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**“In the Marrow of Their Bones”:
The Latter-day Saint Experience of Religion as Identity**

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1. Introduction and Overview

Thank you, Elizabeth, for that kind introduction.

I’ve heard about this conference for years, but I’ve never been privileged to attend. I’m personally thankful for all those at BYU’s International Center for Law and Religion Studies who organized this conference and for their gracious invitation to speak to you. This is a real honor for me.

I say that sincerely, because as I’ve looked over the conference schedule I’ve been amazed to see so many prominent academics, thinkers, writers, and advocates whose academic and professional credentials humble my own. This is truly a high-powered gathering. I also acknowledge generous and important assistance with the thinking and presentation of these remarks.

On behalf of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I would like to thank those of the many different faith traditions who have come—sometimes from great distances—to participate in this vitally important discussion about religious freedom; religious freedom is an issue for people of *all* faiths. But I also want to express gratitude for those who are here and yet do *not* profess *any* religious belief or consider themselves believers. At times, the faith of the religious may seem to you like something inexplicable and irrational. Thank you for caring enough to come anyway—to share your views and learn more about religious freedom and why it is so important to so many of us.

I speak today about the role of religion and religious freedom from a unique perspective, that of a believing member and leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also speak as one whose family—on my father’s side—has been in the Church, and been defined by it, for generations—since its earliest days in the first half of the 19th century. And yet, I can confidently say that my remarks reflect the sentiments of millions of others who have joined the Church more recently but whose identities have been just as profoundly shaped by our shared beliefs and by a common sacred history. In speaking about experiences from my own faith tradition, I, of course, recognize that every faith community has its own sacred stories too.

A few years ago, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland—a member of the Church’s Quorum of the Twelve Apostles—spoke about impoverished 19th-century Mormon handcart pioneers who walked the dusty or freezing 1,300-mile 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,” Elder Holland observed. “They didn’t do it for a social activity; 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

¹ Jeffrey R. Holland, “Roundtable Discussion,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, Feb. 9, 2008, 28; italics added.

With that in mind, I’ve entitled my remarks “‘In the Marrow of Their Bones’: The Latter-day Saint Experience of Religion as Identity.”

2. A World of Freedom, the Search for Identity

Modern life has afforded us enormous freedom. In many ways, people are now freer than ever to choose the life they want. The vast majority of Americans are wealthy by any historical standard. With rare exception, we have been almost totally liberated from the extreme poverty that was experienced throughout nearly all of human history and that in many other areas of the world still exists today. We have health care that not even kings and queens could’ve dreamed of a century ago, with many of our biggest health problems today coming from eating too much rather than from history’s omnipresent linked challenges, hunger and starvation. Most of us have not known the pains of war and deprivation. We live in a time of relative peace and tremendous plenty. Nearly everyone in the United States can get an education, and most who do will be rewarded for their efforts with jobs that will make them comparatively wealthy. We have endless gadgets and gizmos and thousands of hours of entertainment on demand. Most of us carry phones that provide instant access to more information than we could consume in a lifetime.

More deeply, 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 accommodate people’s identities.

3. Failure of Secular Elites to Understand Religion as a Primary Source of Identity

But I think that 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. Too often 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 too often they even see religion itself—not only particular beliefs to which they object, but 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 are increasingly willing to use social and legal forces to pressure people to change 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 tens of millions of Americans faith and religious conviction are the most powerful and defining sources of personal and family identity in their lives. To borrow from Elder Holland again, 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.

4. The Fateful Choice to Believe

Now let me be very clear; I am not suggesting for a moment that *all* secular elites hold these views. I feel confident that nonbelievers attending this conference don't hold these views, because if they did they almost certainly wouldn't be here. But I *am* suggesting that many secular people in positions of influence—be it government, academia, or 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. Boyd K. Packer, late president of the Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, once asked an atheist, “[Do] you know what salt tastes 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 recently argued: “[T]here 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 Yankees fan or even whether to become 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 deeply influences 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

² Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1983.

³ Brian Leiter, *Why Tolerate Religion?* (2012), 63.

the meanings 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 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 3:5). There are similar concepts in other faith traditions.

And it is also no wonder that something this personally powerful and defining cannot be confined to the private portions of believers’ lives. Yet, as Washington Post columnist Christine Emba 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 hid from the public’s view, society also must recognize the same for religious identity. One cannot check religious identity at the church or synagogue exit or at the door of one’s home, any more than one can check their race or ethnicity. Religious identity cannot be compartmentalized and stuffed into a box labeled “private.”

My point is that 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 Supreme Court earlier this month, 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.

⁴ “The Supreme Court Wasn’t Ready to Decide on the Wedding Cake. Neither Are We,” *The Washington Post*, Jun. 5, 2018.

⁵ *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colo. Civil Rights Commission*, No. 16-111 (2018), slip op. at 14.

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.

5. **“In the Marrow of Their Bones”: The Latter-day Saint Experience of Religion as Identity**

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 it 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 D&C 97:21; Moses 7:18).

Their faith was indeed, as Elder Holland put it, “in the marrow of their bones.” Or as Brigham Young said in a related context, it was “the fire of the covenant” that early Mormons 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 “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

Jeremiah spoke of the word of God being like “a burning fire shut up in my bones” (Jeremiah 20:9). Or, as Sister Linda K. Burton, former General President of the Church’s international organization for women, the Relief Society, put it, our faith “is *written in our hearts!*”⁸

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 more 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 1,300-mile 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 forbearers was forged in the crucible of those terrible trials. I cannot separate who I am from the faith that inspired those pioneer

⁶ *Journal History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 28 Sept. 1846, 5.

⁷ Jeffrey R. Holland, “Roundtable Discussion,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, Feb. 9, 2008, 28.

⁸ Linda K. Burton, “Is Faith in the Atonement of Jesus Christ Written in Our Hearts?” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2012, 112.

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. Pardon the pun—both stories have musical notes.

As I said earlier, the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints prominently includes the emigration westward from Nauvoo, Illinois, on the eastern banks of the Mississippi River, to the present Salt Lake Valley. Under the direction of Brigham Young, between 60,000 to 70,000 Church members migrated west about 1,300 miles. Some traveled by horseback or in covered wagons. Others walked or were carried by their parents. About 3,000 of those pioneers traveled with handcarts, which were basically large wooden boxes with two wheels similar to those found on covered wagons. Handcarts had space for a very few possessions and a small child or two. The pioneers’ migration west commenced in about 1847 and continued through 1868 and was comprised of about 250 separate companies or groups 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 in the company of other prominent Church members 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. 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, which was one of the first, about three months—90 days—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 entitled “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 of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Its stirring text includes these words:

Come, come, ye Saints, no toil nor labor fear;
But with joy wend your way.
Though hard to you this journey may appear,
Grace shall be as your day.
‘Tis better far for us to strive
Our useless cares from us to drive,
Do this, and joy your hearts will swell—
All is well! All is well!

We’ll find the place which God for us prepared,
Far away in the West,
Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid;
There the Saints will be blessed.
We’ll make the air with music ring,
Shout praises to our God and King;

Above the rest these words we'll tell—
All is well! All is well!

And should we die before our journey's through,
Happy day! All is well!
We then are free from toil and sorrow, too;
With the just we shall dwell!
But if our lives are spared again
To see the Saints their rest obtain,
Oh, how we'll make this chorus swell—
All is well! All is well!

The second pioneer account I will share is about Emma Jane Dixon, who was born the seventh of nine children in 1855 in Kirtland, Ohio, which in an earlier and brief season had been the headquarters of the Church. In her early childhood, Emma's family moved to St. Louis where her father obtained temporary employment building covered wagons for groups of pioneers who were beginning the trek west to the Salt Lake Valley. Too poor to buy a wagon for their own large family when they began the trek, Emma's father and mother moved their family across the plains by handcart and settled in Payson, Utah, about 20 miles southwest of BYU. Emma walked the entire way from St. Louis to Payson barefoot. She was six years old.

During the journey, Emma became ill and lost her hearing entirely and permanently. Emma 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 she had just turned 19, she married Samuel Douglass. Emma bore and raised 11 children, the eldest of whom was my great-grandmother, who was named Mary. Mary married John Jasper McClellan, who became the chief Tabernacle organist and accompanist for the famed Tabernacle Choir. Emma died in Payson at age 87 shortly after the end of World War II. She never heard her husband speak, never heard any of her 11 children speak, never heard her grandchildren and 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 Mormon 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 forbearers. 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 of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 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.

6. How Religious Identity and Experience Shape the LDS Approach to Religious Freedom

Finally, I want to touch briefly on how the unique religious identity and experience of the Latter-day Saints shapes the Church’s approach to religious freedom. While the Church shares with all faith communities a desire to strengthen religious liberty, in some respects our approach differs from that of other faiths.

A history of fierce persecution against members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 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 denying 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 LGBT rights in areas such as employment and housing. That support was pivotal to the passage of well-known 2015 Utah legislation, the so-called “Utah Compromise,” which protected both LGBT rights and religious freedom.

Also of vital importance to the Church’s religious freedom efforts is what might be called the “right to gather.” Much of the LDS 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 doctrines, sacraments, and covenants. These religious institutions must have very 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.

One small step out from this core of maximal religious freedom, but still extremely important, is the protection of religious schools like Brigham Young University, including its religious conduct standards for admission and continuing enrollment. The importance of such schools to the perpetuation of the faith among the next generation can hardly be overstated. There, tens of thousands of young Church members gather to obtain a first-rate education and associate with—and often marry!—other LDS youth who share the same religious convictions, all in an environment shaped by Church teachings and ideals. The same occurs with religious schools in

other faith communities. They too are places of religious gathering for many thousands of believers and thus, in our view, should receive strong legal protections to ensure that they can pursue their religious mission.

By contrast, the Church’s religious freedom efforts tend to focus relatively less on purely commercial interests, where government has heavily regulated for over a century and where public expectations of equal access are greater and more legitimate. The larger and less personally intimate the business, the more legitimate are the government’s interests in regulating it for the protection of the community. That is not to say government should be able to force business owners to leave their religion at home. There are numerous ways faith can be expressed in the business context. In-N-Out Burger’s decision to print John 3:16 on the bottom of its soda cups is no business of the state. 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 Supreme Court just held, official bigotry against religious business owners, including those with traditional beliefs about marriage and sexuality, has no place in our nation. 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.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, religion remains one of the great sources of human identity and meaning for tens of millions of Americans—and countless millions more worldwide. The Latter-day Saint experience is but one powerful illustration of that reality; there are many similar examples from other faith traditions. I believe that 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, as the recent Masterpiece Cakeshop case makes clear. We cannot escape what Elder Lance B. Wickman, the Church’s general counsel, has called “the hard work of citizenship”—the work of finding common ground and generous, even loving, accommodations for those whose beliefs, personal needs, and lives are different than 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 Americans of good will—citizens of a great nation that over time found a way to tolerate and even embrace my people, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—have big enough hearts, broad enough minds, and strong enough wills to forge 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. Thank you.