

CHAPTER 1

WHY BOTHER WITH OTHER FAITHS?

Latter-day Saints may have different answers to common questions from those of other faiths, but each offers insights into the grave and challenging issues of what it means to be a human being struggling to be in harmony with the ultimate power in the universe.

In 1984 and 1985, while still a Presbyterian minister in Mesa, Arizona, I served on a committee to evaluate a movie entitled *The God Makers*. It purported to be the true story of the Mormon faith, and hundreds of people left the showing believing they finally knew what their Latter-day Saint neighbors believed. It was clear to anyone who had even a little knowledge about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that it was a series of twisted half-truths perpetrated by persons who called themselves “Ex-Mormons for Jesus.” Latter-day Saints were justifiably upset. The Arizona chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (now the National Conference for Community and Justice or NCCJ), a group of persons dedicated to fairness and accuracy in religious dialogue, decided to examine the film. They asked me to be a member of the examining committee, since I had called it “religious pornography” in a letter to the editor of the *Mesa Tribune* after having seen it. No Latter-day Saints served on the committee, to ensure that the effort of the committee would not be self-serving.

In the interest of accuracy, it should be said that I had been a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for three or four months in 1964 while serving in the military, but due to a lack of fellowshiping, no calling, and a failure to understand the Apostasy, I had returned to my prior tradition, Presbyterianism.

The committee examined the film, interviewed those who either made or distributed the film, and then talked with various Latter-day Saints, among them Truman Madsen, then holder of the Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding at Brigham Young University. In the end, the Arizona chapter of the NCCJ issued a statement, in the context of a larger statement on appropriate standards for inter-faith dialogue, saying that the film did not appropriately represent the faith of their Latter-day Saint neighbors. The investigation and statement were models of how the religious community should care for one another to ensure religious freedom for all. Untruths and partial truths about anybody else's faith are both wrong and inappropriate.

This statement now leads me to the title of this chapter, "Why Bother with Other Faiths?" Do we as Latter-day Saint Christians really need to know anything about other faiths? Do we not know all we need to know? In asking these questions, we should remember that Latter-day Saints were deeply offended by *The God Makers* with justification. But sometimes in our ignorance of the true beliefs of our neighbors, we create our own skewed version of other faiths in our priesthood quorums, our Sunday Schools, and our Relief Societies. As converts to the Latter-day Saint faith, my wife and I have seen our previous faith experiences denigrated and demeaned. It was to such ignorance about their beliefs that Latter-day Saints objected when they saw *The God Makers*. Thus, if we are to be a world church, we need to understand and appreciate all the good that God has given to persons beyond the Latter-day Saint pale and to represent it accurately. President George Albert Smith said as he spoke to persons who were not Latter-day Saints:

We have not come to take away from you the truth and virtue you possess. We have come not to find fault with you nor to criticize you. We have not come here to berate you because of things you have not done; but we have come here as your brethren . . . and to say to you: "Keep all the good that you have, and let us bring to you more good, in order that

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you may be happier and in order that you may be prepared to enter into the presence of our Heavenly Father.”¹

Likewise, President Howard W. Hunter told Latter-day Saints:

In the gospel view, no man is alien. No one is to be denied. There is no underlying excuse for smugness, arrogance, or pride. Openly scorning the pettiness and intolerance of rival religious groups, the Prophet Joseph Smith said in an editorial:

“While one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal regard; He views them as His offspring, and



President Howard W. Hunter

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without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes ‘His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.’ He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, ‘according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil,’ or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, or India.”²

In the spirit of President George Albert Smith, President Howard W. Hunter, and the Prophet Joseph Smith, this book will attempt to show the good that God has placed among his children and upon which the Restoration may build to bring more good. It will be done in the spirit of conversation and dialogue, seeking to appreciate all the good that each religion brings. At the same time, this book will seek to show what makes each religious tradition unique, for it is our unique qualities that make us who we are.

— FIVE THOUSAND YEARS OF QUESTIONS —

I remember being in a meeting in which a prominent evangelical was going to speak. A fellow Latter-day Saint sat down next to me and asked, “What is he doing here? We are supposed to teach, not be taught.” My question to him was, “Do you know all the questions?” For five millennia, human beings have been asking about the meaning of life: Where have we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? The big questions are not new with Latter-day Saints. Humans have been asking them since the time of Adam. They have also wondered why some persons are born wealthy and others poor, why some are born perfect physically and others have birth defects, why some have religious inclinations while others do not, why some are born into a privileged part of the world and others are not. And the questions go on and on.

Unfortunately, the study of philosophy and world religions is not required at many universities. If it were, more students might at least understand the issues about which people have wondered for so long. At Brigham Young University, they would also come to realize that the Latter-day Saints have answers, thanks to prophets and apostles, to these questions that need to be considered in any setting where the great questions of life are being discussed. Latter-day Saint answers need to be taken seriously in the realm of philosophical and theological exchange. All too often, Latter-day Saints feel at a disadvantage because they do not have a professional clergy. While that may be true, they have no shortage of thinkers among them who have imbibed the teachings of prophets and apostles who themselves have drunk from the well of divine revelation where these questions are answered. Thus Latter-day Saints can all participate in meaningful discussions with their neighbors of whatever faith about the essentials of life. As we study the religions of the world, we will learn their questions and their answers and see what Latter-day Saints have to bring to the discussion.

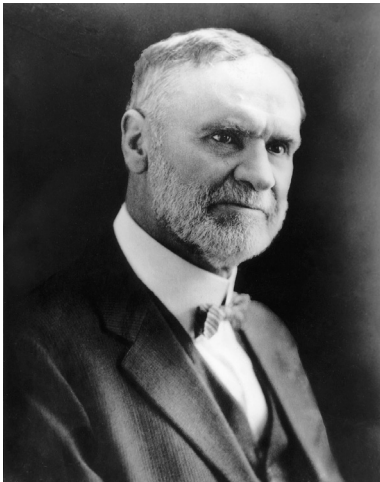
— PROPHETS, APOSTLES, AND SCRIPTURE —

President Spencer W. Kimball stated, “The great religious leaders of the world such as Muhammad, 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

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enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals.”³ Notice that persons like Muhammad, Confucius, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and even philosophers like Plato and Aristotle did not teach simply the best of their own thought. They taught what God had given them to teach, undoubtedly mixed with their own views. And although this passage could suggest that they simply drew from the Light of Christ, real content comes through manifestations of the Holy Ghost, which are available to all members of the human family.⁴

Another very interesting statement was made in 1921 by Elder Orson F. Whitney, an Apostle:



Elder Orson F. Whitney
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[God] is using not only his covenant people, but other peoples as well, to consummate a work, stupendous, magnificent, and altogether too arduous for this little handful of Saints to accomplish by and of themselves. . . .

All down the ages men bearing the authority of the Holy Priesthood—patriarchs, prophets, apostles and others, have officiated in the name of the Lord, doing the things that he required of them; and outside the pale of their activities other good and great men, not bearing the Priesthood, but possessing profundity of thought, great wisdom, and a desire to uplift their fellows, have been sent by the Almighty into many nations, to give them, not the fulness of the Gospel, but that portion of truth that they were able to receive and wisely use.⁵

Note that Elder Whitney says that the Latter-day Saints cannot accomplish what God has called them to do by themselves. They need the help of others beyond the priesthood in its various offices. To accomplish his work, the Lord has actually sent other great figures,

not holding the priesthood, to give to people what they need to hear in their particular time and circumstances. This is an amazing statement, and how true it is.

Suppose that the only truly moral, spiritual persons in the world were fourteen million Latter-day Saints. What would this world be like? It would be a terrible place to live. Thank heaven for all our brothers and sisters who have moral and spiritual values given to them by God and who make it possible for all of us to live above the level of a hunted animal. Thank heaven for my Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Sikh, and Bahá'í neighbors, as well as all the other religious persons I haven't yet mentioned. By the spiritual values they hold, they make the world habitable. We do not have to live in terror, for there are others like us who seek to do God's will.

To extend these thoughts, we need to turn to the Book of Mormon. There are two passages which deal with the themes we have been considering. Every Latter-day Saint is thoroughly familiar with them and could probably quote them from memory. However, I wonder if we have ever read them with the world's religions in mind. The first passage, 2 Nephi 28:30, says:

For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have.

We know that we learn line upon line and precept upon precept. We know that is exactly the way Joseph Smith learned. But have we thought that it is the way the whole human family, the family of God, learns? God never gives any of us, including Latter-day Saints, the whole truth. Sometimes my students say that they as Latter-day Saints know all truth, but in reality, they know so little of what there is to know. What they mean is that they know the fullness of the gospel. They know how to get back to their Heavenly Father, but "all truth" will actually be sought into the eternities. Thus all persons are on their own pilgrimages back to their Heavenly Father. All of us who

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were reserved for and born in these latter days are working on an aspect of our spirituality that our Heavenly Father knew we needed to hone. Perhaps I am a Latter-day Saint because I need to learn how to serve. Perhaps a Hindu is learning how to unite himself or herself with God. Perhaps a Buddhist is learning how to let go of the things of the world. Perhaps a Muslim is learning how to live an ethical life before God. Perhaps a Jew is learning how to obey the law of God. And many more scenarios could be developed.

Each one of us is exactly where our Father knows we need to be to grow. There are no accidents in a universe governed by our Heavenly Father. We all learn line upon line, precept upon precept, and we will be held accountable if we do not receive the “more” that God has to give us as we walk the upward path. When we stop somewhere on the path and want no more, we do not remain stationary; we actually slide backward. We even lose what we have.

The second passage from the Book of Mormon is 2 Nephi 29:11–12, which says:

For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written.

For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it.

Here we have the Lord’s declaration that he will speak to all the peoples of the earth, no matter where they are. We could hardly find a broader statement about the universality of God’s care for all his children. What the Lord speaks to the human family will be written down and kept in books, and it is against the content of these books that the peoples of the world and their works will be judged.

What books? The text tells us. The first book is the one which the Jews shall write, the Bible, for both the Old and the New Testaments

arise from authors of the Jewish faith, except perhaps Luke. The second book is also clear. It will arise from the Nephites, and that is the Book of Mormon. The next books arise from the tribes of Israel that the Lord has led away, so those are writings from the ten lost tribes of Israel. In reality, they will probably be very much like the Book of Mormon, bearing witness of Christ in expectation and then as the Risen Lord. When we finally get those, we might need a large backpack or a wagon to get them all to church!

The last phrase is the most interesting from a world religions perspective, for it tells us that God will speak to all nations of the world and “they shall write it.” These books have to be the Qur’an of the Muslims, the Bhagavad Gita of the Hindus, the Analects of Confucius, the Tripitaka of the Buddhists, the Guru Granth Sahib of the Sikhs, and the many other religious writings found among the great religions of the world. This means that God has also given these books to his children, and thus they are holy scripture for them. They are as sacred to them as any holy writ that we have for us. In them, God addresses members of his family. He ignores none of his children. He gives them all guidance against which they will be judged, for God is a just God. Thus, the Muslim is judged against the Qur’an, the Christian against the Bible, the Buddhist against the Tripitaka, the Hindu against the Bhagavad Gita, and the Latter-day Saint Christian against the four canonical volumes which God has given them. God holds no one accountable for what he has not given them, but each of us is responsible to live by what God has personally given to us.

Given the above, one can imagine a scene in which Heavenly Father called before him a choice spirit and commissioned him to bring more light and truth to South Asia knowing that he would never hear the gospel. Would he do that? Of course, the only request being that someone later perform the saving ordinances for him in a temple. His name on earth was Siddhartha Gautama—the Buddha. Likewise, another choice spirit was asked if he would do something similar for those in Southwest Asia. Again came the positive response with its request for someone to eventually perform his temple work. His earth name was Muhammad.

Now imagine today as Buddhists and Muslims pass through the veil. Each is greeted by the Buddha or Muhammad with the words,

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“Welcome. Now let me tell you the rest of the story!” Is this not what Doctrine and Covenants 138 is about—missionary work to the dead who have never heard the fullness of the gospel in this life and who need its saving ordinances so that they may have all that their Heavenly Father wishes for them? Perhaps it is appropriate to paraphrase some of the prophets of the Book of Mormon by saying, “Oh, how great the breadth and depth of our Heavenly Father’s plan.”

— SETTING TRAJECTORIES —

In harmony with what has just been said, let me suggest that each of us sets a trajectory in mortal life. The greatest step that members of the human family will ever take in their spiritual journey is to enter mortality, for only here can we encounter the sharp edges of life that will smooth us into a disciple that the Lord Jesus can use. Thus those of every faith that seek *truth* will set a trajectory with a steep incline upward, much like an F-16 taking off. Some enter mortality, however, with a somewhat laissez-faire attitude. They do nothing particularly bad, but neither do they do anything particularly good. Their trajectory is flat, similar to a tractor plowing a field. Finally, there are those who use mortality to diminish and destroy themselves. They set a trajectory straight down, similar to a parachutist whose backup chute will not open. If unaltered in mortality, these are the trajectories that we will take out of this life with us to the next.

For those who set the trajectory upward, they will find Truth with a capital *T*. In the Gospel of John, Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). Earlier, Jesus had stated, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Thus, truth is not a series of philosophical propositions but rather a person, the person of Jesus Christ. Those of all faiths who pursue truth will encounter it in all its fullness in the Lord Jesus Christ and, having pursued it, will accept Jesus as their Lord without reservation. They will also accept the authority of the priesthood through which God always works, and they will accept without hesitation the saving ordinances of the gospel done for them by proxy. These persons will be of all religious traditions, for they received what God originally gave them and then accepted more when it was offered. They will be admitted to the celestial kingdom to the joy of all the saints of heaven.

Those, however, who set a level course will also gain what they desire. Again, these are persons from all faith traditions, including, sadly, many Latter-day Saints. It is certainly possible that their trajectory can be changed on the other side of the veil, but if they persist in their present self-satisfied stance, they will gain the terrestrial kingdom. Those who are plummeting to their own dooms may also be turned, but it will not be easy to change their self-destructive ways. If no change occurs, they will receive the glory of the telestial kingdom. Again, all faith traditions will be represented, including Latter-day Saints. However, there is a note of hope, even for those who seem bent on self-destruction. Truman Madsen, in his book about the temple, notes that President Wilford Woodruff said that there would be few who would not accept the ordinances of the temple when they are done for them. Similarly, he notes that John Taylor said that only about 10 percent of persons would refuse the ordinances. He quotes President Taylor as saying, “How many who are kept in prison are not ready to come out?”⁶

— APOSTASY AND RESTORATION —

Another way of seeing the connection between the world’s religions and Latter-day Saints is to examine the concept of apostasy. Latter-day Saints claim that an apostasy took place in the second half of the first century CE. But what does that mean? We know that in the meridian of time, Jesus came to atone for our sins. He called and set apart twelve Apostles and a group of seventy others to carry forward his work during his ministry and afterward. However, both of these groups were lost. Most importantly, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles vanished through persecution and even martyrdom in many instances. Latter-day Saints claim that to perpetuate the apostolic authority, it is not sufficient for an Apostle to have ordained at one time an early Church father. When the Apostles were taken from the earth, so was the authority to perform the saving ordinances of the gospel. Thus with the loss of the Twelve also came the loss of authority—the heart of the Apostasy. This did not mean, however, that all truth was lost.

Latter-day Saints often say to me that they are glad that I have found the gospel. My response is that I knew the gospel long before I was a Latter-day Saint—what I found is the fullness of the gospel.

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How could I have known the gospel? I knew it because faithful Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants passed along the biblical witness of Jesus across the centuries, thereby bringing billions to Christ, myself included.

The heart of the Restoration is that the same authority that was lost in about 100 CE was restored to Joseph Smith by Peter, James, and John in the summer of 1829. By 1835, the Quorum of Twelve was reestablished, although there were always twelve men around Joseph. However, I have to believe that prior to 1835 the full authority of the Restoration lay with the original Twelve in the heavens. In God's economy, what happened over that roughly 1,800-year period between the loss of authority and its restoration? Did not Jesus know that it would be lost? Of course he did, for if Paul knew it in 2 Thessalonians, then so did Jesus. Why, then, did he go to the trouble of establishing the Twelve and Seventy in the first century? To give us a template of what the church would look like when it was time for the church to be on the earth in its fullness. With the Restoration, we see the return of the original order of things with the Twelve and the Seventy leading the church on earth.

But we also see that Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism were part of the Lord's plan. They were Eliases, or forerunners, to the Restoration, for without their ministry across the centuries, no one would have been prepared or looking for something more than what they had. Sidney Rigdon and Oliver Cowdery, for example, were looking for a restoration of the New Testament Church, based on their reading of the Bible. Their only question was whether the Lord had restored it through Joseph Smith.

What then of the other religions of the world? How do they fit into this picture? Much in the same way that traditional Christianity fits. They are Eliases to the Restoration, preparing their followers for the "more" that the Lord is waiting to give them as they are ready. In the meantime, he is molding their spirits through their own traditions.

— MISSIONARIES AND GOOD NEIGHBORS —

From a Latter-day Saint perspective, however, these other religious traditions, including traditional Christianity, are incomplete. They

have much good, but we desire to offer them more good. This is why we preach to all faith traditions. We believe that we have a precious pearl that will enhance their lives and their spirituality. We build on a foundation already laid. We should never denigrate that which God has put into place, for to do so is to despise what the Lord has planted. If we must denounce someone else's faith to make our own look good, that would mean we have very little to offer. If we have truth, truth will validate itself as the Holy Ghost bears witness of that truth.

The missionary effort of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints covers most of the countries of the earth, and in this mobile society, most of the nations of the earth with their religions are represented in the United States. If we know something about the religions we will encounter in our missionary efforts both here and abroad, we will be better missionaries. While the Spirit can guide in all things, we need to be able to find common ground with those that we teach, as did Ammon with Lamoni, so that we build from a common foundation. Knowledge of other faiths also gives an appreciation of and respect for what God has already given them. We can rejoice in the truths that they already know, thanking God for guiding these particular children to the point where we may offer them the “more of Mormonism.”

Similarly, the earth is shrinking. If we are to be good citizens of this world village, we need to know and appreciate our brothers and sisters of all nations, colors, and religions. God would not have us at odds with one another, and religion is very close to the hearts of most people. To know the hearts of our brothers and sisters, we must know their religions.

— **FORMAT** —

In the past when I have written on the world's religions, I have always tried to let the various traditions have their own say without interruption. At the end of a chapter on Hinduism, for example, I would put a section of Latter-day Saint reflections on the philosophical and theological issues that had been raised by the presentation of the Hindu faith. For a textbook, I still believe this is an appropriate approach, but in this book, I am going to take a different path. I believe that there can be constructive dialogue between faiths in which both parties respect and appreciate one another. My experience with the

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study of the world's religions is that I learn much about my own religion through my dialogue with other faiths. I see things in my own faith that I might never have seen had I not looked at it through the lens of another faith. The study of other faiths has only deepened and strengthened my own beliefs and commitments.

I had a teaching assistant who said it well. He was a Sikh from New Delhi who had come to Brigham Young University for his undergraduate work. He attended his ward and participated in the social events that went with ward life. He had his share of missionaries who wanted to convert him to the Latter-day Saint faith, but he resisted them because he did not find his faith to be deficient. With deep respect for Latter-day Saints, he said that being at Brigham Young University among so many faithful Latter-day Saints had deepened his own understanding of and commitment to his Sikh faith. So it is for me. The more I study other faiths, the more committed I become to my own. I become a better Latter-day Saint through my interactions with my brothers and sisters, who are the sons and daughters of a common Heavenly Father.

Thus in this book I will interlace the traditions of the various faiths we treat with the thoughts of Latter-day Saints on the issues that a given faith raises. This is not an attempt to show that Latter-day Saints are better than their neighbors. Rather, it is to show that we all wrestle with the common issues of human life and that we all have sensible answers to common questions. We need to remember that no one believes anything that is unreasonable. We all believe things that give meaning, purpose, and direction to our lives. We may have different answers to common questions, but each offers insights into the grave and challenging issues of what it means to be a human being struggling to be in harmony with the ultimate power in the universe. It is in this spirit of respect and appreciation that we as Latter-day Saints will examine our religiously diverse neighbors who hold deep faiths just as we do.⁷

— NOTES —

1. George Albert Smith, *Sharing the Gospel with Others: Excerpts from the Sermons of President Smith*, comp. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1948), 12–13.

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2. Howard W. Hunter, “The Gospel—A Global Faith,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 18. The quote from Joseph Smith is found in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 4:494–96.
3. Spencer W. Kimball, *Statement of the First Presidency Regarding God’s Love for All Mankind*, February 15, 1978; quoted in Carlos E. Asay, “God’s Love for Mankind,” in Spencer J. Palmer, ed., *Mormons and Muslims: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations*, rev. ed. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002), 54.
4. Dallin H. Oaks, “Always Have His Spirit,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 59. Elder Oaks explains that the manifestations of the Holy Ghost are available to everyone, with the purpose of acquainting “sincere seekers with the truth about the Lord and his gospel.” Though this statement could be interpreted to mean only the doctrine of the church, this chapter suggests throughout that God gives direct guidance to any of his children who are open to it (manifestations of the Holy Ghost). When followed, those manifestations will eventually lead them to Christ and the priesthood, which is the point made by Elder Oaks.
5. Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, April 1921, 32–33, quoted in Hunter, “A Global Faith,” 18.
6. Truman G. Madsen, *The Temple: Where Heaven Meets Earth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 31.
7. In the Western world, era designations are typically expressed in one of two ways: (1) AD (anno Domini, “in the year of the Lord” or “in the year of our Lord”) and BC (“before Christ”), or (2) CE (“of the Common Era”) and BCE (“before the Common Era”). By convention, the “Common Era” begins when Jesus was born, so it is correlated with AD, but BCE and CE are not centered on Christ. Because this is a book about world religions, BCE and CE are used throughout.