

In any discussion of the nature of the Godhead, Joseph's First Vision needs to be considered. Del Parson, The First Vision, © 1987 Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

CHAPTER 15

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE RESTORATION

Manifestations of the Holy Ghost are available to people of any faith, if they are seeking truth. God will always respond to their search, so not only are there old truths in all faiths, but there are continually new reminders of truth being given by God to leaders and members within every religious tradition.

We have traveled a long road through many countries and many faiths. At the beginning of this book, we suggested that God was working through all faiths to bring his children back to him, but we had little factual knowledge to test this hypothesis. Hopefully, having walked in the shoes of many faithful people, Latter-day Saints can see the finger of God moving among all of his children while preparing them for the fullness that he has in store for them. If The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does possess the fullness of the gospel, what contributions can it make to the discussion of the great human issues? The church has solid contributions to offer to the following questions: (1) How do we know God?, (2) What is the nature of the divine?, and (3) What is the nature of the human being? This final section will be organized around these questions, some of which we began to answer in chapter 1.

—HOW DO WE KNOW GOD?—

Latter-day Saint Christians stand firmly on the ground of revelation. There is no way to know God unless he reveals himself to human beings. Many other Christians hold a similar stance, as do Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, and Baha'is. For all Christians, God makes himself known in Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word. It is debated among them whether he can be known also through reason or in nature. For Latter-day Saints, the natural world is proof of God's existence, but we must wait on his self-revelation in Jesus Christ for any real knowledge about him. Muslims believe God has revealed himself to Muhammad, and his Word is incarnate in a book—the Qur'an. Jews hold that God revealed himself at Sinai to Moses and gave his oral and written law, which continues to guide faithful Jews to this day. Hindus and Sikhs hold that God reveals himself in many ways and places and under many names. Baha'is hold that God reveals himself regularly through Manifestations that appear approximately every thousand years. In none of these traditions is God silent. He continues to speak through his Spirit, through a book, or through holy men and women who address anew the problems of daily life.

The unique Latter-day Saint contribution to this discussion is the belief that God has a living spokesperson—a prophet—on earth today who conveys God's will to the human family. Because God continues to speak through a prophet, a portion of the Latter-day Saint canon is open, meaning that there is room to add to the canon. To my knowledge, no other tradition has a doctrine of open canon or of a living prophet like the one among Latter-day Saints.

—WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE DIVINE?—

Latter-day Saint knowledge of the nature of God is not based solely or primarily on written texts. First and foremost, it is rooted in the First Vision of Joseph Smith, in which the Father and the Son appeared to him when he was fourteen years old. Both Jesus and the Father possessed bodily forms. Thus, from a Latter-day Saint point of view, the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, in which the members of the Godhead are all of one essence, is open to further discussion. Latter-day Saints also believe that the Holy Ghost, while a being of

spirit only, also has human form. In any discussion of the nature of the Godhead, Joseph's First Vision needs to be considered.

—WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN BEING?—

PREMORTAL EXISTENCE

It is probably in the area of the nature of the human being that Latter-day Saints have the most to contribute to the general religious discussion. First, among Christians, Latter-day Saints are the only group that believes that life did not begin at conception. In fact, Latter-day Saints believe that there was never a time when human beings were not, for all life is self-subsistent and uncreated, as is God himself (see D&C 93:29). All life—animal or human—existed in a state called “intelligence,” which was then clothed with spirit form by God the Father, thereby creating spirit beings that lived in his presence for a period of time. One tradition which shares this sense of uncreated essence extending into all life is Hinduism with its concept of Brahman, but this view questions the ultimate reality of the individual apart from Brahman. Shinto, with its understanding of the kami as a life-force permeating all things and constantly manifesting itself in humans, animals, lakes, rivers, and so forth comes closer to retaining some individuality, since the kami nature continues after death. Perhaps the closest parallel to the concept of the eternal intelligence is the soul in Jainism, which has no beginning and no end and is uncreated, as is premortal intelligence in Latter-day Saint thought. Of course the idea that humans came from somewhere is not new at all in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, with their doctrines of reincarnation, but in their systems there are multiple mortal existences which are different from Latter-day Saint thought, with only one earth life.

Among Latter-day Saint thinkers, there is not full agreement on the nature of “intelligence.” Some, like Elder Bruce R. McConkie, hold that there was a “stuff” of intelligence from which individual spirits were organized (see Abraham 3:22–23).¹ Others, like Elder B. H. Roberts and Truman G. Madsen, believe that “intelligences” are individual entities, without beginning or end, which were incorporated into spirit bodies by God the Father.² This author favors the latter position.

The concepts of eternal intelligences and a premortal existence as spirit children of God give added meaning to earthly existence. Humans are not just created to praise and glorify their God and ultimately dwell with him, but in Latter-day Saint thought, humans are eternal and on their way from previously dwelling in the presence of God, through an earthly life of growth, to a future life like God's in his presence.

There is thus a dynamic concept of eternal progression with no beginning and no end. In addition, the concept of eternal intelligences, coupled with the fact that Latter-day Saints believe that matter and energy are just as eternal as God and intelligences, means that God becomes an organizer of already existing entities rather than a God who creates "out of nothing." Thus, the understanding of eternal intelligences gives a new view of both God and human beings.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Understanding the issue of eternal intelligences this way makes a significant contribution to the issue of the origin of evil in the universe. If God created all things, including human beings "out of nothing," it is hard not to blame God for creating evil. If premortal intelligences, however, are as eternal as God is, then God is not the source of evil. Rather, God clothes intelligences with spirit form and affirms agency. He gives his spirit children a chance to grow and change, but each has good and evil inclinations upon which their agency enables them to act. Their choices lead to good and evil in the earthly realm. Thus, human beings are the source of all evil in the world, and despite the choices they make, God will use all their choices, whether good or bad, to bring his work to a glorious conclusion. The Resurrection of Jesus has shown that nothing will ever stand in God's way.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

As a product of the First Vision, we learned that not only was Jesus embodied, but so also was the Father. This adds a dimension to the claim that humans are created "in the image of God." Not only do we share the attributes of Deity, such as relationality, rationality, supremacy, love, compassion, and giving, but we also share a common physical form. Hindus would have little problem believing that God could

appear as an embodied being, for in their understanding, God is not limited to any one form but could appear in many ways. While Sikhs hold that God is without form, they assert that God can reveal himself in many ways. Muslims and Jews would have a harder time accepting that God has physical form, for this idea raises images of idolatry for both. What Latter-day Saints need to notice, however, is that the attributes of God—not just the bodily form—are very much a part of his image. The issue of “bodily form” is a gap filled through the First Vision, but form is not the total explanation of the “image of God.”

THE FALL

In the chapter on Christianity, we looked at some of the contributions Latter-day Saint thought makes to understanding the Fall and the Atonement. Latter-day Saint Christians see the Fall quite differently than other Christians do. It is not a disaster and a Fall downward with Eve being a culprit. Rather, it is a “fortunate Fall” forward, a product of a spiritually informed choice, on Eve’s part particularly, through which humankind can actually continue progression toward becoming ever more like God. The trials of life and even death are all part of a process that hones human beings into glorious beings who can live with God and approach being like him.

UNCONDITIONAL EFFECTS OF THE ATONEMENT

Latter-day Saints also contribute to religious dialogue in their understanding of how the Atonement works. While there is usually debate in Christian circles about whether the effects of the Atonement are conditional or unconditional, Latter-day Saint Christians affirm that the effects are both. The unconditional effects of the Atonement remove the results of the Fall—temporal and spiritual death—which all humans received as a product of their birth into mortality. All humans will be resurrected and returned to the presence of God for judgment by the Son.

CONDITIONAL EFFECTS OF THE ATONEMENT

But then what covers our sins? The answer given by Latter-day Saints is that these are dealt with through conditional aspects of the Atonement because they, like Eastern Orthodox Christians, believe

that there is cooperation between God and human beings in bringing about salvation. As we have seen, nothing saves human beings from their sins except the Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and God expects us to participate in them if we want to be saved from our sinful ways. Because of the agency that humans retain following the Fall, they can respond to God when he approaches them in Jesus Christ. That response is to have a relationship of faith with Jesus, to change the direction of their lives, to submit to the priesthood ordinance of baptism, and then to open themselves to the Holy Ghost, which is God's seal upon them that they have done as he asked them to do. The Holy Ghost also enables persons to live as God would have them live. With the Holy Ghost, they can keep the commandments that God gives them, particularly to love God and to love their neighbors. If we do these things, we are connected into the Atonement, justice is satisfied, and all that God has in store for us will be ours, as long as we continue in a relationship of faith and obedience with Jesus. The critical Latter-day Saint contribution here would be the essential nature of saving *priesthood* ordinances for human progression toward God, which is added to the traditional faith and repentance of many religions.

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Latter-day Saint Christians have much to add to the discussion of life after death. For some of the religions we have studied, there is a cycle of reincarnations to bring people to a spiritual maturity that will enable them to be released from the wheel (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism); there may be little concern for an after-life (Confucianism, philosophical Taoism, and Shinto); or there may be a doctrine of being with or separated from God in the end (Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Baha'i). Given the revealed doctrines of the Restoration, particularly those found in Doctrine and Covenants 76 and 138, Latter-day Saints have a good deal to add to human knowledge of what happens beyond the grave.

POSTMORTAL EVANGELISM

Doctrine and Covenants section 138 reveals that mortality is not the only place where persons may hear the fullness of the gospel. If persons of whatever faith pass through death having never heard the

full gospel of Jesus Christ, they are not automatically condemned to separation from God, as so many Christians across the ages have believed. Rather, there is a spirit world consisting of spirit prison and paradise. Those who have heard the gospel of Jesus and have received the saving ordinances under the hands of the priesthood go to paradise. Others go to spirit prison, but this is far from a place without hope, for the inhabitants of paradise become missionaries of the gospel to them. There is postmortal evangelism because God is loving and gracious. As suggested in the first chapter of this book, those who have sought truth, no matter what their faith, will find the Truth in their relationship with Jesus Christ and joyfully receive the saving ordinances that others have done for them by proxy. They will then join the missionary force in paradise.

DEGREES OF GLORY

There will, however, come a time when God brings this world to its end, and there will be a final judgment. Doctrine and Covenants section 76 tells us that following the Resurrection and Final Judgment, the end is not just heaven or hell but rather three degrees of glory. The clear differentiating factor between the celestial kingdom, or the highest degree of glory, and the other kingdoms is that those who inhabit it received the testimony of Christ, were baptized by immersion, and received the gift of the Holy Ghost under the hands of “him who is ordained and sealed unto this power” (D&C 76:51–52). Here is the priesthood line as shown in the diagrams. It is this required channel of authority that sets Latter-day Saints apart from all other religious traditions, be they Christian or otherwise. Latter-day Saints believe it is through this priesthood channel that the fullness of all that God has in store is available to us, and that fullness involves dwelling with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Those who will inherit the celestial kingdom come to it only through their willingness to humble themselves before Christ and through priesthood authority. This is indeed the “more of Mormonism.” It is what The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has to offer to the world—the authority of God through which he can open the celestial kingdom to all who want it, whether they are living or dead and regardless of what religion they practiced in mortality.

Latter-day Saints also hold that this kingdom is where husbands and wives who have been sealed for time and eternity by priesthood authority will dwell eternally with their families. Most people believe that they will live with their loved ones in the afterlife. However, Latter-day Saints are the only persons who say that this comes about through earthly ordinances performed by the priesthood. The eternal nature of the family and the way this may come about is an area in which Latter-day Saints have contributions to make to the broader religious dialogue.

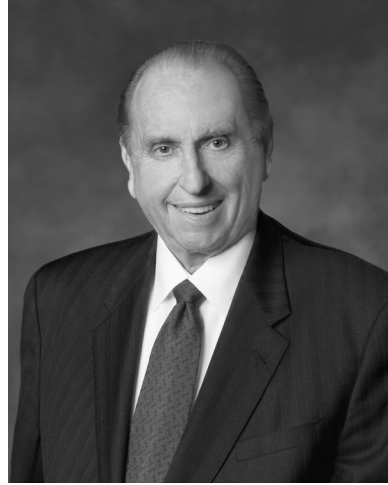
The next degree of glory is the terrestrial kingdom. The people who go there are good people—again, from all faiths—who have done many fine things in life but even in death have refused to participate fully in the gospel. They have seen no need for the ordinances of the priesthood, even though all have had witness borne to them that God asks this of them. Thus, spiritual death once again takes hold, for they are not permitted to enjoy the presence of the Father, although they have the loving companionship of Jesus and the Holy Ghost.

The final degree of glory is the telestial kingdom. This appears to be a broad collection of people who have never denied the Holy Ghost but who may have done all sorts of negative things. They will not be raised until the end of the Millennium, but even so, once raised, they will have the fellowship of the Holy Ghost with them and inhabit a kingdom that is beyond description. Thus, the doctrines of “post-mortal evangelism” and “three degrees of glory” as understood by Latter-day Saints give an answer, which should be considered, to the age-old question, what happens to those who never hear the gospel?

THE LIVING PROPHET

Central to all Latter-day Saint Christian thought is that prophets still live and that the church is headed by a living prophet. It seems incongruous that Jesus suffered all that he did and the Father gave his Only Begotten Son for people of various religions who cannot get along. Did Christ do all that he did so that the religious world could fall into divisiveness and conflict, even within the same faith tradition? Is there no longer anyone to speak the word of the Lord to the human family? Most would say that the Lord’s word comes to them through sacred books like the Hindu Bhagavad Gita, the Sikh Guru

Granth Sahib, the Jewish Tanak, the Christian Bible, the Muslim Qur'an, or the Baha'i Kitab-I-Aqdas. Latter-day Saints would wholeheartedly agree with these affirmations, for they too hear God speaking to them from the texts of sacred books. However, their contention is that God does not limit himself to books. He spoke in ancient times through prophets like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. He continued after Jesus' death and Resurrection to speak through prophet-apostles like Peter, James, John, and Paul.



President Thomas S. Monson, whom Latter-day Saints accept as prophet today. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Why should that pattern no longer exist? The answer to that question, as we saw in the first chapter, is that an apostasy occurred which removed those prophet-apostles from the midst of the church through persecution.

However, the heart of the Latter-day Saint message is that prophets and apostles with the ancient authority of the divine priesthood have returned to the earth. The restoration of the lost role of prophet began when God the Father and his Son, Jesus, appeared to the fourteen-year-old Joseph Smith in a grove of trees in 1820. From Joseph, that prophetic mantle was passed to Brigham Young and then to his successors, and it is now upon Thomas S. Monson, who is God's prophet, seer, and revelator for both the latter-day church and for the world. The heavens are not sealed. God speaks, and for those who will look and listen, they will know God's will for them in these last days. We no longer need wander in twilight, wondering where God would have us go or trying merely to feel our way along. If we look to the living prophet, we will know God's will in the midst of the chaos of the modern world. We need, however, to look to him, and Latter-day Saints need to offer that opportunity to the world that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

—CONCLUSION—

Most Latter-day Saint Christians hold that the commonalities between the religions can be explained because all have a common root in the gospel that was given to Adam, then successively to Noah, Abraham, and beyond. Over time, the pure gospel became contaminated with the philosophies of men, giving rise to the divergent religious traditions. There is some truth in this viewpoint. It overlooks, however, statements like those of President Spencer W. Kimball and Elder Orson F. Whitney that God *sent* people like Muhammad and the Buddha, Socrates and Plato, Luther and Wesley, Guru Nanak and Baha'u'llah. The world's religions are not just corruptions of an original message but rather the product of a purposeful plan of God to reach all of his children, meeting them exactly where they need to be met. While some of the truths in other faiths may be the product of the original gospel passed on, many had brand new beginnings in meetings between the founder and his God. Falling into this category would certainly be Nanak, Zoroaster, Abraham, Muhammad, and Baha'u'llah. God seems to have given them new messages designed to raise the people of their day to new spiritual heights.

In addition to this, we have seen that manifestations of the Holy Ghost are available to people of any faith, if they are seeking truth. God will always respond to their search, so not only are there old truths in all faiths, but there are continually new reminders of truth being given by God to leaders and members within every religious tradition. God is far from silent among any of his children. Latter-day Saints believe they hear his voice most clearly because they have a living prophet in their midst, but the Holy Ghost moves wherever he wishes, enlightening people everywhere and summoning them to come ever closer to the God and Father who loves them. God's is a glorious, multicolored, and multifaceted tree of faith upon which we all depend and in which we all participate. No persons of any faith are outside God's love, but they are encompassed by it as they find him and his love within their own faith traditions.

There is a saying in Japan that "there are many ways up Mount Fuji." Mount Fuji is, of course, a volcanic cone, and no matter which side persons climb, they end up at the same place. In a sense, this is not a bad analogy for what we have been experiencing in our

pilgrimage through the world's religions. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, each faith tradition, because God works in it, leads to the top of Mount Fuji, but all are not the same nor do all contain the fullness that God offers to his children. Latter-day Saint Christians believe, because of the restoration of the *fullness* of the gospel through Joseph Smith, at the top of Mount Fuji is the "more of Mormonism." There persons find the additional channels of grace that augment any other avenues into the Atonement that God may have supplied in their faiths. Thus, the circle becomes complete. Jesus Christ and all the authoritative ordinances that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints offers on earth will be available to all in the afterlife at the top of Mount Fuji.

—NOTE—

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), "Intelligence," "Intelligences."
2. Note by B. H. Roberts, in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 354; Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 24 n. 5.