

# A Mormon View of Life

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THERE ARE MANY VANTAGE points from which to view a religion. In distinguishing one Christian religion from another, we might study its concept of God, the mission of Jesus Christ, or the role of the church. Another very practical and fruitful subject for analysis would be that religion's view of human life. What is life's purpose and meaning? How should human beings live? What is our relationship to God and to Christ? What constitutes salvation and how is it to be gained?

I find the Latter-day Saint view of human life unique among Christian religions. In this essay I present several Mormon perspectives on human existence that have come to mean a great deal to me. In doing so, I do not speak for the Church, and I respect the fact that other Latter-day Saints may perceive emphases quite different from mine.

The Mormon view of life is positive and affirmative. It espouses no doctrine of original sin. Deity planned earth life for the good of human beings, as an essential and significant step forward in their eternal life. Adam and Eve were not sinners but courageous, revered ancestors who set mortal life off to a fine start. As the Book of Mormon testifies, "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25).

As I read it, this scripture locates joy in the present tense. Joy is to be experienced here and now. Jesus confirmed this idea when he said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). According to my Mormon faith, living religion brings great joy in this life. Joy is not reserved as an afterlife

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reward for virtue. There is, then, continuity between our mortal existence and eternal life. The principles which prepare us for eternal life also bring us great satisfaction in mortality. My religion denies me none of the joys of living. The only sacrifice it demands of me is the sacrifice of lesser values for higher ones. In a debate at the University of Utah years ago, I asked an atheist philosopher to name a pleasure he enjoyed which was denied me because of my religion. Well informed about LDS beliefs, he answered not a word.

### INTELLIGENCE UNCREATED

Most world religions, including traditional Christianity, begin with the idea that God existed alone. He then created all things—the universe, laws, human beings, and nature—*ex nihilo*, out of nothing. These religions hold that God is omniscient, omnipotent, absolute, the source of everything that exists. Humanity and earth life are entirely the work of Deity.

This view contrasts in almost every particular with the Mormon understanding of God's relationship to humans and the universe. Joseph Smith stated in a revelation: "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. . . . The elements are [also] eternal" (D&C 93:29, 33). The same thought is expressed in another scripture: "[A]lso, if there be two spirits, and one shall be more intelligent than the other, yet these two spirits, notwithstanding one is more intelligent than the other, have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end, they shall exist after, for they are . . . eternal" (Abr. 3:18).

Latter-day Saints reject the *ex nihilo* theory of creation. Intelligence and the elements have always existed, co-eternal with God. He is tremendously creative and powerful, but he works with materials not of his own making.

This Mormon theory of creation leads to very significant conclusions regarding both our view of God and of human beings.

### GOD'S GOODNESS

In mortality, we all experience a great deal of suffering, inequality, and natural evil such as diseases, earthquake, drought, and other impartially destructive natural forces. Added to natural evil is the moral evil of appalling inhumanity to each other.

If God were omnipotent, omniscient, and the ultimate source of all, he would, it seems to me, be responsible for all. It could easily be argued that the universe and human nature are precisely what he

wishes them to be. I recognize the goodness and beauty of life and know that there is some value in suffering and in inequality, but there is far too much evil and suffering in the world to ascribe it to a God who is good as well as all-knowing and omnipotent.

If, on the other hand, God must work with elements and intelligences not entirely of his own making, then he is not fully responsible for conditions as they are. To use an analogy, if a builder has not only full knowledge of the construction process but also the ability to make building materials to his or her own specifications, we would expect full perfection in the product. In actual fact, builders must use existing materials, so we don't hold them fully responsible for what they create.

We assume that God is by definition good. The overwhelming amount of evil associated with human life has caused many people to doubt his existence. Mormonism preserves faith in God's existence and goodness by limiting in some measure his omnipotence, believing that he must cope with existing elements, laws, and other intelligences.

The prophet Mormon directly addresses the question of God's responsibility for evil and attests to his goodness: "[W]herefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God. Wherefore, take heed, my beloved brethren, that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God" (Moro. 7:13-14). The premise that God is in some way responsible for evil as well as good in the human condition misconstrues eternal realities.

### FREE AGENCY

The eternal, uncreated nature of human intelligence leads to a second important conclusion, namely that free agency is inherent in our eternal intelligence. A revelation to Joseph Smith declares: "All truth is independent in that sphere in which God has placed it, to act for itself, as all intelligence also, to act for itself, otherwise there is no existence" (D&C 93:30). God respects and protects human free agency, but he did not create it. Further, agency is not a condition but a trait inherent in our intelligence, a function of the mind like memory, imagination, or reasoning.

I find this teaching very appealing. If agency were a gift of God, he would be ultimately responsible for its use. Since agency is inherent in our uncreated intelligence, God is not responsible for human cruelty and error. We can ascribe only goodness to God.

### COOPERATION WITH DEITY

From the eternal nature of human intelligence, including free agency, we may draw one further conclusion: the course of human life

is not predetermined. There may be foreordination but no predestination. The drama of life is, in fact, still being written as it is played out.

The Lord has tremendous power. He is the greatest intelligence in existence. He is wise, good, loving, creative, a person of absolute integrity. Our lives—all life—depend on him in ways we cannot even comprehend. In him, as Paul says, “we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

At the same time, God needs and seeks our cooperation. If we are genuinely free agents, he cannot achieve his purpose in our lives unless we accept his guidance and assent to his higher purposes. We must work with him to overcome evil and suffering.

### IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Another unusual teaching of the Mormon faith is that human beings experienced a spiritual existence prior to mortality. God took eternal, uncreated intelligence and created us, his spirit children. How he created us is not known, but we believe we partook of his divine nature, for he calls us his children.

When it was desirable to these spiritual beings to experience mortality—to walk by faith—his children in goodly numbers agreed to come to earth. According to Genesis, we were created in the image of God in our mortal creation. How Deity created us in mortality is, again, not known. Suffice it to say that what he did he pronounced good. I find it deeply inspiring to believe that we humans have—in embryo to be sure—much in common with our Creator: intelligence, creativity, love, and integrity. But, let us remember, a vast difference looms between his attributes and ours, not in kind but in degree and quality. We were made in his image, not he in ours. God is the prototype. We dignify humans by relating ourselves to God, but let us not reduce God to our level.

The Mormon conception of humankind's relationship to Deity leaves unanswered questions, as does any theological theory. It suggests, however, some exciting and ennobling possibilities for the lives of human beings. Mormonism dignifies human nature and affirms without reservation both the goodness of God and his great love for his children.

### LIFE IS PURPOSEFUL

Purpose implies a goal or end towards which one is striving. Life is meaningful largely to the extent that it is purposeful. The character of one's overall purpose in life will largely determine the quality of a person's life.

What is the purpose of life according to Mormonism? Nephi wrote: "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Ne. 2:25). Perhaps joyous satisfaction is what we wish for most out of life, but joy cannot be sought directly. It is a by-product of an individual's efforts to realize and actualize the finest qualities of the human spirit. The purpose of life is to recognize and develop those divine qualities that are within us as offspring of God. And what are these? I believe they are intelligence—to know the truth and increase in wisdom—humility, integrity, love, creativity, and faith. Our purpose in mortality is to learn to emulate those attributes so beautifully taught and exemplified by Jesus Christ in his earthly sojourn.

Asked "What is our purpose in life?" Mormons often reply, "To get to the celestial kingdom" or "To return to our Father in Heaven," thus identifying our purpose in life as a place to be, a destination to reach, or a reward for compliance to ordinances and principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But our efforts should not be directed toward getting some place, but toward *being* or becoming the kind of person we were created to be. Salvation is a process more than a destination. If we have developed divine attributes, we will be at home in the presence of the Father and Son.

Self-realization is our eternal as well as our mortal goal. We believe in eternal progression, that all will be given the opportunity to realize their human and divine potential. "Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come" (D&C 130:18, 19). The Lord's purpose in creation is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal [God-like] life of man" (Moses 1:39). He will pursue that purpose, we believe, into and throughout eternity. Human beings deprived of opportunity or capacity to grow spiritually in mortality will have that chance in the life to come.

Everything in our religion and in the Church should contribute to God's purpose, which is to develop the finest attributes in the lives of his children. Even the ordinances of the Church are not ends in themselves. Baptism, sacrament, washing and anointing, temple endowments: these ordinances are occasions of covenant when we witness of our desire and determination to live the Christian life. Before Alma baptized his people, he said,

[A]s ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in

need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even unto death. . . .

Now I say unto you, if this be the desire of your hearts, what have you against being baptized in the name of the Lord, as a witness before him that ye have entered into a covenant with him, that ye will serve him and keep his commandments, that he may pour out his Spirit more abundantly upon you? (Mosiah 18:8-10)

Mormon also explains the intimate, interconnected relationship between the gift of the Holy Ghost and the development of Christian qualities of character in the recipient.

And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins; and the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God. (Moro. 8:25, 26)

### BROTHERHOOD AND SISTERHOOD

Latter-day Saints believe in the brotherhood and sisterhood of all human beings. We are all children of God and objects of his love. We all have the same need for food, clothing, shelter, and health care. All need love, creativity, feelings of worth. God does not distinguish among us in offering the blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These blessings are intended for all.

For behold, my beloved brethren, I say unto you that the Lord God . . . doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him. Wherefore, he commandeth none that they shall not partake of his salvation. Behold, doth he cry unto any, saying: Depart from me? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; but he saith: Come unto me all ye ends of the earth, buy milk and honey, without money and without price. . . .

Behold, hath the Lord commanded any that they should not partake of his goodness? Behold I say unto you, Nay; but all men are privileged the one like unto the other, and none are forbidden.

. . . [H]e inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembereth the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile. (2 Ne. 26:23-28, 33)

Latter-day Saints are generally very compassionate towards fellow Church members. When a baby is born or serious illness comes to a family, Relief Society teachers and/or priesthood brethren step in with food, physical help, words of comfort, or whatever else may be needed.

Similarly, when crises occur in their larger communities, Latter-day Saints are ready and willing to organize to help, as was evident when Salt Lake City experienced a serious flood several years ago. The Church currently encourages its members to serve people in need within the larger society on an ongoing basis. Missionaries, for instance, are now instructed to devote four nonproselyting hours a week to humanitarian service in whatever areas they are living. Relief Society sisters have always been encouraged to relieve the poor and needy. We understand that we should love and serve our brothers and sisters in the world, as Paul and Nephi observed, whether they be black or white, brown or red, young or old, male or female.

### LAY CHURCH AND PRIESTHOOD

The Mormon Church is a lay church which makes no distinction between clergy and laity. We have no full-time paid ministry. General Authorities who devote their full time in service to the Church receive a cost-of-living allowance to maintain them and their families, but unpaid laymen appointed to leadership positions administer local congregations—the wards and stakes—of the Church. A bishop of a ward may be a farmer, businessman, teacher, lawyer, and so forth. At any given time, a third or more of any branch or ward population may be serving as teachers and officers.

A lay church has its limitations. Lay members may not have as much training in speaking, counseling, teaching, or management as trained professional clergy. Nor do they usually have as much time to donate to ecclesiastical service as a pastor.

On the other hand, a lay church gives more people an opportunity to serve and to increase in knowledge and leadership ability. A lay church promotes equality, democracy, and socialization among its members. Those members learn to know each other and to work together for a good cause.

The priesthood, divine authority received by ordination, is available to all men in the Church who are worthy in character and willing to serve. Lay priesthood members hold the same authority as General Authorities. While their callings in the Church may differ, they have the same privileges to bless and to perform the ordinances of the gospel. A priesthood calling motivates one to live righteously and to serve others with humility and love.

Another valuable and formative experience the Church offers its members, usually when they are young men and women and then later in life as retired couples, is the opportunity to serve one- to two-year missions to proclaim the gospel as we understand it. During these

years, the missionaries study, develop convictions, evaluate patterns of living, and quite often lay a foundation for their own religious philosophy of life.

## RELIGION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Mormonism is not a Sunday-only religion; it permeates every aspect of daily living. Its presence is felt in matters of health, marriage, family life, education, vocation, recreation, and culture.

### *1. Physical Health*

Conscientious Latter-day Saints live by what is called the Word of Wisdom. This revelation advises us to abstain from tobacco, alcoholic beverages, coffee and tea, drugs, and an overabundance of meat; it encourages us to eat fruits and vegetables in season, and all grains, especially wheat. The listed prohibitions and recommendations are not intended to be inclusive, but simply illustrative. The spirit and principle of the Word of Wisdom is to enjoy with moderation and thanksgiving all things good for us and to abstain from things harmful.

I am grateful that my belief in the divine origin of the Word of Wisdom guided most of my choices in youth, despite the absence at the time of scientific evidence, which has since verified Word of Wisdom teachings. Now we know that living by this code will help to prevent cancer, heart and lung disease, and other serious disabilities.

### *2. Mental Health*

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of two houses. He is in this parable describing two lives, one built upon his teachings and the other not. The same hardships troubled both lives: "The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house" (Matt. 7:25). But the life built upon the teachings of Jesus—upon humility, faith, integrity, and love—fell not, for it was founded upon a rock.

Latter-day Saints who understand and live their religion can face life with faith, fortitude, and even resignation when appropriate. An acquaintance of mine, a fine Jew specializing in psychiatry at the University of Utah medical school, who was living with some Mormon students, remarked to me that he marveled at their faith, commenting specifically at how they affirmed life under very difficult and grueling circumstances. Seeing purpose and meaning in life beyond one's immediate successes, failures, challenges, or life circumstances is a product of religious faith. Discipleship to Christ—drawing the deepest satisfactions from learning and serving rather than from material goods or worldly recognition—can be wonderfully freeing and stabilizing.



## MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY

*Verily I say unto you, that whoso forbiddeth to marry is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man. (D&C 49:15)*

Marriage has two fundamental values: (1) the love and security a couple can give to each other and (2) the procreation and development of children. Both marriage and parenthood offer complex, at times difficult, but unsurpassed opportunities to experience life deeply, richly, and challengingly. The LDS Church values marriage and family life, teaching these as religion topics in Relief Societies, priesthood quorums, and other auxiliary organizations. It maintains a trained corp of marriage and family counselors in its Social Services Department.

Since Latter-day Saints believe that earth life is a necessary step in one's eternal progression, they believe in the value of bearing children and sacrificing freedom, self-advancement, and pleasure to meet their children's needs. The birthrate among Mormons is considerably higher than the national average. Mormons also believe in sexual abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage. A major reason for both is to safeguard the stability of marriage and provide a secure family setting for children to be born into and reared. The sex drive needs the institution of marriage as the setting for its fulfillment.

## EDUCATION

An LDS revelation declares: "The glory of God is intelligence." That should be self-evident, but it is good to state it. The glory of human beings is also intelligence. It is the characteristic which distinguishes us as human. Our minds are not only a marvelous means of understanding life, but intelligence enriches every dimension of our existence—human relations, romance, aesthetic feeling, love of neighbor, integrity, humility, and faith.

In 1832 at the very outset of Latter-day Saint history, Joseph Smith was told that we live in a world governed by law, that we should learn the laws of life by study and by faith, and that we should teach one another and seek knowledge from the best books (D&C 88). The first temple erected by the Saints in Kirtland, Ohio, was to be a "house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a *house of learning*" (D&C 88:119, emphasis added).

Establishing schools, academies, and universities was a high priority in early Mormon-dominated Utah. When public education largely appropriated the task of education, the Church supplemented with seminaries and institutes to provide youth with religious instruction as well. From the beginning, many Mormons have been inspired by their

religious philosophy to engage in professional and advanced study. Most of them have not been afraid to test their religious convictions by their intellectual studies in other fields.

Many tenets of religion—the existence of God, the atonement of Christ, the immortality of the soul—rest solely on faith. One can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God by rational thought alone. However, religion appeals to the mind as well as to feeling, hope, and faith; and many principles of faith, such as repentance, humility, integrity, and love, can be known, experienced, and witnessed to by the mind. The wisdom of the Decalogue and the Beatitudes is evident to the rational mind. Scientific research has authenticated the Word of Wisdom. Our rational affirmation of these principles strengthens our belief in the great primal postulates of faith—the reality of God, the divinity of Christ, and the immortality of the human soul.

### CONCLUSION

As I have noted, Mormonism has definite and unique beliefs about the nature of human beings—they are uncreated intelligences with free agency; all humans are children of God created in his image; earth life is purposeful; salvation is a process rather than a far-off goal.

Mormonism places great responsibility on the individual to make something of his or her life and to help others to do the same. This is well expressed in a modern revelation:

Verily I say, men [and women] should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as they do good they shall in nowise lose their reward. But he that doeth not anything until he is commanded, and receiveth a commandment with a doubtful heart, and keepeth it with slothfulness, the same is damned. (D&C 58:27–29)

The Mormon philosophy of human life is not fixed or confined. It is open-ended and flexible, constrained only by a few guiding principles. Above all, I appreciate that the Mormon view is life-affirming and places no limits on what we may accomplish here and in eternity. It is, I believe, consistent with human nature, helping those who believe its teachings to realize the full potential of their beings and to find the joy that Nephi claims as the purpose of our existence.