

## Of Their Own Nation and Tongue



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I have here a book that was given to me by an investigator while I was serving a mission in Taiwan in the early 1980s. We had shared with her the Book of Mormon, and in return, she gave me this English translation of the *Buddhacarita*, a biography of the Buddha written by Asvaghosa around 120 AD. Inside, she had written her testimony of Buddhism. Since we were asking her to read a book that meant a great deal to us, that we held sacred, it seemed only fair to take a look in return at a book that she regarded as scripture. I didn't spend a lot of time with the Buddha's biography since a mission is not really the right setting to study other religions in depth, but I was touched by her gesture of faith, and after I returned home, I learned much more about Buddhism as well as Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Islam.

Growing up Mormon, I had naturally encountered other forms of Christianity, and I knew the story of the Apostasy and the Restoration, but it wasn't until my mission that I realized how much of the world is left out of that narrative. Many of you come from places where you have much more exposure to non-Christian religions, perhaps even among your own friends and family, and you already know what I only discovered at nineteen—there are devout, good people around the world who are not of our faith, and much of what they believe is inspiring and even admirable. (Of course, this is true of other Christians as well.) As members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth” ([D&C 1:30](#)), how should we respond to other religions? Particularly when it is obvious that many of their teachings are “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” ([Articles of Faith 1:13](#)).

It can't simply be a matter of “we're right and you're wrong” or “our beliefs are true and yours are false.” Such polarized, even close-minded thinking hardly seems worthy of disciples of Christ, let alone Latter-day Saints. Joseph Smith once taught that “we should cultivate a meek, quiet and peaceable spirit,” and he extended that to interfaith dialogue: “Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc. any truth? Yes. ... We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true ‘Mormons.’”<sup>1</sup> Nearly eighty years later, in 1921, George Albert Smith acknowledged the good in other religions, telling a nonmember friend: “We have come not to take away from you the truth and virtue you possess. We have come not to find fault with you nor to criticize you. ... Keep all the good that you have, and let us bring to you more good, in order that you may be happier and in order that you may be prepared to enter into the presence of our Heavenly Father.”<sup>2</sup> And some eighty years after that, in 2004, the *Preach My Gospel* manual noted that “just as the Christian world was blessed by the courage and vision of the reformers, many

other nations and cultures have been blessed by those who were given that portion ‘that [God] seeth fit that they should have.’ Teachings of other religious leaders [including Buddha, Confucius, and Mohammad] have helped many people become more civil and ethical.”<sup>3</sup>

I will be speaking this morning about three scriptures that can guide our interactions with those of other faiths.

The first of these is [Luke 6:31](#), the Golden Rule, which is probably good advice in any situation: “As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” Just as we would like others to be respectful of our beliefs, and to be generous and fair-minded in representing the tenets of our faith, so we in turn should treat the religious commitments and understandings of others in a similar fashion. I know how frustrating it can be when people get the basic principles of Mormonism wrong or dismiss them lightly, and I try hard not to be guilty of the same mistake when I teach world religions.

Let me give you an example of a time when I was the beneficiary of the Golden Rule. Several years ago, our family hosted an LDS high school exchange student from Japan, Takeshi Ikeda. (Some of you may know him; he’s a BYU–Hawaii student right now.) And last January, we had an opportunity to travel to Japan and spend a day with his family. His mother was excited to take us around Tokyo and asked what we would most like to see.

High on my list was the Meiji Shrine—a key site in Shinto, the native Japanese religion. It was a last minute suggestion on my part, and she called the shrine the day before to try to arrange for someone to show us around only to be told that it was too short notice, and they only did that for educational groups. But when she mentioned that we were Mormon and that I once taught at BYU, they said, “Wait a minute. We’ve got someone here who might be willing to help you.” One of the Shinto priests, Moriyasu Ito, was delighted to serve as our guide since he had visited Utah a few years ago on a religious outreach trip and had studied for a semester at BYU, staying with an LDS family in Provo. He had had a wonderful experience and wanted to repay the kindness he had been shown.

So our tour of the beautiful Meiji Shrine included not only information about Shinto beliefs and practices but also conversations about family home evenings, questions about where our son wanted to serve a mission, and a story about the time the priest met President Hinckley.

It was a most unusual, marvelous tour that only happened because some Latter-day Saints treated this man and his religion with the dignity and respect that they themselves would have liked.

My second scripture comes from [Alma 29](#). One of the things I love about the restored gospel is its expanded view of revelation. God cares for all His children, and His interactions with humanity were not limited to a few nations on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea in ancient times. One of the most significant messages of the Book of Mormon is that the Lord has spoken to men and women around the world, throughout history, and even in the modern era. That particular book of scripture is a record of Israelite prophets in the Americas, but it contains promises of still more records yet to come forth from elsewhere on the globe ([2 Nephi 29:10-14](#)). In addition, Moroni testifies that everyone has received the spirit of Christ, or a conscience, to guide their actions ([Moroni 7:15-19](#)), and there are oblique references to more specific instances of revelation.

For example, when Alma, in a fit of missionary exuberance, wishes that he could speak as loudly and forcefully as an angel, to “cry repentance unto every people!” (it makes you wonder what he would have done with a Facebook or Twitter account), the Spirit urges patience and contentment.

Alma says, “I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth” ([Alma 29:1](#)) I love that last line. But then he realizes that our Heavenly Father has things well

in hand, that his plan of salvation is unfolding on schedule, and that the work of redemption is already underway. Even in Alma's day, in the first century BC, people all over the world were choosing good or evil, life or death, according to their desires and the light and knowledge they had so far received.

Alma continues, "For behold, the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that the seeth fit that they should have" ([Alma 29:8](#)).

"Of their own nation and tongue" means that the Chinese had been hearing some portion of God's word from inspired Chinese sages, Indians from Indian gurus, Africans from African elders, and South Sea Islanders from island teachers, or as a First Presidency Statement dated February 15th, 1978 put it, "The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, 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 enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals."<sup>4</sup>

This is undoubtedly a familiar concept to many of you, and we might nod in agreement with the general sentiment, but let me give you some specific examples from my own studies of world religions. For this talk, in the interest of time, I'll stick to a single faith tradition—Buddhism. How do we know which of the Buddha's teachings convey a portion of God's word? It might be easy to respond, "Well, the ones in which he agrees with us," but I think there's more to it than that. Reading the sutras or talking to Buddhists just to find parallels with what we already know isn't that satisfying or helpful. It also fails to take their beliefs seriously, on their own terms. We should be alert to both similarities and differences and even to places where we can learn from other religions. I believe that Buddhism contains spiritual insights that can enlarge and enrich our understanding of God, humanity, and nature. We may have the truth, but we certainly don't have all truths.

For instance, the Buddha taught his followers to live by the Five Precepts, the first four of which are no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, and no false speech. This sounds like inspired counsel to me, and I'm sure that you recognize the parallels with the Ten Commandments.

The fifth precept, however, may be somewhat unexpected: no intoxicants. Latter-day Saints, of course, will say, "That's good advice; it's just like the Word of Wisdom." And indeed, it is easy for me to view the Buddha's Five Precepts as an example of the Lord "grant[ing] unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word." And yet in digging a little deeper, there are things we can learn from Buddhists about our shared values. For instance, many Buddhists have taken the prohibition against killing as not only forbidding murder but as not causing harm to any living beings—human or animal. There is a keen sense that all life is sacred and valuable and much discussion of the numerous ways in which we might harm others. And that has made me think harder about my treatment of all of God's creations.

According to the scholar Peter Harvey, "The second precept is seen as ruling out any act of theft, but also fraud, cheating, borrowing without the intention to return, and taking more than is one's due."<sup>5</sup> The fourth precept, against false speech, has been defined not only as not lying but also not deceiving others, manipulating others, engaging in idle chatter, or using hurtful words. And that reminds me that it is possible to lie without saying a word—sometimes being silent and allowing a false impression to remain can be a form of deception. The prohibition of intoxicants is familiar to Latter-day Saints, but the reasons given by the Buddha are a little different. When we explain the Word of Wisdom to our friends or to each other, we often talk of health, our bodies being temples, and the blessings that come from obedience. Those are valuable concepts, but Buddhists tend to speak of the importance of always being in a state of mental clarity and mindfulness. Intoxication makes a person more likely to break the other precepts and less likely to keep his or her attention focused on what is truly important in life. In addition, some may turn to alcohol or drugs to escape their troubles rather than looking toward the true source of liberation from suffering—the Four Noble Truths in the case of Buddhism but Jesus Christ in our own tradition. The word "mindfulness" never appears in our LDS standard works, but I have found

it both useful and inspiring in my own spiritual discipleship. Can studying Buddhism make me a better Latter-day Saint? I think so.

There are certainly great differences between Buddhism and Mormonism. For example, the Buddhist doctrine that nothing has a permanent self, or soul, stands in stark contrast to our understanding of being spirit children of heavenly parents with an eternal destiny ahead of us, and yet in the New Testament, Jesus says, “He that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” ([Matthew 10:39](#)). Jesus may have been talking about actual martyrdom, but we often read this in terms of “selfless action,” and Buddhists have a great deal to say about that. How much of what we do is colored by selfish considerations? Even when we offer service, aren’t we often motivated by concerns for rewards—spiritual or otherwise—or a desire for others to think well of us? Or perhaps we just enjoy the feeling of saying, “I’m a good person.” Is it ever really possible to help others with no thought of self?

Buddhists spend a lot of time thinking about these issues, and they teach that truly selfless actions are not only possible but are characterized by the “Four Immeasurables”: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These have been explained as follows: “Loving kindness is an attitude of pure goodwill toward self and others that always seeks the welfare and happiness of all beings. ... Compassion, an attitude of pity or empathy for oneself and others who are suffering, contains the desire to free all beings from pain.”<sup>6</sup> So far, it sounds a lot like Alma’s exclamation “O that I were an angel,” which, as you will remember, culminates in the hope that “there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth” (Alma 29:2). To continue: “Sympathetic joy is joy at the joy of others, and is the antidote to jealousy and discontent. Equanimity is an even-minded serenity towards beings, which balances concern for others with a realization that suffering is an inevitable part of being alive.”<sup>7</sup> This reminds me of Lehi’s teaching about the necessity for “opposition in all things”. Brigham Young once taught the Saints that “‘Mormonism,’ so-called, embraces every principle pertaining to life and salvation, for time and eternity. No matter who has it. If the infidel has got truth it belongs to ‘Mormonism.’ The truth and sound doctrine possessed by the sectarian world, and they have a great deal, all belong to this Church. ... All that is good, lovely, and praiseworthy belongs to this Church and Kingdom. ‘Mormonism’ includes all truth.”<sup>8</sup> I like to think that Mormonism, in President Young’s expansive definition, encompasses such principles as loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

In that same passage, Brigham Young also pointed out, again speaking of non-Mormons, “As for their morality, many of them are, morally, just as good as we are.” I saw a Buddhist example of this a few months ago in a visit to Myanmar or Burma. Burma is a very religious country with about 500,000 monks and 75,000 nuns out of a population of 60 million, 90% of whom are Buddhist.

We were invited to attend a novitiation ceremony where five boys, about 8-10 years old, were being ordained monks. Nearly all males in Burma are ordained when they are boys, and they spend at least a week living in a monastery learning about Buddhism, wearing maroon robes, getting up at 4:30 am, and eating their last meal of the day before noon. It’s a little like a vacation Bible boarding school, and it gives everyone a good idea of the lives of monks. Those who choose to make their stay in a monastery permanent (usually when they return as young men) are given a great deal of respect, and one of the precipitating events that led to the recent, welcome political reforms was the so-called “Saffron Revolution” when tens of thousands of monks joined in the demonstrations.

The ceremony we saw was a joyous occasion, complete with a procession, music, and feasting.

Imagine what this means, not only to the boys but also to the adults in their lives. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, writing about the Burmese novitiation ceremony, observed, “Here the parents are participating in that profoundly moving experience of dramatically expressing their handing over of their son from their own personal charge to that of the society, and in a sense handing him over to his own charge, to be responsible now

for himself. ... It is a thrilling and solemn moment to see a son cut the ties that relate him directly to his parents and at the same time turn his face in the direction that those parents have found to be supremely good.”<sup>9</sup>

In Mormonism, baptism occurs at about this age, but the real parallel comes later. As the boys had their heads shaved and donned new robes, with parents and grandparents anxiously and proudly looking on, we were reminded of what Latter-day Saints feel when they send their children off to the MTC. There’s a sadness at parting, of course, but also joy at the realization that those young elders and sisters are choosing to follow the path that their parents themselves have trod and found supremely good.

At the conclusion of our visit, we were able to participate in feeding the 1400 monks and nuns in residence. As they passed by giant vats of food in double file, we put scoopfuls into their begging bowls, and I found it quite moving. There is a close, mutually-supporting relationship between the monks and the laity that acknowledges self-sacrifice, devotion, generosity, and faith. It is perhaps a model for how Mormon missionaries might connect to a strong ward, especially one with a number of returned missionaries, parents of missionaries, and members who were themselves converts.

It is a blessing to be a missionary and a blessing to be able to feed the missionaries and support them in all sorts of way (including introducing them to your friends).

As I mentioned, the Burmese ritual recreates a moment in the life of the Buddha who was raised as a prince in luxurious circumstances and then chose to give that up in order to pursue spiritual enlightenment and to benefit all sentient beings. And it made me consider the role of religious sacrifice within our own tradition. What am I, or you, willing to give up in order to follow God’s will? When I taught at BYU–Hawaii several years ago, I was impressed by the faithfulness of many of the students here who are sometimes asked to do harder things than their peers in Provo or in Idaho. When I graduated from BYU–Provo, it was understood that I could serve the kingdom by being as successful in my profession as I cared to be. By contrast, BYU–Hawaii students are often urged to return to their home countries after graduation, which means forgoing professionally and financially satisfying opportunities in the United States in order to build up the Church in your native lands. It is a sacrifice that I was never asked to make, or even consider, but it will allow you to join the ranks of those messengers praised by Alma, who teach the word of God in “all nations, of their own nation and tongue.”

Another thing that I love about the restored gospel is its expansive vision of the plan of salvation. If baptism is required of everyone who enters the kingdom of God, what about those who lived before Christ or in regions never visited by Christian missionaries or even those who might have accepted the gospel had they just lived a few years longer? This is a serious theological conundrum for most Christians, since unlike Buddhists or Hindus, they believe that this life is our one chance to find and embrace the truth. But Mormonism provides an answer. Not only has God been inspiring religious figures throughout the world with a portion of his word, He also allows the opportunities of mortality to be extended into the spirit world so that missionary work will continue on the other side of the veil, assisted by vicarious ordinances for the dead performed in holy temples. Before the final judgment, every soul who has ever lived will have a chance to hear the fullness of the gospel taught in plainness by missionaries whom they love and trust. It is a doctrine of exquisite fairness and compassion.

Yet there may seem to be something of a contradiction here. If other religions enjoy some portion of the truth and all individuals will someday have the opportunity to hear the gospel message and make an informed decision, whether in this life or the next, why are Latter-day Saints so anxious to convert the world? Why worry about hastening the work?

And here I would like to share another scripture with you—the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, from Matthew 20. Early in the morning the master of the vineyard hires some workers and offers them the usual daily

wage. About nine o'clock, he sees others standing around in the marketplace and he hires them as well, promising that he will pay them what is right. He goes out at noon and does the same and then again at three o'clock. And finally, at five o'clock, he finds still others who have been waiting all day, and he hires them. An hour later, as the sun is going down, he pays all his workers, and he gives each of them the same wage, regardless of how long they had labored, which causes some grumbling among those who had been working all day out in the hot sun. The master reminds them that he gave them exactly what they had agreed upon, and he gently criticizes them for being envious at his generosity to their fellows.

I'm never quite sure if Latter-day Saints are the ones who have been working hard all day, while others can accept the gospel later in life or even posthumously, or if Mormons are the well-paid latecomers, as we certainly are in terms of the history of world religions. In any case, there is a lesson here that God can do as He will with His gifts, and we should not worry too much about whether others have more or less than we do—in the end, our Heavenly Father loves all His children, and those who come to Him, whether early or late, will enjoy the same reward of eternal life. (Remember Buddhism's "sympathetic joy," that is, joy at the joy of others.)

Nephi spoke along these lines when he reproved modern Christians for believing that God had only spoken through their own scripture: "Thou fool, that shall say, 'A Bible, we have got a Bible, and we need no more Bible.' Know ye not that there are more nations than one? ... Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written. 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" ([2 Nephi 29:6, 10-11](#)). It may be that God will judge Buddhists in the light of Buddhism, Hindus in the light of Hinduism, and Muslims in the light of Islam. We know a great deal about the covenants that the Lord made with the house of Israel, yet He may have made different covenants with other peoples around the globe (as, for example, with the Jaredites, who left Mesopotamia long before Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and thus were definitely not Israelites). Yet at some point, every person who has ever lived will have an opportunity to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ and be numbered among those who have entered into the covenants that will lead to exaltation in the Celestial Kingdom.

That, indeed, is the covenant we entered into at baptism, and our particular agreement for laboring in God's vineyard comes with the responsibility to share the gospel with others. Doctrine and Covenants 81 includes an injunction to seek out learning of all kinds: "things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad ... and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms." Does that include knowing about other religions? Of course it does. And why is this knowledge necessary? To help us become better Latter-day Saints and better missionaries. The passage continues, "Behold, I sent you out to testify and warn the people, and it becometh every man who hath been warned to warn his neighbor" ([D&C 88:79-81](#)). But it is impossible to be a good teacher without being a good listener and a good learner as well.

How many of our brother and sisters around the globe have enjoyed a portion of God's word but have felt some uneasiness as well, some uncertainty, or the feeling that something was missing? What a joy it is to know what we believe—to be able to proclaim the fullness of the gospel boldly and confidently to our friends, our neighbors, and our families

We can seek out truth and goodness throughout the world, among all cultures and religions, and we can do so humbly and sincerely. We have so much to learn. But at the same time, we should not hesitate to share what we know. There are marvelous blessings that come from keeping the commandments and living the principles of the Gospel, in this life, right now. God's plan of happiness, through Jesus Christ, is open to everyone, and we are his messengers, inviting all who hunger and thirst to come to the feast and be filled ([Alma 32:42](#)). Of this I

bear witness, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

## References

1. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 316. This is a very rough approximation based on notes taken by Willard Richards of sermon given on July 23, 1843; see Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of Joseph Smith* (Orem: Grandin Book, 1991), 234.
2. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: George Albert Smith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 152.
3. *Preach My Gospel*, 46.
4. "God's Love for All Mankind," First Presidency Statement, Feb. 15, 1978.
5. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 205.
6. Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79
7. Harvey, 209.
8. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 16.
9. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Patterns of Faith Around the World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 53-54.