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## A Model of Mormon Spiritual Experience

When I considered all these things and that that being seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go. [Joseph Smith, 1832]<sup>1</sup>

Why make a model of religious experience? Ian Barbour writes that models are “organizing images used to order and interpret patterns of experience.”<sup>2</sup> Take one aspect of Mormon religious experience. How do you answer the question, “How are prayers answered?” Mormonism contains a far more comprehensive answer to that question than we generally realize. The stock answer, based on the D&C 9 revelation to Oliver Cowdery, is a good beginning, but unfortunately, we too often stop there. In this paper, I list scriptures that describe at least thirty different ways that prayers are answered. The Bible contains just a few descriptions; the modern scriptures contain many. Thirty different kinds of answers may sound like a lot to manage, but if you ponder them for a while, they do suggest patterns. The first pattern I noticed was the division between Feeling kinds of passages, such as D&C 9:8-9, and Thinking kinds of passages, such as Alma 32:34. This natural complementary relationship between Thinking and Feeling aspects is a very useful beginning in ordering the kinds of experience described in these scriptures.

But that beginning leads me to take the question a step further—How do the kinds of spiritual experiences described in our scriptures compare to the kinds of spiritual experiences that underlie the spiritual experiences of mankind in general? How do we orient ourselves in relation to everyone else? We can start by looking at doctrinal differences, but that immediately defines boundaries and erects barriers. What do we have in common? Is there a common wine of core religious experience that remains fairly constant despite the differing doctrinal wineskins that we use to carry them in? Scholars of religion like Rudolf Otto, Ninian Smart, and Mircea Eliade have made significant studies of comparative religion. Where do we fit in their pictures?

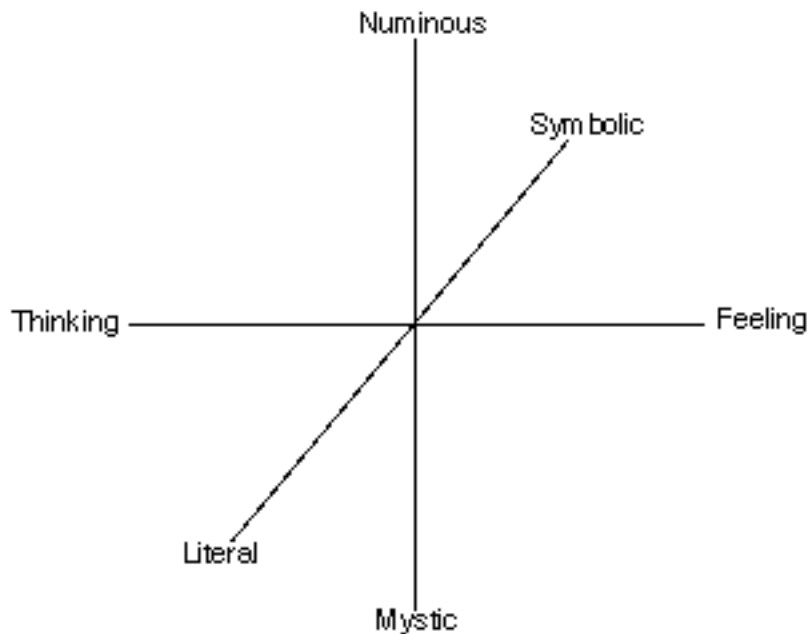
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<sup>1</sup> Dean Jessee, comp. and ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study of Science and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 7.

Often our first attempts to orient ourselves place us squarely in the shoes of Joseph Smith when he began his religious quest. We have our minds disquieted by a confusing array of religious claims. The confusion is something that we all have to order and interpret at some point. It is difficult, if not impossible to communicate with those of differing views, or ever to take bearings on our own position without some place of fairly solid footing, a common ground upon which most people can at least comprehend. Ideally, we seek a vantage point that can both explain and order commonality, and that can also account for differences.

Here is my suggestion for a model. Consider three intersecting axes, with each axis describing a relation between complementary contraries.



Joseph Smith remarked that “by proving contraries, truth is made manifest.”<sup>3</sup> By looking at the relations between these intersecting sets of contraries, I hope that certain truths can be made manifest. William Blake astutely observed that for any complementary relation of this sort, if one side of a contrary relation attempts to destroy

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<sup>3</sup> A letter to Daniel Rupp in 1844, quoted in Eugene England, *Dialogues with Myself* (Salt Lake City: Orion, 1984), ix.

its complement, it ends up negating itself.<sup>4</sup> For instance, thinking that neglects feeling demonstrates ignorance; feeling that takes no thought has no heart. After we look at thinking and feeling, we shall consider like relationships between the other contraries in this model.

## Thinking and Feeling

Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart. (D&C 8:2)

“Study it out in your mind,” Oliver Cowdery was advised (D&C 9). Alma speaks of moments when your “understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand” (Alma 32:34). These, and many other scriptures, relate thinking, knowledge, and understanding to spirituality. But, of course, spirituality involves deep feeling as well. Nephi writes, “He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh” (2 Nephi 4:21). The scriptures speak of feelings of joy and sorrow, sinfulness and forgiveness, consolation and pain, humility and strength. The mind and the heart participate together in spirituality. A feeling may provide the motivation to seek knowledge; knowledge gained may provoke other feelings. As you read through the scriptures in Appendix A, notice the range of and the respect given to both thinking and feeling experiences that come through the spirit, and the typical movement and relation between them.

Different people may prefer or respect either thinking or feeling more. A preference one way or the other is natural.<sup>5</sup> Even so, both thinking and feeling should play a role in spiritual experience. Because both contribute, an undue emphasis on one, without considering a balancing contribution from the other, can only serve to impede spiritual growth. But thinking and feeling alone do not completely define the experience of the sacred.

## Numinous and Mystic

In a classic study, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto studied the characteristics of a type of religious encounter that he named the numinous.<sup>6</sup> Ninian Smart sums up numinous experience as “a mystery which is fearful, awe-inspiring, . . . and fascinating.”<sup>7</sup>

But above all, the sense of presence which confronts a person in the numinous experience is majestic: marvelous in power and glory. In their rather different

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<sup>4</sup> See William Blake in Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, eds *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York: Norton, 1979). “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence.” 86. Also “Contraries are positives / A Negation is not a contrary”, 559. “There is a place where Contraries are equally True”, Milton, Book the Second, 287. “There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary: The Negation must be destroyed to redeem the Contraries.” 303.

<sup>5</sup> On this, see such books as Isabel Briggs Myers, *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type*, (Palo Alto: Davies-Black, 1995) 3, 65-68, or Otto Kroeger and Janet Thuessen, *Type Talk.: The 16 Personality Types that Determine How We Live, Love and Work* (New York: Dell, 1988), 21-22, 70-72.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John Harvey, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1950).

<sup>7</sup> Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Cross Cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (New York: Scribners, 1983), 63–64.

ways, the experiences of Arjuna, Isaiah, Job, Paul, and Muhammad are all numinous in character.<sup>8</sup>

Ian Barbour emphasizes the “sense of otherness, confrontation and encounter” when “man is aware of his own dependence, finitude, limitation, and contingency.”<sup>9</sup> This experience usually occurs in institutionalized worship situations involving personal models of God. The worshipper often bows to show humility, acknowledging inferiority and distance, and feels contingency and a moral demand. Worship involves sacrifice and petition.

Upon reading descriptions of numinous experience, those familiar with LDS scriptures should immediately think of Joseph Smith’s first vision, of the vision of Moses in the Pearl of Great Price, of Lehi’s vision of the throne of God, of the climactic moments of Benjamin’s sermon, and of the manifestations at the Kirtland Temple. To a degree, at least, the Mormon experience partakes of the numinous. However, there is another kind of religious experience that has characteristics quite different from the numinous. This is mystic experience, as reported by such persons as the Buddha or Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Mystical union is characterized by “joy, harmony, serenity, and peace,” and a sense of the unity of all things and loss of identity.<sup>10</sup> Separation seems illusory, differences and dichotomies of opposites are transcended. Most often, the mystic stresses the ineffability of the experience and uses impersonal models of God. This experience usually occurs in response to contemplation, mediation, discipline, and possibly asceticism.

Some kinds of mystical experience are without question foreign to Mormonism, as discussed by Hugh Nibley in *The World and the Prophets*. Nibley cites such differences as the impersonal models of God, the emphasis on meditation as strict discipline requiring a teacher-guide, and the ineffable, incommunicable, and solitary aspects of the experience of mystic illumination.<sup>11</sup>

However, differences between mystic experience and Mormonism are not the whole story. Numinous encounter has predominated in the West and mystical union in the East, but all the major religions have included both types of experience, and this is true of Mormonism as well. Mark Koltko’s insightful essay, “Mysticism and Mormonism,” explores parallels between various Mormon scriptures and certain characteristics of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. My discussion here depends on Barbour and Smart.

<sup>11</sup> Nibley, “Prophets and Mystics,” in *The World and the Prophets, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol.3, ch.12. Also *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol.10, Ch.9, p.370 “Who can tell us the plot of the play? The Sophic mind assures us that the play is simply a product of lighting, rocks, and wind and has no plot aside from the plots we invent for it. In that book things just happen--and there is no way of proving that that is not so. The mystic makes a virtue of the incomprehensibility of the whole thing; he submerges himself in the darkness of unknowing and wallows in his self-induced and self-dramatizing mood of contradictions: he is strictly a Sophic, not a Mantic, product.” Although, compare Alma 5:46, 17:3-3 on fasting, etc. Tom Nibley reports that Hugh has changed his views on some aspects of the “Prophets and Mystics” chapter over the years. See comments and an essay by Kerry Shirts at <http://www2.ida.net/graphics/shirtail/mysticis.htm>.

mystical experience.<sup>12</sup> Koltko's "eight central qualities of the mystical or transcendent experience" are the "ego quality" (cf. D&C 88:6; Moses 7:41); the "unifying quality" (cf. D&C 88:41), the "inner and subjective quality" (cf. Moses 7:48); the "temporal/spatial quality" (cf. Moses 1:27–29); the "noetic quality" (D&C 38:1–2), the "ineffable quality" (3 Nephi 19:19); "the positive emotion quality" (2 Nephi 4:21); the "sacred quality" (3 Nephi 11:15; Moses 1:11).

In a separate study, I observed some striking parallels in the "light" passages in D&C 88 and the language Emerson uses in his 1836 *Nature* to describe some of his experiences.<sup>13</sup> But even while it parallels aspects of Emerson's experience, much of D&C 88 reflects numinous experience and eschatological intent that is totally alien to Emerson's thought. So we arrive at the point of needing to understand the relation between numinous and mystic experiences. If we think of the numinous and mystical as poles on a continuum of experience, we can begin to appreciate the distinctiveness of Mormonism in relation to these experiences without feeling threatened by the comparison.

Commenting on the numinous and the mystical, Ian Barbour writes: "The polarity of withdrawal and approach, or distance and identity, seems to be present within the experience of the sacred, though for different individuals, one aspect or the other may be more prominent."<sup>14</sup>

I see the experience of the sacred in Mormonism as bridging the numinous and the mystic. After a numinous theophany, Moses announces, "for this cause I know that man is nothing" (Moses 1:10). Yet a few verses later, changing perspectives, he makes a declaration amounting to intimate identity. "For behold, I am a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten." The tension of distance most evidenced in Joseph Smith's first vision, D&C 76, Moses 1, Benjamin's coronation speech, and Alma's conversion, resolves towards a profound intimacy:

And then shall ye know that I have seen Jesus Christ, and that he hath talked with me face to face and that he told me in plain humility, even as a man telleth another in mine own language concerning these things" (Ether 12:39).

But such intimacy in Mormon thought, even when described as Oneness is typically associated with a personal deity.

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<sup>12</sup> Mark E. Koltko, "Mysticism and Mormonism: An LDS Perspective on Transcendence and Higher Consciousness," *Sunstone* 13/2 (April 1989): 14–19. For expanded definitions and examples, see Appendix A.

<sup>13</sup> For a class in American literature, I wrote a paper comparing Smith and Emerson. Someday I hope to prepare it for publication. In the meantime, see Appendix B for the comparison of D&C 88 and Emerson. I should also mention that various "core" NDE experiences reported in Kenneth Ring's *Heading toward Omega: In Search of the Meaning of the Near Death Experience* (New York: William Morrow, 1984) p 57-89 also compare strikingly. The implication is that the parallels have a common experiential basis, not a literary dependence. As easy as it has been for some people to imagine Joseph ripping off everyone in sight (or out of it), no one could or should imagine the Harvard-educated Ralph Waldo Emerson cribbing from the unlettered Joseph Smith in composing *Nature*, his masterpiece.

<sup>14</sup> Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 81.

Then shall ye know that ye have seen me, that I am, and that I am the true light that is in you, and that you are in me; otherwise ye could not abound.<sup>15</sup>

The implications of this bridging of kinds of experience go beyond a license to make historic and scriptural parallels. According to Ninian Smart, the numinous and mystic poles of experience influence patterns of doctrine.

If you stress the numinous, you stress that our salvation or liberation (our becoming holy) must flow from God the Other. It is he who brings it to us through his grace. You also stress the supreme power and dynamism of God as creator of the cosmos. If, on the other hand, you stress the mystical and non-dual, you tend to stress how we attain salvation and liberation through our own effort at mediation, not by the intervention of the Other... If we combine the two, but accent the numinous, we see mystical union as a kind of close embrace with the other—like human love, where the two are one and yet the two-ness remains. If the accent is on the mystical rather than the numinous, then God tends to be seen as a being whom we worship, but in such a way that we get beyond duality.<sup>16</sup>

Here, I believe, is an essential distinguishing characteristic of Mormonism—the blend of the numinous and the mystic. This explains the Orthodox discomfort with the Mormon idea of deification (something quite unthinkable to one caught up in a purely numinous tradition), as well as the Eastern discomfort with our literalism and personal God (again, something quite unthinkable to one caught up by the emptiness of pure mysticism). For the same reason, the blend in Mormonism explains Nephi's insistence on combining grace and works—“By grace we are saved after all we can do.”<sup>17</sup> Our need for grace offends the self-reliant mystic, and our effort towards perfection offends those who depend on pure grace. By pointing out the experiential roots behind such doctrinal disagreements, I feel that we have much to gain. Against the background of comparative world religion, Mormonism appears as the more comprehensive and inclusive faith.

For one thing, it becomes apparent that by treating numinous and mystic experience as contraries, we can solve various problems that come up in other traditions because one or the other aspect of the sacred has been excluded. Mosiah deliberately strives to awaken in his people a sense of their nothingness (Mosiah 2:25, 4:5) in contrast to the numinous majesty of the Almighty. But when that necessary awareness has done its work, he describes his people as “the children of Christ” (Mosiah 5:7).<sup>18</sup> The danger in a strictly numinous tradition is that humankind tends to be seen as depraved and contingent. For example, “Luther's outlook, with its undue respect for power and authority, and its sense of the complete sinfulness and evil in the human being when left alone”<sup>19</sup> can be seen as

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<sup>15</sup> D&C 88:50. cf. John 15: 3; Nephi 19:23; D&C 88:41. Also compare Hugh Nibley, “The Meaning of the Atonement,” in *Approaching Zion, Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, vol 9* (Salt Lake City and Provo; Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 554–614. Eugene England, “Shakespeare and the At-onement of Jesus Christ.” in *Why the Church is as True as the Gospel* (Salt Lake City; Bokcraft, 1987), 31-51.

<sup>16</sup> Smart, *Worldviews*, 71-72.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Nephi 25:23.

<sup>18</sup> A similar shift occurs in the account in Moses 1:10, 18 as he reports his sense of nothingness, and then asserts “I am a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten;... and I have other things to inquire of him.”

<sup>19</sup> Smart, *Worldviews*, 76.

unhealthy to the human psyche. On the other hand, a mystic like Emerson can preach an admirable “Self Reliance.”<sup>20</sup> But even the memory of an experience of unity with an impersonal Oversoul turns out to be altogether inadequate when he had to confront the death of his son, Waldo.<sup>21</sup> Self-reliance was not enough. And even his Oversoul could not bring Waldo back.<sup>22</sup> Mormonism provides the strength gained from the union of complementary experiences.<sup>23</sup>

Additionally, an awareness of mystic kinds of experience within our own tradition should provide grounds for better communication with peoples raised in those traditions. For example, David Peck suggests that 2 Peter 1:5–11 “stands out as an example of the Christian correlative to the mystics conceptualizations, . . . whether we adopt the terms employed by Peter [faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, and charity] or those of the mystic (knowledge, discipline, devotion, and pure love), the path is generally the same.”<sup>24</sup>

The last thing one might expect Joseph Smith to have in common with some Eastern mystics might be an interest in seer stones and treasure seeking as a transitional stage in their spiritual development, but here it is. Craig Miller provided the following quote in an intriguing letter in *Sunstone*.

In yogic practices, the crystal plays a very important part. In South India there is a particular science called anajan, meaning not known. It consists of different methods of projecting the illuminating superphysical facility through a crystal. . . . When the illuminating facility is directed towards a person or an object which is missing, it can be immediately known where that person or thing is. Thus, treasures which are buried underground, or objects which are very distant can be directly observed.<sup>25</sup>

This kind of comparison provides a positive context for Joseph Smith’s involvement with seer stones and money digging (cf. Joseph Smith–History 1:56), making the experience a vital preparation, rather than somehow tainting his mission. Even so, while this comparison provides parallels, still others provide enough contrast that we cannot explain

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<sup>20</sup> See Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self Reliance” in Carl Bode and Malcom Cowley, *The Portable Emerson* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 138-164.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Portable Emerson*, 269 and “Threnody” 656-64.

<sup>22</sup> A passage in “The Oversoul” is instructive: “But we must pick no locks. We must check this low curiosity. An answer in words is delusive; it is really no answer to the questions you ask. Do not require a description of the countries towards which you sail. . . . Men ask concerning the immortality of the soul, the employments of heaven, the state of the sinner, and so forth. The even dream that Jesus has left replies to these interrogatories. . . . The moment the doctrine of immortality is separately taught, man in already fallen. . . . No inspired man asks this question or condescends to these evidences. . . . These questions which we lust to ask about the future are a confession of sin. God has no answer for them. No answer in words can reply to a question of things. . . .” Bode and Cowley, 219. Against his own express doctrine, Emerson’s comfort in “Threnody” regarding Waldo’s immortality comes as a personal answer in words.

<sup>23</sup> Smart’s examples of the blend of the numinous and mystic in *Worldviews* come from Hinduism, which, compared to Mormonism, lacks a balancing historical orientation (something distinct from a historical tradition) to complement its rich exploration of symbolism.

<sup>24</sup> David D. Peck, “Mormonism and Eastern Mysticism,” *Dialogue* 21/2 (Summer 1988): 113–27.

<sup>25</sup> Satyananda Paramahansa, *Four Chapters on Freedom*, quoted by Craig W. Miller in an intriguing letter, “A Mystical Joseph Smith,” in *Sunstone* 12/2 (March 1988): 4.

Joseph as “just” another mystic. Of the translation process, Blake Ostler made the following observations:

Joseph’s state of consciousness differs from shamanistic possession, classical mysticism, and most reports of automatic writing in that he did not lose consciousness of his surroundings or become dispossessed of his personal identity. Further, there is no evidence that he claimed to hear a voice or take dictation from another personality, unlike cases of spirit writing or channeled texts.<sup>26</sup>

While studying near-death experiences, I noticed that researchers have made comparisons between the aftereffects of the NDE and the aftereffects of various mystic experiences. In my turn, I noticed several points that should be of interest to Mormons. Along with distinctive attitude and behavior changes, some NDErs report “new-found psychic powers; according to the researchers, telepathy, precognitive insights, out of the body sensations, déjà vu episodes occur with unusual frequency.”<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Ring uses this increase in psychic development as a point of comparison between NDE aftereffects and the kundalini experiences with higher consciousness. Ring quotes Gopi Krishna:

One who has attained to a higher state of consciousness . . . should be characterized by four exceptional attributes, namely genius, psychic talents, lofty traits of character, and an expanded state of consciousness. . . . He finds himself in possession of channels of communication which, acting independently of the senses, can bring him knowledge of events, occurring at a distance, and also visions of the past and future. His utterances may become prophetic and he may acquire a healing touch.<sup>28</sup>

Joseph Smith, of course, displayed all of these traits. Recall the striking reports of precognition and clairvoyance (such as those involving Oliver Cowdery’s arrival), and the later visions, especially in relation to the Book of Mormon translation. Joseph’s description of the revelatory process compares with NDE reports of access to pure knowledge.

This first comforter, or Holy Ghost has no other effect than pure intelligence . . . expanding the mind, enlightening the understanding, and storing the intellect with present knowledge. . . . It is calm and serene. . . . A person may profit by noticing the

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<sup>26</sup> Blake Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” *Dialogue* 20/1 (Spring 1987): 150; Scott C. Dunn in “Automaticity and the Dictation of the Book of Mormon” in Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe eds., *American Apocrypha* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 33 disputes Ostler on some aspects of the spirit writing phenomena, and does make some notable observations. On the other hand, Dunn’s single footnote (Ibid. 35 n 37) makes an insufficient response to Richard L. Anderson, discussion of channeled/spirit writing texts, “Imitation Gospels and Christ’s Book of Mormon Ministry,” in *Apocryphal Writings and the Latter Day Saints*, ed. C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1986), 53–107. Additionally, reports of Joseph’s experience also contrast with Ian Wilson’s observations of hypnotic regressions that purport to recover memories of past lives. See *Mind Out of Time?* (London: Galanez, 1981), also published as *All in the Mind*. Wilson convincingly compares hypnotic regression to the psychological mechanisms that also cause multiple personalities.

<sup>27</sup> Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 141.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Ring, *Heading toward Omega* (New York: Morrow, 1984), 170.



first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas.<sup>29</sup>

Compare this from Reverend Carol Parrish-Harra's NDE account, quoted in Ring's *Heading toward Omega*.

It seemed whole *Truths* revealed themselves to me. Waves of thought—ideas greater and purer than I ever tried to figure out—came to me. Thoughts, clear, and without effort revealed themselves in total wholeness.<sup>30</sup>

Also, from NDE experiencer Tom Sawyer in Ring:

You realize that you are suddenly in communication with total knowledge. It's hard to describe. . . . You can think of a question . . . and *immediately* know the answer to it. As simple as that.<sup>31</sup>

Where does all this knowledge go when an NDEr returns to life? Carol Zaleski comments that along with access to knowledge, “Forgetfulness, which has as important a place as remembering in the mystical literature of the world, is a recurring element in near-death reports.”<sup>32</sup> During the Book of Mormon translation, Oliver Cowdery attempted to translate and failed, and through Joseph Smith received the revelation that became D&C 9, which combines themes of knowledge and forgetfulness.

All of this goes to suggest that looking at Latter-day Saint religious experience in comparison to other accounts, whether numinous, mystic, or something with bridging and in-between characteristics like the NDE literature, can only enhance our appreciation of the strength of our tradition. For example, in light of these sorts of comparisons, attempts to explain Joseph Smith as a deceiver appear as pitifully inadequate. And considering the abundance of light that Joseph Smith provided when compared to that returned by other visionaries, attempts to explain Joseph as “just another” visionary appear woefully weak.

As you read the scripture references that describe spiritual manifestations that can come in answer to prayer,<sup>33</sup> notice that some dramatic experiences might emphasize the numinous side of things, and some the mystic. Others seem best described as something in between, more like a loving “close embrace,” an at-onement with Christ.

The next question is, how are we to understand such accounts and experiences? Are they literal encounters with the divine, or something wholly psychological? Do they concern the inner life only (no trivial thing), or do they also define a connection to an external reality?

## Literal and Symbolic

For by the Spirit are all things made known unto the prophets, which shall come upon the children of men according to the flesh. Wherefore, the things of which I have read are things pertaining to things both temporal and spiritual. (1 Nephi 22:2–3)

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<sup>29</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 149–51.

<sup>30</sup> Ring, *Heading toward Omega*, 75.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, 132.

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix A.

The Book of Mormon sets the pattern for Mormonism by combining the physical and the spiritual, the literal and the symbolic, the unique historic event and the mythic recurrence. Nephi tells us that he is writing a history, but that history is organized around the vision of the tree of life. We can neither separate the history from the symbols of the vision, nor the symbolic vision from the narrative history. The vision is a historic event, and the symbols of the vision come from the physical landscape.<sup>34</sup> Yet the vision enacts current tensions and future events in the history of Lehi's family, just as it depicts eternal realities.<sup>35</sup> Even when Nephi refers to history, he does so, not to merely recite facts, but to "liken" the history to his people, that is, to relive the patterns of creation and Exodus, and make them actual in the lives of his people and his readers (cf. 1 Nephi 19:23; 2 Nephi 11:2).<sup>36</sup> The literal and the symbolic illuminate and give meaning to each other; attempts to separate them make no sense at all. Indeed, the tension in the between the literal and the symbolic corresponds to quite neatly to the Jung's distinction between Sensing and Intuitive modes of thinking.<sup>37</sup> While individuals may have a natural preference for one or the other, the modes compliment one another and each performs essential functions beyond reach of the other.

Mircea Eliade's *The Myth of the Eternal Return* explores the tension between the archaic view, that nothing was truly real unless it repeated a pattern or archetype, and the modern view that embraces unique events and linear history.<sup>38</sup> Eliade argues that the archaic view sought to abolish time and history through "eternal return." While this view had several strengths, especially in giving meaning to suffering, it can also lead to a kind of fatalism. He suggests that Judeo-Christianity possessed a unique historic consciousness, a respect for irreversible events as theophanies, and an appreciation of personal freedom. But the Book of Mormon has the risen Christ conducting the central Temple rite of eternal return for the Lehite peoples, taking them back to the beginning for a new creation in which "Old things are done away, all things are become new."<sup>39</sup> Yet during that rite, Jesus's teaching to the people involves extensive prophesy regarding the future of Israel, showing an intense concern with human freedom and linear history (3 Nephi 20–26). A paradox? Once again Mormonism provides a marriage of complementary contraries, embracing both temporal existence and eternal archetypes.

His paths are straight, and his course is one eternal round. (Alma 37:12)

The literal and symbolic aspects of religion encompass types of experience common to nearly all religions.

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<sup>34</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, "Lehi's Dreams," in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 253–64.

<sup>35</sup> See Bruce W. Jorgenson, "The Dark Way to the Tree: Typological Unity in the Book of Mormon,," and Richard Rust, "All Things Which Have Been Given of God ...Are The Typifying of Him: Typology in the Book of Mormon" in *Literature of Belief* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1981).

<sup>36</sup> See Alan Goff, "Boats, Beginnings, and Repetitions," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 67–84.

<sup>37</sup> On this, see such books as Isabel Briggs Myers, *Gifts Differing: Understanding Personality Type*, (Palo Alto: Davies-Black, 1995) 2-3, 57-63, or Otto Kroeger and Janet Thuessen, *Type Talk.: The 16 Personality Types that Determine How We Live, Love and Work* (New York: Dell, 1988), 19-21, 67-69.

<sup>38</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

<sup>39</sup> See Kevin Christensen, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, vol 2, 247–56. Christensen, *Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies*, FARMS Occasional Papers, 2 (Provo; FARMS, 2001), 65-75.

If approached without reference to any particular doctrinal interpretation, Ian Barbour suggests that these kinds of experience can serve as a common ground for discussion, a place of solid footing, a point of little disputed reference from which to examine the varied interpretations and traditions. Those I shall discuss in this paper (following Barbour) can be seen as generally framing a movement:

- (a) From responses to external impressions regarding:

*Order and creativity* in the world

The *common mythic symbols and patterns* underlying most religious traditions

*Key historical events* that define separate traditions and bind individuals

- (b) Through the innermost experiences of the individual:

*Numinous awe and reverence*<sup>40</sup>

*Mystical union*

*Moral obligation*

*Reorientation and Reconciliation* with respect to personal sin, guilt, and weakness, the existence of evil, suffering, and death, and tensions between science and faith.

- (c) Then returning to the external world as human action:

*Personal dialogue* where you begin interpret external events as God speaking to you, and you answer through your own actions.

*Social and Ritual* behavior

These matters cannot objectively prove the existence of a God (whether personal or impersonal), but, as I hope to demonstrate, they do constitute the core of religious experience for believers. They provide the ground of experience on which reasoned and feeling assessments of the validity and worth of faith are based. They encompass the ways in which spirituality is manifest in history and symbol. They are the wine—and doctrine the wine-bottles. To argue and contend about doctrine is to emphasize the wine skin over the wine. In Alma's terms, it is to emphasize what you think you "know" over what ultimately gives "cause to believe" (Alma 32:18).

## **Encountering Order and Creativity in the Physical World**

Joseph Smith's 1832 journal contains a reminiscence of his awakening wonder at the order and creativity in the physical world. While specific Mormon interpretations of the creation can and should vary, this is enough to place a sacred appreciation of nature and the cosmos firmly in the Mormon tradition. This earliest version of the youthful Joseph's first vision suggests that his awakened wonder was at least partially responsible for carrying him towards the Sacred Grove. Despite the awkwardness of the phrasing, the intensity of his experience comes through. (Spellings follow the original.)

For I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their majesty through the heavens and also the stars shining in their courses and

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<sup>40</sup> I'll assume that the previous discussion of mystic and numinous shall suffice, and will not discuss them again in the sections that follow.

the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the strength and beauty whose power and intilgence in governing the things which are so exeding great and marvilous even in the likeness of him who created them and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man said it is a fool that saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power a being that makith Laws and decreeeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from All Eternity to Eternity.<sup>41</sup>

## Common Symbols and Rituals in Religion

In trying to orient ourselves when confronted by the bewildering variety of religions, we can take some comfort in the surprising discovery that all religion gathers around common symbols and rituals. Emphasizing the mythic side of things, Joseph Campbell has been very effective in popularizing the notion that humankind shares “one mythology.” The same themes, “creation, death and resurrection, ascension to heaven, virgin births,” are retold everywhere with “inflection to culture.”<sup>42</sup>

On the ritual side, the Myth and Ritual school at Cambridge pointed to the Year Rite as the center and climax of ancient religious activity everywhere:

The dramatic representation of the death and resurrection of the god [and the mourning and seeking of the god by his female consort];<sup>43</sup> The recitation or symbolic representation of the myth of creation; The ritual combat, in which the triumph of the god over his enemies was depicted; The sacred marriage; The triumphal procession, in which the King played the part of the god followed by a train of lesser gods of visiting deities.<sup>44</sup>

But besides ritual and psychological aspects of myth, there may also be historical associations. The performance of a rite is a historical event and the archaic insistence on

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<sup>41</sup> Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 6; cf. Alma 30:44 and D&C 88:42–50.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 10–11. Compare Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1990), 28. “Religion is thus, a social form of art, and as such both its origin in art and the fact that its principles of interpretation are those of art should always be kept in mind: ‘The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation’s different reception of the Poetic Genius, which every where call’d the Spirit of Prophecy.’”

<sup>43</sup> Eugene Seach, *A Great Mystery* (unpub), 198–99: “The goddess had an important part to play in the resurrection of her husband. . . . We will recall how Anath made possible Baal-Hdad’s resurrection by attacking and destroying his enemy, Mot, the God of death. In Mesopotamian myth it was Inanna-Ishtar who descended into the realm of the dead to destroy Erishkigal’s power so that the dead Dumuzi-Tammus could be restored to life. Aristide’s *Apology* describes how Aphrodite descended into Hades to ransom Adonis from Persephone. Cybele likewise made possible the resurrection of Attis on the third day, while in Egypt it was Isis who made possible the resurrection of her husband, Osiris. . . . But no matter what the details of these ubiquitous Near-Eastern death-and-resurrection legends, the underlying theme is the same: *the god is helpless without the ministrations of his consort*”; cf. John 20:11–18, Alma 19:29–31, and 2 Nephi 11:4.

<sup>44</sup> In Lord Raglan, *The Origins of Religion* (London: Thinkers Library, 1948), 67, citing Samuel H. Hooke, *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958).

imitating archetypes leads to a ritually conditioned history, as is especially evidenced in kingship.<sup>45</sup> Hugh Nibley argues for the primacy of the temple since that is where the historical, the mythic, the ritual, the social, and the symbolic meet and fuse.<sup>46</sup> In Mormonism, “all things which have been given of God from the beginning of the world, unto man, are the typifying of [Christ]” (2 Nephi 11:4).

And behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth; both things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me. (Moses 6:63)

The phenomenon of a single underlying mythology in human history is arresting, whatever the ultimate explanation. Natural curiosity makes it reasonable to ask, how well does any particular religious tradition integrate and interpret these common patterns and symbols? Hugh Nibley suggests the extent to which Mormonism integrates the essential symbols and patterns.

A century of bound periodicals in the stacks will tell the enquiring student when scholars first became aware of the various elements that make up the super-pattern, but Joseph Smith knew about them all, and before the search ever began he showed how they are interrelated. In the documents he has left us, you will find the central position of the Coronation, the tension between Matriarchy and Patriarchy, the arcane discipline for transmitting holy books through the ages, the pattern of cycles and dispensations, the nature of the Mysteries, the great tradition of the Rekhabites or sectaries of the desert, the fertility rites and sacrifices of the New Year with the humiliation of the kind and the role of the substitute, etc.<sup>47</sup>

Some people may despise the symbolic and inner aspects of religion, but they are really no less significant than the literal and historic aspects. As the writer of the *Gospel of Phillip* says, “We enter by means of despised symbols.”<sup>48</sup> The symbols guide us through the transitions and passages in our own lives and provide a means to point beyond literal meanings to truths that cannot be expressed or apprehended in any other way. The myths of faith are not lies, but are metaphors—models that point beyond themselves, paradigms that define a community. The archetypal unity of world mythology invites humankind into a single community. I believe that ultimately, all myth points to Christ.

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<sup>45</sup> See Nibley, “The Hierocentric State,” in *The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* vol. 10 (Salt Lake City and Provo; Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991) 99-147.

<sup>46</sup> See Hugh W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992).

<sup>47</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 130.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City; Deseret Book, 1975), 286.

## Key Historical Events

Every community celebrates and re-enacts particular historical events which are crucial to its corporate identity and its vision of reality.<sup>49</sup>

Just as some people may despise the historical and literal aspects of religion, yet these too are no less significant than the symbolic and inner aspects. Think of the communities defined by celebrations of the Jewish Passover and Exodus, the Buddha's enlightenment, Mohammad's call, and the Passion of Christ. For Mormons, historical events such as the first vision, the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon, the Martyrdom of the Prophet, and the Mormon Exodus, all contribute to a sacred history that defines and binds the community. This kind of "key event" also may include direct experience that becomes crucial to personal identity and a personal vision of reality. Some people may see particular historical events as having mythic or symbolic significance, and subsequently record them in mythologized terms. This means that some events may be both historical and mythically significant.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, "What distinguished Mormonism," writes Richard Bushman, "was not so much the Gospel Mormons taught, which in many respects resembled other Christians' teachings, but what they believed had happened—to Joseph Smith, to Book of Mormon characters, and to Moses and Enoch [and later to the pioneers, during their archetypal Exodus to the west]. . . . The core of Mormon belief was a conviction about actual events. . . . Mormonism was history, not philosophy."<sup>51</sup>

## Moral Obligation

When does a sense of moral obligation become a truly religious experience? The essential "Do unto others as you would have them do to you"<sup>52</sup> makes good sense in any society that expects to thrive. Certainly one could feel far more secure in such an environment than in pecking orders that adopt Korihor's "Every man prospers according to his strength" and "whatsoever a man did was no crime."<sup>53</sup>

And thus . . . they did not send away any who were naked, or that were hungry, or that were athirst, or that were sick, or that had not been nourished; and they did not set their hearts upon riches; therefore they were liberal to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, whether out of the church or in the church, having no respect to persons as to those who stood in need. (Alma 1:30)

Social conditioning does influence the experience of conscience and moral obligation. However social influence cannot completely explain such feelings since people at times feel obligated to speak out against their own society, even at the risk of their lives, or even more, at risk of their soul. Indeed, it's difficult get much more heroic than Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, when he decides, against his social and religious training, to

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<sup>49</sup> Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> See especially Clifton H. Jolley, "The Martyrdom of Joseph Smith: An Archetypal Study," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44 (Autumn 1976): 329–50.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 187–88.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 7:12

<sup>53</sup> Alma 30:17.

help Jim. “All right, then I’ll go to hell.”<sup>54</sup> Many students of religion have been powerfully impressed on encountering a sense of moral obligation that seems to transcend social conditioning and survival instincts. Consider the following from the Book of Mormon:

Now when the Lamanites saw that their brethren would not flee from the sword, neither would they turn aside to the right hand or to the left, but that they would lie down and perish, and praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword— Now when the Lamanites saw this they did forbear from slaying them; and there were many whose hearts had swollen in them for those of their brethren who had fallen under the sword, for they repented of the things which they had done. And it came to pass that they threw down their weapons of war, and would not take them up again. (Alma 24:23–25)

Responses like this show moral obligation springing from feelings that are experienced as sacred illumination. Any moral act that springs from conscience in this way transforms morality from secular courtesy to sacred encounter with the holy.<sup>55</sup>

One final example of moral obligation deserves mention here because of its unusual complexity and intensity, as well as its vivid presence in the Book of Mormon. Sociologist Terrence Des Pres made a study of the experiences of individuals who have survived extreme horrors created by fellow humans.<sup>56</sup> A striking type of survival behavior that emerged from Nazi and Soviet death camps came as certain persons developed a will to “survive as witness” and to create a specific genre of survival literature. These Survivor-Witnesses can be described as follows:<sup>57</sup>

1. The will to remember and record anchors the survivor in the moral purpose of bearing witness, thus maintaining his own integrity in conscious contradiction of the savagery around him (Mormon 3:11–16; Moroni 9:6–25).
2. Witnessing of his experience is viewed as a duty, even a sacred task (Mormon 4:16; 8:14; 9:31).
3. It is instinctively felt, an involuntary outburst of feeling, born out of the horror that no one will be left (Mormon 6:17–22; 8:1–3).
4. The task is often carried out despite great risks; often in secret or by depositing the record in a secret archive (Mormon 6:6; 8:14).

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 273. In keeping with the recognition of opposition in all things, remember that there are also extraordinary circumstances when choosing becomes as heroic as refusing. See the discussions of the story of Nephi and Laban in Tod R. Harris, “The Journey of the Hero: Archetypes of Earthly Adventure and Spiritual Passage in 1 Nephi” in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 6/2 1997, 43-67 and Eugene England “Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon” in *Dialogue* 22/3 (Fall 1989):32-51.

<sup>55</sup> See Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, 110–11. Also Truman G. Madsen, “Conscience and Consciousness” in *The Highest In Us* (Salt Lake City; Bookcraft, 1978) 59-76.

<sup>56</sup> Lisa Bolin Hawkins and Gordon Thomasson, “I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee: Survivor-Witness in the Book of Mormon,” F.A.R.M.S. preliminary report, 1984. Their paper is based on Terrence Des Pres, “Survivors and the Will to Bear Witness,” *Social Research* 40 (1973): 668–69, and Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

<sup>57</sup> I am quoting the summary in the Hawkins–Thomasson paper, “I Only Am Escaped Alone to Tell Thee,” and am parenthetically adding references to appropriate passages from the experiences of the key figures of the final chapters of the Book of Mormon.

5. Survivors do not witness to inflict guilt or to rationalize their own survival. Their mission transcends guilt and their irrepressible urge to witness arises before any thought of guilt surfaces and at the initial stages of adjustment to extremity (Mormon 9:30–31; Moroni 9:3–6).
6. They speak simply to tell, to describe out of a common care for life and for the future, realizing that we all live in a realm of mutual sacrifice (Mormon 4:17–22; 8:37–40; Moroni 7:45–48).
7. Survival in this sense is a collective act; the survivor has pledged to see that the story is told (Mormon 4:16).
8. The survivors speak to the whole world, as a firsthand eyewitness, one whose words cannot be ignored (Mormon 4:16–22; 9:30).
9. They view themselves as a necessary connection between the past and the future (Mormon 4:17–22; 5:12; 7:1–10; 9:30).
10. They perceive that “out of horror . . . the truth will emerge and be made secure,” That “good and evil are only clear in retrospect,” for wisdom only comes at a terrible price. Thus their mission is to display the “objective conditions of evil” (Mormon 5:8–9; 9:31; Moroni 9–10).

## Reorientation and Reconciliation

Discussing reconciliation, Barbour writes, “The redemptive power of love is known in human life. Grace and redemption are not theological abstractions but experienced realities in which divisions within man and between man and his neighbor are healed.”<sup>58</sup>

Barbour’s here focuses on the experience of grace, when “people unable to accept themselves are somehow enabled to do so. Such reorientation may need to a new freedom from anxiety, an openness to new possibilities in one’s life, a greater sensitivity to other persons.”<sup>59</sup> Notice that Reorientation is a Thinking process, turning the mind, and Reconciliation is a Feeling process, turning the heart.

I’ve chosen two examples to illustrate the Mormon experience. One shows the reorientation and reconciliation as neat and sudden, and the other as the more typical experience, which includes periodic stumbles. The first comes from the Book of Mormon, from the center of Alma 36.52

And it came to pass that as I was thus *racked with torment*,

While I was *harrowed up* by the *memory* of my many *sins*,

behold, I *remembered* also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the *sins* of the world.

Now, as my mind caught hold upon this *thought*,

I cried within my heart:

O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy upon me,

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<sup>58</sup> Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 89.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 54.



who am in the gall of bitterness,  
and am encircled about  
by the everlasting chains of death.

And now, behold, when I *thought* this,

I could *remember* my *pains* no more;

yea, I was *harrowed* up by the *memory* of my *sins* no more.

And oh, what *joy*, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea *my soul* was filled with *joy*  
*as exceeding as was my pain!* (Alma 36:17–20)<sup>60</sup>

The next example comes from a writing often called Nephi's Psalm. I'm fond of this one because it shows reorientation and reconciliation as an ongoing process. Again, I've arranged the text to highlight poetic characteristics.<sup>61</sup>

Notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord,  
in showing me his great and marvelous works,  
my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am!  
Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh;  
my soul grieveth  
because of mine iniquities.  
I am encompassed about,  
because of the temptations and the sins which so easily beset me.  
And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth  
because of my sins;  
nevertheless, I know in whom I have trusted. . . .  
Oh then, if I have seen so great things,  
if the Lord in his condescension<sup>54</sup> unto the children of men  
hath visited men in so much mercy,  
why should my heart weep  
and my soul linger in the valley of sorrow,  
and my flesh waste away,  
and my strength slacken, because of my afflictions?  
And why should I yield to sin, because of my flesh?  
Yea, why should I give way to temptations,  
that the evil one have place in my heart  
to destroy my peace and afflict my soul?  
Why am I angry because of my enemy?  
Awake, my soul!  
No longer droop in sin.  
Rejoice, O my heart,  
and give place no more for the enemy of my soul.

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<sup>60</sup> Compare John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36" in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights You May Have Missed Before* (Provo; Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991).

<sup>61</sup> See a more sophisticated analysis in Stephen P. Sondrup, "The Psalm of Nephi: A Lyric Reading," *BYU Studies* 21/3 (1981): 357–72.

(2 Nephi 4:17–19, 26–28)

In a more recent treatment of these “core” religious experiences, Barbour adds remarks on the burden that religion carries towards providing believers with the courage and understanding to face “suffering, death, transiency,”<sup>62</sup> as well as the existence of natural and human evil. It strikes me that humankind also hungers for “reconciliation and reorientation” on these matters as well. Like Enos, after finding ourselves reconciled and reoriented before God, we may find our souls enlarging with concern for our neighbors, and then our adversaries. How do we orient ourselves towards the human condition? In the course of this essay, I have mentioned the well-known strengths of Mormonism in dealing with the problem of evil.<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere I have written on the strengths of the Latter-day Saint teachings regarding the afterlife.<sup>64</sup> Here, let me recognize the significance of the letters from Liberty Jail, D&C 121 and 122, and 2 Nephi 2 in defining the Mormon paradigm for reorienting believers towards, and reconciling them to, tragedy and death.

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment. . . . If the heavens gather blackness, . . . if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he? (D&C 121:7; 122:7–8)

Adam fell, that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy. (2 Nephi 2:25)

## Personal Dialogue

Drawing on works by Martin Buber, Ian Barbour suggests that an interpersonal relationship with Deity can be seen as “One understands oneself to be addressed through events. . . . A person replies through the speech of his life; he answers with his actions. Events in daily life can be interpreted as a dialogue with God.”<sup>65</sup> I immediately think of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*. I was tempted to defer to the beauty of that example, but I found a suitable Mormon counterpart from historian Richard Bushman.

I had been a branch president and Bishop, and was then president of the Boston Stake. Those offices required me to give blessings in the name of God and to seek solutions to difficult problems nearly every day. I usually felt entirely inadequate to the demands placed upon me and could not function at all without some measure of inspiration. What I did, the way I acted, my inner thoughts, were all intermingled with this effort to speak and act righteously for God. I could no longer entertain the possibility that God did not exist because I felt His power working through me. . . . Only when I thought of God as a person interested in me and asked for help as a

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<sup>62</sup> Ian G. Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science: The Gifford Lectures 1989–1991*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), 37.

<sup>63</sup> A good recent treatment is Kathleen Flake, “Evil’s Origins and Evil’s End in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis” in *Sunstone* 21/3 August 1998, 24–30.

<sup>64</sup> Kevin Christensen “Nigh Unto Death: NDE Research and the Book of Mormon” in *The Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 Spring 1993, 1–20.

<sup>65</sup> Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 55. Barbour cites Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*.

member of Christ's kingdom did idea and reality fit properly. Only that language properly honored the experiences I had day after day in my callings.<sup>66</sup>

May I add, that in my own life, I've adopted the metaphor of "stones lighting up" based on the account of the brother of Jared in the book of Ether 3, to describe occasions when external events seem to speak to me with all the clarity of the finger of the Lord touching stones, bringing light into darkness.

## **Summing Mormon Religious Experience**

Like it or not, people within the Mormon tradition can and do enjoy the full range of all the experiential and historic aspects of religion, along with access to rich symbolism. Each aspect becomes like a thread in a rope: awe at the creation, numinous and mystic encounter, moments of reorientation of the mind, and reconciliation of the heart, moral obligation, the likening of scriptures to ourselves, making ancient stories into personal biography, dipping into the common mythic experience of humankind, or any number of individual historic events that define and bind our community. Like it or not, when you look at the Mormon community and the Mormon faith at this level of core experience, all that defines religion anywhere exists here. Therefore, like it or not, at the outset, any assessment of the religious value of Mormonism should admit that here the fountain of living waters flows briskly. In assessing Mormonism, in dealing with questions raised about any particular thread in what can be a complex bundle of threads of varied strengths, some more significant than others, but no single thread carrying all the weight, keep in mind that the validity of Mormon spiritual life must be accepted as a given.

## **Appendix A: Answers to Prayer in LDS Scripture**

Here are scriptures describing answer to prayer through the Spirit. Contexts usually refer to study, pondering, inquiry, musing, fasting, and reflecting on the subject of the prayer before and during the experience described or promised. You should study the scriptures in context. These verses should spur introspection in assessing personal experience, and in considering the claims of others. (Even skeptics should define what they do not believe in.) They are also a strong test for the claims of Joseph Smith. Consider them in light of my model and note how well they all hang together. The Spirit is a promised witness to the obedient (Acts 5:32; John 7:17, 8:31–32).

### ***Answer to Prayer Emphasizing Thinking***

1. Guides to truth (that is, to what is real; Jacob 4:13; John 16:13; Ephesians 5:9–10).
2. Brings Christ's words to remembrance (John 14:26).
3. Eyes of understanding opened, that ye may know (Ephesians 1:16–19). "We began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention . . . revealed to us in a manner we never could attain to previously, nor ever before thought of." (Joseph Smith–History 1:74)

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Bushman, "My Belief," in *A Thoughtful Faith: Essays on Belief by Mormon Scholars*, ed. Philip L. Barlow (Centerville, UT: Cannon, 1986), 24.

4. “It is calm and serene; . . . a person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation: for instance when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas.”<sup>67</sup>
5. Expands your mind (Alma 32:34).
6. Is this not real? What is true is discernible. “Whatsoever makes manifest is light”—truth is things as they really are (Alma 32:35; Jacob 4:13; Ephesians 5:13; D&C 52:14–19) “A pattern in all things” (D&C 52:14).
7. Persuades to believe in Christ (Moroni 7:17).
8. Judge righteously (D&C 11:12; Matthew 7; Luke 11:35).
9. Enlightens your mind (D&C 11:13–14; Alma 32:34).
10. You will know and bear record (Ether 4:11–15).
11. “Still small voice,” “which whispereth through and pierceth all things often making my bones to quake,” “voice in mind,” “as of one crying in the wilderness . . . because you cannot see him” (Enos 1:10; 1 Kings 16:13; Isaiah 30:21; D&C 85:6; 88:66; see also 3 Nephi 11:37).
12. I know that ye believe them . . . by the manifestation of the spirit, great is my joy. He that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together (Alma 7:17; D&C 50:10–25). It can be a shared experience that is witnessed and not self-induced.
13. Experience a change of perception. “God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer a man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and . . . arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker and is caught up to dwell with Him. . . . This is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment: he must have been instructed . . . by proper degrees, until his mind is capable in some measure of comprehending the propriety, justice, equality, and consistency of the same.”<sup>68</sup>

### ***Answer to Prayer Emphasizing Feeling***

1. Heart burns within (Luke 24:32; Jeremiah 20:9; Psalms 39:2–3, 12; D&C 9).
2. Enlarges soul (Alma 32:27; Moroni 10:3–6); cf. Enos for enlargement of soul, first praying for self, then his people, then his enemies (Enos 1–17).
3. Word begins to be delicious to you (Alma 32:27); also tree of life (1 Nephi 8:10–16).
4. Word grows in you (Alma 32:28–43) “As that subject seems to occupy my mind, and press itself upon my feelings the strongest” (D&C 128:1). “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected upon it again and again” (Joseph Smith–History 1:12).

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<sup>67</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 151.

<sup>68</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 151.

5. Invites to do good (Moroni 7:13); fruit of spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (Galatians 5:22–25).
6. Invites to love God and to serve him (Moroni 7:13–19).
7. Peace to mind concerning the matter (D&C 6:14–15, 22–23).
8. Feel that it is right; stupor of thought if wrong (D&C 9:7–9).
9. Leads you to walk humbly (D&C 11:12).
10. Peace and power of spirit flow into you (D&C 111:8).
11. Spirit teaches you that ye must pray (2 Nephi 32:8–9).
12. Spirit fills with joy (D&C 11:13–14; Mosiah 4:3)
13. Peace of conscience (Mosiah 4:3).
14. Consolation, comfort, peace (Helaman 3:5; John 14:26–27)
15. Guilty take truth hard, for it cuts to the center (Acts 2:37; 1 Nephi 16:2; 2 Nephi 32:2). Some harden hearts against it; others repent (see Alma 14, 15, and 36).
16. Experience a change of heart (Alma 5:26). “The spirit of the Lord . . . will whisper peace and joy to their souls; it will take malice, hatred, strife and all evil from their hearts, . . . and their whole desire will be to do good, bring forth righteousness, and build up the kingdom of God.”<sup>69</sup> “Law . . . written in hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33). “New heart, new spirit within you” (Ezekiel 11:19).

### **Other Ways Prayers Are Answered.**

1. You receive help that you’ve prayed for (James 5:16–18). “The fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16).
2. Numinous Experience: awe and reverence, mystery and wonder, fascination and dread, a sense of otherness, confrontation and encounter; becoming aware of dependence, finitude, limitation, and contingency.<sup>70</sup>
3. Mystical Experience; sense of the unity of all things, joy, harmony, serenity, peace, loss of ego. “Eight central qualities of the mystical or transcendent experience” are:<sup>71</sup>
  - The “ego quality.” During the experience, the person may lose the sense of self, and feel absorbed in to something greater. (cf. He that ascended up on high, as also he descended below all things, in that he comprehended all things, that he might be in all and through all things, the light of truth; D&C 88:6; And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto Enoch, and told Enoch all the doings of the children of men; wherefore Enoch knew, and looked upon their wickedness, and their misery, and wept and stretched forth his arms, and his heart swelled wide as eternity; and his bowels yearned; and all eternity shook. Moses 7:41);
  - The “unifying quality.” During the experience, the person may feel that “everything is one.” (cf. He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all

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<sup>69</sup> Joseph Smith to Brigham Young in a dream; see S. Dilworth Young, “Gift of the Holy Ghost,” *Improvement Era* 71 (November 1968): 76. Also, Brigham Young, “An Olive Leaf: Tell the People to Keep the Spirit” in *Sunstone* 97 December 1994,

<sup>70</sup> Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 53–54; Smart, *Worldviews*, 62–72; cf. Moses 1; Joseph Smith–Testimony; Mosiah’s sermon; Alma’s conversion, etc.

<sup>71</sup> Mark E. Koltko, “Mysticism and Mormonism: An LDS Perspective on Transcendence and Higher Consciousness,” *Sunstone* 13/2 (April 1989): 14–19.

- things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever. D&C 88:41),
- The “inner and subjective quality.” The person may feel that things possess consciousness which we don’t usually regard as being conscious, like trees, or the earth itself. (cf. And it came to pass that Enoch looked upon the earth; and he heard a voice from the bowels thereof, saying: Wo, wo is me, the mother of men; I am pained, I am weary, because of the wickedness of my children. When shall I rest, and be cleansed from the filthiness which is gone forth out of me? When will my Creator sanctify me, that I may rest, and righteousness for a season abide upon my face? Moses 7:48)
  - The “temporal/spatial quality.” The person may experience time and space differently, and may even feel that the experience occurs outside the normal boundaries of space and time. (cf. And it came to pass, as the voice was still speaking, Moses cast his eyes and beheld the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the spirit of God. And he beheld also the inhabitants thereof, and there was not a soul which he beheld not; and he discerned them by the Spirit of God; and their numbers were great, even numberless as the sand upon the sea shore. And he beheld many lands; and each land was called earth, and there were inhabitants on the face thereof. Moses 1:27–29. Compare also Black Elk’s vision.);
  - The “noetic quality.” The person may feel that the experience is the source of true knowledge. (cf. And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because you know, for ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand. O then, is not this real? I say unto you, Yea, because it is light; and whatsoever is light, is good, because it is discernible, therefore ye must know that it is good; ...Alma 32:34-35 )
  - The “ineffable quality.” The experience may be impossible to express in normal language. (cf. 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 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 28:13-15. Which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the Spirit, and are not lawful for man 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 Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him, and purify themselves before him; D&C 76:116-117)
  - The “positive emotion quality.” (cf. He hath filled me with his love, even unto the consuming of my flesh. 2 Nephi 4:21. And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy. Alma 36:20-21).

- The “sacred quality.” The experience may seem to be intrinsically sacred. (But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes, for my natural eyes could not have beheld; for I should have withered and died in his presence; but his glory was upon me; and I beheld his face, for I was transfigured before him. Moses 1:11).
4. Dreams and Visions; compare Nephi and Lehi, Daniel, Peter, and John, etc.
  5. Personal Dialogue; you feel yourself addressed through events, and answer through your actions.<sup>72</sup>

## Appendix B: An Extract from a Comparison of Smith and Emerson

To illustrate the bridging of numinous and the mystical by Joseph Smith, compare these passages from the “Spirit” section in Emerson’s 1836 *Nature*<sup>73</sup> and some unified passages from an 1832 revelation (D&C 88) that Smith termed an “olive leaf which we have plucked from the Tree of Paradise.” I’ve broken the lines to facilitate comparisons, not just of the poetic prose, but of the conceptual content.

Notice that Emerson starts with mystic truths arising within a meditating human consciousness, and that Smith starts with the numinous divine reaching down to illuminate human consciousness.

### From Emerson:

But when, following the invisible steps of thought, we come to inquire, Whence is matter? and Whereto? many truths arise to us out of the recesses of consciousness.<sup>74</sup>

### From Smith

He that ascended up on high,  
as he also descended below all things,  
in that he comprehended all things,  
that he might be in all and through all things  
the light of truth;

Which truth shineth.  
This is the light of Christ.  
As also he is in the sun, and the light of the sun,  
and the power thereof by which it was made . . .  
And the light which shineth, which giveth you light,  
is through him who enlighteneth your eyes,  
which is the same light that quickeneth your  
understandings; (D&C 88:6–11)

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<sup>72</sup> Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 54-55.

<sup>73</sup> Bode and Cowley, *The Portable Emerson*, 42–43.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Both writers express an identical epiphanic awareness of a divine spirit interpenetrating and supporting the physical world. Both speak in an identical tone, differing only in that Emerson depicts the influence of the Spirit in terms of a Nature metaphor, and Smith does so in terms of a light metaphor.

**From Emerson:**

We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man;  
that the dread universal essence,  
which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power,  
but all in one, and each entirely,  
is that for which all this exists,  
and by which they are; that spirit creates;  
that behind nature, throughout nature spirit is present;  
one and not compound it does not act upon us from without,  
that is in space and time,  
but spiritually, or through ourselves.<sup>75</sup>

**From Smith:**

Which light proceedeth forth from the presence of God  
to fill the immensity of space -  
The light which is in all things,  
which giveth life to all things,  
which is the law by which all things are governed,  
even the power of God who sitteth upon his throne,  
who is in the bosom of eternity,  
and who is in the midst of all things. (D&C 88:12–13)

Regardless of the differing vehicles that carry their thoughts, and their different points of origin, both metaphors move towards the same awareness.

**From Emerson**

therefore that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being,  
does not build up nature around us,  
but puts it forth through us,  
as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and  
leaves through the pores of the old.<sup>76</sup>

**From Smith**

He comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him,  
and all things are round about him;  
and he is above all things,  
and in all things,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



and is through all things,  
and is round about all things;  
and all things are by him, and of him,  
even God, for ever and ever. (D&C 88:41)

#### From Emerson

As a plant upon the earth,  
so a man rests upon the bosom of God;  
he is nourished by unfailing fountains,  
and draws at his need inexhaustible power . . .  
we learn that man has access to  
the entire mind of the Creator,  
is himself the creator in the finite.<sup>77</sup>

#### From Smith

And if your eye be single to my glory,  
your whole bodies shall be filled with light,  
and there shall be no darkness in you;  
and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth  
all things. (D&C 88:67)

Here Smith's production embraces the mystical experience of union and identity with the divine, and sounds very close to Emerson. However, the complete text of the "Olive Leaf" includes much that is numinous in tone and eschatological in intent, totally alien to Emerson's thought. Nevertheless, this bridging to mystic experience by Smith may account for striking parallels that appear in the key teachings of both men, just as the more numinous aspects of Smith's revelations can account (in part) for the many differences.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.