank the International Society for the invitation to address this distinguished audience. I use the word *distinguished* on purpose as it means literally “to separate by pricking.” Your mark of distinction, of excellence, is your testimony of the divinity of Christ and His restored Church on the earth today. Using this mark in your professional field is making a difference in the way The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is being known, recognized, and established in the nations of the world.

As for myself, my field is as general as it can be as a General Authority, and my only distinction is to prick the hearts of people with the word of God, as mentioned in Jarom 1:11–12:

Wherefore, the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently, exhorting with all long-suffering the people to diligence; teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was. And after this manner did they teach them.

And it came to pass that by so doing they kept them from being destroyed upon the face of the land; for they did prick

their hearts with the word, continually stirring them up unto repentance.

This proselyting message will never change; it is eternal in our mortal perspective. It is, of course, associated with the verb *to prick*, which also means to affect with anguish, grief or remorse, or repentance. Where did it start?

Physical and Spiritual Needs

From the very beginning of the history of mankind, man has been characterized by physical and spiritual needs, as we may refer to the so-called primitive man of Africa, Australia, and Neanderthal or to our biblical religious ancestors Adam and Eve. Their physical needs were their first priority in order to survive, and the earth became their first resource. Three essential questions were asked on a daily basis.

The man: “What are we going to eat tonight?”

The woman: “What am I going to wear tomorrow?”

Both of them: “Where are we going to find shelter and protection from the elements around us?”

But after being satisfied with an answer to their physical needs, namely, from the earth, there came the quest for knowledge about themselves, their existence, their hopes and pains, their future. How to face the challenges of life and especially death? Spiritual or philosophical needs emerged rapidly and were answered by revelation from God or by worshipping manmade idols. It seems that there was always an inborn need for worship or religion. It is the Greek historian Plutarch who wrote, “In history I have found cities without ports, cities without palaces, cities without schools, but never have I found cities without places of worship.”

Religious Pluralism

Religious—as well as social, economical, or political—pluralism developed from the beginning in one form or another. The one

religious form, the original, came by direct revelation from God giving knowledge of who to worship and how to worship and giving mankind a plan of happiness, also called the plan of redemption. Another religious form was a deviation from divine revelation that could be defined as human divination leading to a worship of manmade idols or man-created gods. This deviation, by the name of apostasy, would take place by defection from true knowledge or renunciation of true faith. It is interesting to note that despite eras of apostasy, they were always followed by a restoration of the true nature of God and His plan of redemption for His children. Such a period of establishing or restoring true religion was called a “dispensation”—God literally dispensing divine knowledge for the benefit of His children. Thus, in this religious pluralism, people had to deal with a fact called divine revelation and not only the uniqueness of it but also that this divine revelation had been witnessed by men called prophets, whose testimonies were recorded in sacred books.

Atheists, pagans, and idolaters did not have such written or revealed evidence except their own. In the Book of Mormon, Alma the prophet, confronting Korihor, the anti-Christ, asks him, “And now what evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not?” The answer is plain and direct, “I say unto you that ye have none, save it be your word only” (Alma 30:40). Evidence throughout the centuries testifies of the existence of God—even though some may choose to deny this existence.

For example, returning to our beginnings, we read of what happened to our religious ancestors, Adam and Eve, as they were pondering and praying about their spiritual needs. From the book of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, we read: “And Adam and Eve, his wife, called upon the name of the Lord, and they heard the voice of the Lord from the way toward the Garden of Eden, speaking unto them, and they saw him not; for they were shut out from his presence. And he gave unto them commandments, that they should worship the Lord their God, and should offer the firstlings of their flocks, for

an offering unto the Lord. And Adam was obedient unto the commandments of the Lord” (Moses 5:4–5).

Unique Role of Christ’s Church

Religious uniqueness has always been declared by revelation from God, by angels—his messengers—or other means, and through prophets called by Him. Religion, a revealed system of beliefs, ordinances, rites, and a way of life, was to become an integral part of life to save man from his mortal and imperfect condition. A Savior and Redeemer was announced to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man through the Atonement. His name would be Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

Jumping over the centuries, we find the same reality today. The recent dedication of the Nauvoo Illinois Temple, a house of worship, is a vivid and modern example of what happened yesterday with Adam and Eve and what has continued in all the various dispensations of the gospel. May I first refer to the words uttered by the prophet of the Restoration, Joseph Smith, in his dedicatory prayer of the first temple in this modern dispensation of the fulness of the gospel, the Kirtland Temple:

Remember all thy church, O Lord, with all their families, and all their immediate connections, with all their sick and afflicted ones, with all the poor and meek of the earth; that the kingdom, which thou hast set up without hands, may become a great mountain and fill the whole earth;

That thy church may come forth out of the wilderness of darkness, and shine forth fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners;

And be adorned as a bride for that day when thou shalt unveil the heavens, and cause the mountains to flow down at thy presence, and the valleys to be exalted, the rough places made smooth; that thy glory may fill the earth. (D&C 109:72–74)

Is that prayer different from the dedicatory words of President Gordon B. Hinckley, our present prophet, for the Nauvoo Illinois Temple? Let us review a short excerpt:

Now, Beloved Father, this is Thy house, the gift of Thy thankful Saints. We pray that Thou wilt visit it. Hallow it with Thy presence and that of Thy Beloved Son. Let Thy Holy Spirit dwell here at all times. May Thy work be accomplished here, and Thine eternal purposes brought to pass in behalf of Thy children, both the living and the dead. May our hearts reach to Thee as we serve within these walls. May all who are baptized in behalf of those beyond the veil of death know that they are doing something necessary under Thine eternal plan. May those who are here endowed understand and realize the magnitude of the blessings that come of this sacred ordinance. Seal upon them the covenants which they make with Thee. Open their eyes to a clear perception of Thy divine purposes. As they move into the beautiful celestial room, may their minds be brought to an understanding of Thy glorious plan for the salvation and exaltation of Thy children.

May those who gather at the altars in the sealing rooms, whether in their own behalf or in behalf of their forebears, comprehend by the power of the Spirit Thy divine will concerning the eternity of the family—fathers, mothers, and children, joined together in an everlasting union. May they receive a vision of Thine infinite ‘plan of happiness’ which Thou hast designed for Thy faithful sons and daughters.

Again, from the beginning until now, all that has been done to exercise the true worship of a living God and His Son Jesus Christ has been accomplished through the establishment of the Church of Christ upon the earth. Modern revelation confirms it over and over, as I quote from the Doctrine and Covenants: “And also those to whom these commandments were given, might have power to lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which I, the Lord, am well pleased, speaking unto the church collectively and not individually” (1:30).

One God, one Savior, one plan of salvation, one church, one priesthood, one set of ordinances of salvation. That uniqueness has always been the subject not only of questioning this assertion but

especially of criticism leading even to persecution. Elder Dallin H. Oaks once said, “Anyone who preaches unity risks misunderstanding.” We may add that we are not only risking misunderstanding but also risking life—as we have witnessed in the cases of Joseph Smith the Prophet and even Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

How do we deal with that paradox of uniqueness declared by God and pluralism advertised by the world as being politically correct? Is it religiously correct to condemn and silence or persecute nonbelievers or members of other faiths?

One of the early Apostles, Paul, said, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16). Another Apostle, James, asked the following question, “Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (James 4:4). Lehi warned his son Jacob, “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11).

Opposition and Persecution

As simple and innocuous as it may seem, establishing the Church of Christ among religious pluralism has not only been met by skepticism but also by opposition, persecution, destruction, and violence by believers and nonbelievers. Religion or church are too often associated with chauvinism and exclusion. Being recently in Palmyra and Kirtland, I rediscovered the reality of the persecution endured by the early Saints trying to establish the restored Church of Jesus Christ.

Has the situation changed in the beginning of this twenty-first century? Are new religious movements or the restored Church exempt from religious or state persecution? Apparently not, as it is quite evident in view of the destruction of sacred sites, sacred lives, and sacred values all around the world in our days. The devastating human effects of religious wars, that we thought belonged to the dark

ages of civilization, are alive and doing well in the Middle East, Nigeria, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, India, Indonesia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, to mention only a few. The more insidious of these wars are also being fought in the Western nations dealing with religious freedom and human rights versus the amazing explosion of religious plurality among the traditional religions. Paradoxically, this awakening of various new religious movements has been accompanied by a growing extension of the exercise of religious freedom and rights and also with increased restrictions to limit that new freedom to worship how, where, or what we may. Religious exclusiveness related to nationalism, patriotism, or favoritism is not new and will continue, as we saw in a 2000 incident in Russia between the Orthodox and the Catholic churches. Tolerance does not seem to belong to the religious vocabulary!

The major monolithic religions—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity—also seem to build more than ever before the physical and spiritual walls of intolerance, hate, and distrust among them. All three are major revealed religions based on words of prophets recorded in their sacred records: the Torah, the Qur'an, and the Bible. In essence, all have the same source and foundation!

How can ordinary people who are members of these religions deal with constant references to war? The most challenging temptation of this twenty-first century will be to turn to oneself and to use reason to deal with religion or to simply negate the role of religion, churches, and priesthood. The recent scandals affecting priesthood leaders and church shepherds in the Catholic Church will neither help the growing desertion of their faithful nor prevent growing distrust for church leaders of other confessions.

The dogma of the existence of God is a message of love to help us be transformed to become like Him. A dogma is a promise; it is hope that will change life by faith. It is up to the individual to accept it or to tear it down. Logical reasoning, relativism, and the modern propensity to discard judgments to be politically correct are the temptations to change the divine nature of God into a natural god,

the divine instrument of love and salvation into a worldly instrument of friendship and unconditional salvation, and the divine righteousness into hedonism. That is much easier to believe when there is almost nothing left to believe in.

The Lord has warned us about this calamity in very clear terms: “They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall” (D&C 1:16).

What is the Lord’s solution? He called a prophet, Joseph Smith. He gave him commandments. He told this prophet and his followers to proclaim the restored truths unto the world that the fulness of His gospel might be proclaimed by the weak and the simple unto the ends of the world, and before kings and rulers. Then, in His preface to the doctrines, covenants, and commandments given in this dispensation, the Lord said: “For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men, and there is none to escape; . . . and the voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days. . . . Wherefore the voice of the Lord is unto the ends of the earth, that all that will hear may hear” (D&C 1:2, 4, 11).

Religious pluralism and religious uniqueness, despite being a major cause for contention and wars, can coexist—even if at first glance it seems unsolvable as a paradox. The one and only truth can exist without excluding or condemning the unbelievers and others. Religious freedom has a double edge but addresses both sides of the table and should assure communication, friendship, and peace despite the differences.

So are there any doubts about the uniqueness, the reality, or the necessity to share and expose the gospel of salvation to mankind? The Lord has spoken in our day. His Church will continue to be established in all the nations of the earth, missionaries will continue to share their testimonies, there will continue to be persecution, but we have a spiritual duty and a spiritual assignment to declare the mes-

sage of the Restoration—that Jesus is the Christ, that Joseph Smith was the prophet of the Restoration, and that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the church led by Jesus Christ. It is our motivation to do so without imposing our message or restraining the agency of others.

Religious Freedoms Today

The eleventh article of faith is a declaration of love and respect as “we claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may” (Articles of Faith 1:11). It is not different from the various international declarations trying to cope with the mortal challenge for an individual to decide for himself or herself, without the intervention of the state, a church, or a court, to join, belong, or leave a religion or a church. The Universal Declaration of 1948 states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief.” It has been repeated in every possible assembly of government and church leaders, as it was recently in Rome in the International Symposium on Human Rights in Islam. In his message to the symposium, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, stated, “Human rights are the expression of those traditions of tolerance in all cultures that are the basis of peace and progress. Human rights, properly understood and justly interpreted, are foreign to no culture and native to all nations.” He then went on to refer to Imam Ali, the fourth khalifa after Prophet Muhammed, who “instructed the governor of Egypt to rule with mercy and tolerance towards all his subjects . . . ‘for they are of two kinds: either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation.’”

Apparently everyone agrees today, too often in words only, that religious freedom and the exercise of human rights can or should be applied equally to all political regimes, cultures, nations, and particularly religions. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of

Action of 1993 states: “All human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional peculiarities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights.”

There is still a major difference between the word of the law and its intentions and the reality of the world and its traditions. We can help by building bridges of communication, friendship, and peace instead of elevating walls of incomprehension, hate, and war. It is not only our duty but also our responsibility to claim our religious uniqueness.

Conclusion

What is the conclusion of this very short examination of religious plurality and religious uniqueness, that unique paradox? We must look and listen as Joseph Smith did when he prayed to know which of all the sects was right, that he might know which to join. The vision was of the Father and the Son, the message was the greatest ever given again to mankind: “This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!” (Joseph Smith—History 1:17). It was the message of love: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. He is the central part of the plan of salvation, and the ordinances of salvation are found in His church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This message is unique and is an invitation for the honest and sincere to find out for himself or herself as Moroni the prophet concluded his exhortation:

Remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts.

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. (Moroni 10: 3–5)

The invitation is not coercive. It is given with respect for others' beliefs; it is given in the spirit of love and recognition that we may be different in our religious thoughts but we are essentially the same—all are spirit children of our Heavenly Father. Our quest for happiness and peace is also the same, and eternal life is a result of agency and choice.

May the Lord help us to remember our religious uniqueness among the religious pluralism of our days, but may we also do it the Lord's way and not the world's way, as He commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

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