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Religious Identity Like Marrow in Our Bones

For millions of people, faith and religious conviction are their most powerful and defining sources of personal and family identity.

A few years ago, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spoke about impoverished 19th-century Latter-day Saint handcart pioneers who walked the dusty or freezing 1,300-mile (3,000 km) trail to the Salt Lake Valley, often burying spouses and children along the way. Why did they do it? How did they do it?

“They didn’t do [it] for a program, they didn’t do it for a social activity,” Elder Holland observed. “They did it because the faith of the gospel of Jesus Christ was in their soul, *it was in the marrow of their bones.*”¹

Failure of Understanding

Modern life has afforded us enormous freedom. We are free like never before to become what and who we want to be. As sources of individual meaning have proliferated, we now better understand that respect for human dignity requires appropriate accommodation of the many ways human identity finds expression. With that realization have come, albeit sometimes slowly, greater social acceptance of those once marginalized and greater legal safeguards to protect basic human rights and to accommodate people’s identities.



Through our faith, we comprehend more deeply the meaning of marriage and family, gender and sexuality.

But too often secular elites and government officials focus so much on certain favored identities—such as race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity—that they miss the importance of religion as a profound source of identity. They see religion and religious faith—especially traditional Christian faith—as something akin to a quirky private belief or hobby, like secretly believing in the yeti or UFOs, or belonging to a weekly bowling league. “You are welcome to have your own private fantasy world, but keep it private and don’t make me acknowledge it!”

Perhaps that would be harmless by itself, but too often secular elites and government officials also see faith and faith communities, with their competing demands on loyalty and their adherence to tradition, as an intractable obstacle that interferes with achieving their own ideological views of a just and modern society.

I fear that often they even see religion itself—not only particular beliefs to which they object but also faith in God itself—as outright dangerous, as an uneducated and superstitious way of thinking that ought to be cast aside as soon as reasonably possible. “Religion is obviously a fraud,” this thinking seems to go, “and while sometimes it is harmless enough, the sooner it is abandoned in favor of reason and reality, the sooner we can be secure against its dangerous consequences.”

Some people are increasingly willing to use social and legal forces to pressure people to change or abandon their religious beliefs, convinced they will be better off for having discarded those beliefs as quaint anachronisms.

But this view is profoundly naïve. It fails to account for the fact that for hundreds of millions of people throughout the world, faith and



religious conviction are the most powerful and defining sources of personal and family identity in their lives. To return to Elder Holland’s statement, their faith is marrow to the very bones of who and what they are. The failure to understand this naturally results in discounting the importance of the religious freedom that allows people of faith to live out their core identity in dignity and peace.

The Fateful Choice to Believe

Not *all* secular elites hold these views. But I *am* suggesting that many secular people in positions of influence—government, academia, the media—do hold such views to one degree or another.

Perhaps one reason for this is that many of them have never truly experienced the power of faith. President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, once asked an atheist if he knew what salt tasted like. When the atheist said yes, President Packer asked him to describe it, which of course is impossible.²

So it is with faith. Many secular people simply don’t understand how something they have never experienced and that they ideologically reject as false and even absurd can in fact be true and profoundly real in the life of another person—indeed, so true and real that it defines one’s life, one’s very identity.

Thus, one legal scholar at a prestigious university argued, “There is no apparent moral reason why states should carve out special protections that encourage individuals to structure their lives around categorical demands that are insulated from the standards of evidence and reasoning we everywhere else expect to constitute constraints on judgment and action.”³ In other words, goes the argument, there is nothing special about religion, so why give it special legal protection? That’s an argument that only someone without vibrant religious belief and without a true understanding of the role faith plays in the life and identity of a believer could ever make.

There’s another reason many secular people fail to understand how powerful religion can be in forming one’s identity. That is the view that faith is really just one more personal preference, like deciding whether to become a baseball fan or a teacher, lawyer, or journalist. In this view, one’s religious identity is just an ordinary choice and thus not something fundamental to one’s being. I think this is profoundly mistaken. For many believers, religion is simply not something one can put on or remove like a favorite T-shirt. Dispelling this myth is key to greater understanding between religious and nonreligious people.

It is certainly true that God does not force us to believe in Him. Faith in God is ultimately something we exercise our God-given agency to choose to accept. But that does not mean it is an ordinary choice or merely a preference in the sense that many secular thinkers understand it. In fact, it’s just the opposite. Once experienced and accepted, faith in God is life-altering. The fateful, life-changing choice to believe influences deeply one’s personal, familial, and cultural

identity. It defines who and what we are, how we understand our purpose for being, how we relate to others, and how we deal with pain, suffering, and death. Through our faith, we comprehend more deeply the meaning of marriage and family, gender and sexuality.

In nearly all religions, personal faith brings us into communities of faith, where individual belief and practice combine with communal worship, sacred ceremonies, shared traditions, and holy celebrations. Indeed, for many, faith is experienced primarily in community. We become part of something larger than ourselves, bound in beautiful and complex relationships with those of similar conviction. Religious faith often entails duty and personal sacrifice, where obligation to a higher truth and the good of others is placed before the demands of self.

Religious authority—whether in the form of sacred writ, revered teachers, priestly intermediaries, vows and covenantal obligations, or simply a conscience powerfully informed by

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faith—shapes our hearts, minds, and actions in profound ways. Our faith lifts us beyond the trials and tribulations of this life to a loftier vision of salvation and peace. It gives us hope to press forward and joy in the journey.

It is no wonder, then, that in the New Testament, Jesus Christ spoke of being born again, of becoming a new man or woman in God. For Christians, taking upon oneself a new identity as a disciple of Christ is essential for ultimate redemption. (See John 3:3, 5.) There are similar concepts in other faith traditions.

It is also no wonder that something this personally powerful and defining cannot be confined to the private portions of believers' lives. Yet, as a *Washington Post* columnist recently observed: "It is now commonly held that citizens can—and should—practice their religious beliefs in private but remain neutral in public spaces. . . . It's possible, technically, but that approach rests on the assumption that 'beliefs' are not things that influence everyday life. For many religious people, that isn't the case; for them, belief—religious faith—is all about acting out your faith in real life. Those without religious faith often fail to understand how untenable it is to insist on a dichotomy between private beliefs and public performance."⁴

I agree. Just as society has increasingly recognized that other identities should not be required to be hidden from the public's view, society also must recognize the same for religious identity. One cannot check religious identity at the church, synagogue, or mosque exit or at the door of one's home any more than one can check race or ethnicity. Religious identity cannot be compartmentalized and stuffed into a box labeled "private."

Misconstruing religious faith as a mere choice preference—as something that can be adopted

and discarded at will—radically misconceives the nature of religion in the lives of millions of faithful people. It makes light of faith, treating it, in the words of the U.S. Supreme Court, as "something insubstantial and even insincere."⁵ It reduces a way of life and a state of being to a pastime. It takes an identity that for millions is vastly more important and profound than race, color, national origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, education, profession, wealth, and so on and dismisses it as trivial or something to grow out of, like a childhood belief in Santa Claus.

Again, not all secularists refuse to see the reality of religious faith. And I admit that not all people of faith experience it so thoroughly. Every person is unique. But the simple fact is that many millions *do* experience religion as a fundamental human identity, if not *the* fundamental identity of their lives.

"The Fire of the Covenant"

That is certainly the case for faithful members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The narrow, undemanding, personal-pastime conception of religious faith does not remotely account for its meaning in my life or in the lives of millions of my fellow Church members. And that constricted idea of faith could never account for its meaning in the lives of my pioneer forebears who sought a gathering place to build what they would call *Zion*—the name their modern revelations gave to a place where the pure in heart would dwell in unity and righteousness, where there would be no poor among them, where in time they would be prepared to meet God (see Doctrine and Covenants 97:21; Moses 7:18).

Their faith was indeed, as Elder Holland put it, "in the marrow of their bones." Or as



President Brigham Young (1801–77) said in a related context, it was “the fire of the covenant” that early Latter-day Saints had “burn[ing] in [their] hearts, like flame unquenchable.”⁶

“That’s the only way,” Elder Holland continued, that while on the trek to the Salt Lake Valley, “those mothers could bury [their babies] in a breadbox and move on, saying, ‘The promised land is out there somewhere. We’re going to make it to the valley.’”

“They could say that because of covenants and doctrine and faith and revelation and spirit. . . . [Our faith is] the substance of our soul; it’s the stuff right down in the marrow of our bones.”⁷

That faith sustained early Latter-day Saints as they uprooted themselves and their families and moved from upstate New York, where the Church was founded, to Kirtland, Ohio, to rural Missouri, and then to Nauvoo, Illinois—all in the span of a little less than a decade—with prejudice, mob violence, plunder, and murder driving them to each new location. That faith brought them to the fateful decision to abandon their Illinois

homes, their temple, and the country they loved and make the trek west to a barren wilderness that they were determined to make their Zion—their place of gathering, worship, freedom, and peace. Thousands of others left comfortable homes, extended families, and professions in England and continental Europe and crossed the Atlantic Ocean and America’s plains to settle in what must have seemed like a desert wasteland.

Much of my own religious identity and that of my father’s forebearers was forged in the crucible of those terrible trials. I cannot separate who I am from the faith that inspired those pioneer ancestors to sacrifice everything for the gospel of Jesus Christ. That faith continues to inspire and define my life and that of my family. Let me share with you two family stories to illustrate what I mean.

“All Is Well”

Under the direction of Brigham Young, 60,000 to 70,000 Church members migrated west about 1,300 (3,000 km) miles. Some traveled by horseback or in covered wagons. Most walked or were

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carried by their parents. About 3,000 of those pioneers traveled with handcarts. Handcarts had space for a few possessions and a small child or two. The pioneers' migration west commenced from Nauvoo in 1846 and continued through 1868 and was composed of about 250 separate companies of Church members.

The first pioneer account I'll share is from my great-great-grandfather, whose name was William Clayton. On February 27, 1846, William was compelled to leave Nauvoo by unfriendly, threatening neighbors. It was winter. He and the others who fled the city at that time—some prominent, some not—took what few possessions they could and crossed the Mississippi River.

William was appointed as the clerk for the entire Camp of Zion, as the pioneers were called. Because of wet, often freezing weather and deep mud, it would take the company in which he traveled, one of the first, more than

three months to cross the state of Iowa and reach the Missouri River.

William had left his wife, Diantha, at home with her parents in Nauvoo. She was expecting their first child. On April 15, William received a letter informing him that on March 30, Diantha had given birth to a "fine fat boy." He records in his journal that after hearing the news, he wrote a new song, which he titled "All Is Well." The song became an anthem for the pioneers. It is reputed to have been sung frequently as the pioneers worked their way west. Now known as "Come, Come, Ye Saints," the hymn he wrote is sung today all over the world in congregations of the Church.⁸

The second pioneer account is about Emma Jane Dixon, who was born the seventh of nine children in 1855 in Kirtland, Ohio. In Emma's early childhood, her family made the trek west. They traveled in a company of about 120 individuals over an 11-week period, during which the company met regularly for camp devotionals. Emma was six years old.

During the journey, Emma became ill and permanently lost her hearing. She remembered how to talk and retained that capacity throughout her life, although family members remember that she spoke with a "funny accent." She learned to read lips proficiently.

When Emma turned 19, she married Samuel Douglass. She bore and raised 11 children, the eldest of whom was my great-grandmother, named Mary. Mary married John Jasper McClellan, who became the chief Tabernacle organist and accompanist for the famed Tabernacle Choir.

Emma died in Payson, Utah, at age 87, during the time of World War II. She never heard her husband speak, never heard any of her 11

children speak, never heard her grandchildren or great-grandchildren speak, and never heard her first son-in-law, John Jasper McClellan, play the famous pioneer anthem “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” or any other number, on the Tabernacle organ.

The profound faith of earlier Latter-day Saint pioneers, tested and strengthened by these and innumerable other profoundly difficult pioneer experiences, helped bind the Latter-day Saints together, welding tens of thousands of people from diverse backgrounds into a united people with a heroic, sacred history and a distinct religious identity. Millions of Church members around the world who have no blood ancestors among the pioneers nevertheless count them as their spiritual forebearers.

Their sacrifices to be true to the faith and to keep the covenants they made with God are part of every Church member’s personal sacred narrative. It is part of our identity as members of the Church and disciples of Jesus Christ. The same faith that sustained 19th-century pioneers through terrible trials as they sought to build their Zion continues to sustain and define the identities and lives of faithful Church members to this day. That same faith is still in the “marrow of [our] bones.” It is still who we are.

If you have concluded that certain favored classes deserve special legal protections and accommodations but that people of faith do not because

they have *chosen* their beliefs and can just as easily *un-choose* them, I would ask you to reconsider.

If you believe public and private institutions should credit the dignitary claims of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities, then please consider that many of the same reasons for doing so apply with equal or greater force to the dignitary claims of religious believers.

If you believe that taking constitutional and human rights seriously requires social respect and legal safeguards so people can live out their core identities openly as equal participants in our communities and nation, then I hope that same conviction also extends to religious people and their core beliefs, even when those beliefs may be deeply unpopular.

The Latter-day Saint Approach

While the Church shares with all faith communities a desire to strengthen religious liberty,



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in some respects our approach differs from that of other faiths. A history of fierce persecution against members of the Church has made the Church sensitive to laws and practices that deny believers the right to participate as equals in society without abandoning their faith. No one should be denied free speech rights or the ability to have a job or a place to live based on their religious convictions, practices, or speech, and corporate employers should reasonably accommodate an employee's religious needs. Likewise, religion should not be a basis for being denied the right to participate in one's chosen profession or run a business. Governmental efforts to punish or threaten the licenses of professionals

or business owners for expressing their religious convictions, especially on issues of sexuality, are deeply disturbing.

The Church also acknowledges the right of others to live according to their core convictions and needs. It has openly supported LGBTQ rights in areas such as employment and housing.

Also of vital importance to the Church's religious freedom efforts is what might be called the "right to gather." Much of the Latter-day Saint experience I've just touched upon can be understood as the quest of a people for a place to freely gather in families and communities of faith in the name of their God without interference from government or those who do not share our beliefs. We seek the greatest protection for areas that are most sensitive and essential to the perpetuation of our religion.

At the center of the Church's priorities, therefore, lies the protection of families and the right of parents to pass on their faith to their children. Also at the center is the protection of core Church institutions that preserve, teach, and administer the Church's doctrine, sacraments, and covenants. These religious institutions must have broad freedom to govern themselves in their ecclesiastical affairs, free from government regulation. Why? Because these zones of family and religious autonomy are vital to preserving our identity as individual disciples of Jesus Christ and as a covenant religious community.

Government must not be allowed to marginalize and delegitimize religion by confining it to purely private spheres, as if it were some kind of infection to be quarantined. As a large majority of the U.S. Supreme Court held in 2018, official bigotry against religious business owners, including those with traditional beliefs about marriage and sexuality, has no place in the United States.



Even so, I recognize that the commercial realm is far less vital as a place of religious gathering and thus legitimately subject to greater regulation for the public good than the other family, ecclesiastical, and educational spaces I've just mentioned.

A Moral Imperative

In conclusion, religion remains one of the great sources of human identity and meaning for countless millions worldwide. The Latter-day Saint experience is but one powerful illustration of that reality; there are many similar examples from other faith traditions.

No democratic government that claims to value personal dignity and human rights can ignore the moral imperative to respect the fundamental right to freely, openly, and peacefully exercise one's religion—to be who one truly is, faith and all, in the private *and* public spaces where people live out their lives. I believe religious identity deserves to be taken at least as seriously—and that it should be afforded at least as much protection and accommodation—as other forms of identity that now attract far more attention and sympathy. It is that essential.

Yes, there are challenging situations to be worked out. We cannot escape what Elder Lance B. Wickman, the Church's general counsel, has called “the hard work of citizenship”⁹—the work of finding common ground and generous, even loving, accommodations for those whose beliefs, personal needs, and lives are different from our own. We may not get it right at first. There will surely be tense moments along the way. And no one need affirm the ultimate truth of another's identity, religious or otherwise.

But I believe that religious and secular people of goodwill have big enough hearts, broad enough minds, and strong enough wills to forge



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the hard compromises that will allow all of us, whatever our identities, to live together in dignity, respect, and peace. It is to that task that we must commit ourselves for the good of all. ■

From an address, “In the Marrow of Their Bones”: The Latter-day Saint Experience of Religion as Identity,” delivered at a Religious Freedom Annual Review conference, Brigham Young University, June 20, 2018.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Roundtable Discussion,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, Feb. 9, 2008, 28; emphasis added.
2. See Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1983, 52.
3. Brian Leiter, *Why Tolerate Religion?* (2013), 63.
4. Christine Emba, “The Supreme Court Wasn’t Ready to Decide on the Wedding Cake. Neither Are We,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 2018, washingtonpost.com.
5. *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S. 14 (2018).
6. Brigham Young, in *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Sept. 28, 1846, 5, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
7. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Roundtable Discussion,” 28.
8. See Paul E. Daul, “All Is Well . . .”: The Story of ‘the Hymn That Went around the World,’” *BYU Studies*, vol. 21, no. 4 (Fall 1981), 515–27; “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” *Hymns*, no. 30.
9. Lance B. Wickman, “Promoting Religious Freedom in a Secular Age: Fundamental Principles, Practical Priorities, and Fairness for All,” Religious Freedom Annual Review conference, Brigham Young University, July 7, 2016, newsroom.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.