

## Unity in Humanity Interfaith Celebration 2023

Online Conference

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One of the comments that Brian Bowler just made about prayer circle: That's a practice that members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints participate in in the temples that they build. And at one point, when you get through the process of the temple and the ceremony is wrapping up, there's a symbol that gets discussed, and it's a symbol that represents (according to the lecture given) "all truth can be circumscribed into one great whole"—whole w-h-o-l-e, not h-o-l-e, although given where society is right now, all the truths may as well go into a hole. But the truth that can be circumscribed into one great connection is really represented, I think, well by the comments that were made in the earlier presenters. The truths that you discover at the highest level of the teachings of Hinduism and at the highest level of Buddhism and at the highest levels of the Christian experience all merge into a kind of singular, harmonious whole that agrees with one another across the religions. The problem is that our... Marquita [Oliver] was talking about how she doesn't like organized religion. The problem with organizing religion into entities—no matter what form that entity takes—is that it very often, then, has jealousy for itself and defensiveness against anything that would be viewed as a rival. The religion that I believe in was founded by a prophet who claimed God had visited with him and enlightened him. And one of the proclamations that he made in defining what it was he believed was that all truth belonged to that religion, no matter where it came from.

The traditional form that Mormonism is regarded to have assumed is in a corporate entity called The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but that institution has renounced the name "Mormon," and they no longer claim that they ARE Mormon. In fact, the leader of that church says that whenever the term "Mormon" gets used, that's a victory for the devil. And I am a Mormon. The founder—the Prophet-founder—defined Mormonism as "more good," and the religion consists of all truth, no matter where it can be found. And I think that's a welcoming proposition where, if you can find truth out there, then that's what we believe. That's what **I** believe. That's what **my** religion consists of: whatever truth can be found.

The theme of this conference is "Sacred Beliefs and Holy Writings," and those, in my view, are two separate things. Not all sacred beliefs are contained in holy writings, nor does holy writings contain fully the sacred beliefs. Texts that I regard as holy writing demonstrate the dichotomy between these two things. This is from a passage in a book called Alma:

*It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless, they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart — only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him. And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word. And he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God...in full. And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries; and then they*

*are taken captive by the Devil and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell. (Alma 9:3 RE)*

Another way of stating that is: If you ignore light and truth, you get less light and truth, and eventually you fall into darkness; and that darkness, that misery, that hopelessness IS hell. It happens here, and it happens now; it is hell.

That same concept—that you have more understanding or you have less understanding, but that there are limits to what you are able to share in mortality—shows up in the New Testament writings of St. Paul. Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians about a person (we all think he's referring to himself, but he's not identifying himself as the person) who was *caught up to the third Heaven...(whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell; God knows), that he was caught up into paradise and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. Of such an one will I glory (2 Corinthians 1:41 RE).*

The idea that there is something that God can reveal but that man cannot talk about is embedded throughout the Scriptures. Joseph Smith (the founder of Mormonism) and Sidney Rigdon were shown a vision of what will go on in eternity, and they end that description of what they saw with this:

*But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he shewed unto us, which surpasseth all understanding, in glory, and in might, and in dominion, which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the spirit, and are not lawful for men to utter, neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the holy ghost, which God bestows on those who love him and purif[y] themselves before him, to whom he grants th[is] privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves, that through the power and manifestation of the spirit, while in the flesh, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory. (T&C 69:29)*

See, there are some things about the highest form of religious experience which are intended to be shared between you and God alone. Religion can have sacred beliefs, and religion can have holy writings. But the holy writings often tell you about the sacred experiences that those that pursued the path received, going along the way, in which they encountered God. Religion is intended to bring us to encounter God, whether that is in the least dramatic form of feeling yourself closer to Him or more dramatic forms in which sudden bursts of clarity and understanding come, overwhelming the mind; or a voice speaking to you that comes out of nowhere that informs you of some great answer to a dilemma that you've been looking for; or an angelic visitor who comes from another dimension that steps into this dimension to speak to you and to make themselves known and visible to you; or the experience of being caught up (as Paul writes about) into Heaven and seeing and hearing unspeakable things. Everywhere along that continuum, there is a connection that happens between the individual and God, and that's what religion and sacred writings are intended to cause to happen. Institutions that interfere with that process by claiming that they are a substitute for the experience of a living, breathing, presence of God in your daily experience are really substituting themselves, like an idol, to become a false image, a false messiah, a deceiver, if you will.

Enlightenment should be experiential (in that you go through it), and it should be shared universally. Nephite disciples recorded in the Book of Mormon: *And many of them saw and heard unspeakable things which are not lawful to be written* (3 Nephi 12:3 RE). God wants to tell them to you. He doesn't want someone else to; **He** wants to tell them to you. Three of the Nephite disciples reported about their experience:

*And behold, the Heavens were opened, and they were caught up into Heaven and saw and heard unspeakable things. And it was forbidden them that they should utter, neither was it given unto them power that they could utter, the things which they saw and heard. And whether they were in the body or out of the body, they could not tell; for it did [not] seem unto them like a transfiguration of them, that they were changed from this body of flesh into an immortal state, that they could behold the things of God.* (3 Nephi 13:4 RE)

Your sacred beliefs, based upon holy writings, point you to something that is ineffable and intended to be personal and intended to be shared between you and God alone.

Nephi saw a vision at the beginning of the Book of Mormon, in which he saw the unfolding of history down through the end. But he was instructed by the angel who was his companion on the journey, *But the things which thou shalt see hereafter thou shalt not write* (1 Nephi 3:30 RE). We should all have experiences that lead us to a familiarity and an intimacy that we share between ourselves and God alone.

And I do want to comment on the eclipse. As we heard about the eclipse that it—like a snake—it gets a bad reputation. Oddly enough, the snake is not originally a symbol of the deceiver or the adversary. Originally, it was a symbol of God. In order to mislead—in the myth of Adam and Eve—in order to mislead them, the adversary assumed the form of the snake (which was a symbol of renewal of life, shedding the skin, rising from the grave, eternal life), co-opted that, and turned it into the source of temptation and, ultimately, transgression against God and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. But it wasn't always so.

I do think that we're in the midst of a series of eclipses that hold some communicative value from on high. The one that happened in 2017 and the one that happens in 2024 (next year) are total eclipses. I think the total eclipse brings together a symbol of both the Father and the Mother: *In the image of [God, created he them], male and female, created he them* (Genesis 3:14 RE) is a statement at the very beginning of the account of God's dealing with this world in the book of Genesis found in the Bible. The image of God, therefore, is both the man and the woman. The sun is many times larger than the moon, but the moon is many times closer than the sun, and from the surface of the Earth, the two occupy the same space in the vision field that we have from the surface of the Earth looking up. Well, when the sun and the moon in an eclipse are at totality (a total eclipse), then you see neither the sun nor the moon; you can see the one and the other *joining together*, but at the moment of the eclipse, they're both blotted out.

Today's eclipse was an *annular* eclipse, which is unlike a *total* in that this one is called a "ring of fire," because the ring of fire leaves you still with the ring of the glory of the sun exposed, but the presence of the moon there. I think today's eclipse, unlike the one in 2017

and 2024, represents an agreement between both the Divine Father and the Divine Mother—the image of God—striking an agreement. And I think you have to view the first eclipse ~~and the~~ (in 2017) and the second (in 2024) as conveying a message and today's eclipse signifying that the two of them are in agreement about that message. (And I think that I'll speak more about that when we get to a conference in April of 2024.)

For today, I do think that we have heard from people a consistent message that there is truth, it does matter, that you can take the Hindu teachings and look at the message of Christ and you can find that what Christ is talking about and what the highest level of values in Hinduism represent can be found there. The idea of “awakening” in Buddhism and the “illusion of separation” and the “presence of God in us all” is one of the themes in the talk given by King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon, where he talks about how God is within every one of us, that God is sustaining us from moment to moment by lending us breath so that we can live and move and have our being, and that we are all connected because we're here borrowing power from God to be here, and that same God who sustains us all, therefore, we have in common. Our separation is an illusion. And there is a constant recycling of existence that we read about in the prophecies of Joseph Smith, about how this process continues *worlds without end* (T&C 69:28) and how we go from exaltation to exaltation until we attain, ultimately, to a point where we secure the resurrection from the dead and we're no longer needing to go through endless cycles of existence. I agree with what Marquita had said that we are not as different as we are the same. The problem is we tend not to notice our similarities; we tend instead to only reject by noticing our differences.

And one thing I noted before the schedule was put out was that we intended to end at 12:45, and I think it's discourteous to go on and require people more time than they've allotted for this. So I intend to wrap up now. I don't think there's any questions for me, and I'll turn it back over to you, Jill.

**Jill Van Haren:** ...Denver, there is a question that came up in the question thread. Would you like to take a look at that, or do you want me to read it to you?

**Denver:** “Many of the panelists explain explicitly, to a degree, what their particular spiritual practices/prayers/mantras look like. Could you share some light into how you pray?”

Well, this is what I would say. It's different now than it was at the beginning. At the beginning, prayer seemed the same sort of thing that one would see in a Christian church or in a Mormon church or in a Catholic thing. I didn't use *rote* prayers. I used the kind of formal language of prayer. And very often it had the same elements that you would think of in a normal prayer setting: You address God, [and] you articulate what it is you're looking for. That has changed over time. And while I still will, on occasion, engage in something that is akin to that, very often I reflect upon the things of God **all the time**; that's where my mind goes, continually. It's not that I am constantly in a “state of prayer,” but I will be aware of the presence and involvement of God in things that are going on and will take time to reflect upon and to meditate upon things that involve God and truth [and] creation.

Yesterday, my wife and I were on a hike, and I was reflecting again, out loud, about how—in both the revelations of Joseph Smith and in the book of Revelation itself—there will come a point at which time is no more; there will be a point at the end of this creation when time ceases to exist in the way in which we encounter time; and at that point, there is time no more. And so if we continue our existence on into that state and there's timelessness there, then we're already there; I mean, we will **move** into that condition, but since that condition is, in itself, timeless, that timeless existence already exists, even though I'm here in time.

There's a notion in the Egyptian religion about the *ka* and the *ba*, the *ka* being you in an eternal sense, and the *ba* being you here in mortality, and you both exist in both places at one time and that there's no difference between the two, and the objective is to try to get in touch with your eternal self. And there are echoes of that within the Scriptures that I regard as sacred writings or holy writings. And reflecting on that and trying to push that theoretical concept back further is a kind of meditative enterprise that is, in my view, a form of prayer, a form of reflection, and I engage in a lot of that a lot of the time. And there's not a clear distinction between the prayer life, on the one hand, and the daily existence, on the other hand.

There's a passage in the book of Alma about how you ought to pray, and he starts at a distant spot (in your fields and over your crops), and he talks about prayer, and he mentions place after place where prayer should take place, and then it ends with the proximity getting closer and closer until, finally, you're alone in your closet at home, and you're praying. And that "alone in your closet at home," I don't view as merely physical; I view it also as when you're alone in your thoughts when you can—by meditative practice—exclude everything there is here and to take into account your relationship to God, you can go to your closet in secret prayer. And I think—now—prayer is more of a constant phenomenon and not an event to be scheduled and to be set apart. I can pray even while I'm in a meeting like this or when I'm talking, as I am now. So, it's changed over time.