Mormon Transhumanist Presentation: Jay Griffith | Oct 13, 2024

(Go here for a primer on Mormon Transhumanism)

Buen Camino!

Twelve days ago my wife, Jane, and I entered our home after 34 days of walking the Camino de Santiago, or way of Saint James. We began in Saint Jean on the French side of the Pyrenees and ended our walk in Santiago Spain, nearly to the Atlantic. This is an east-to-west route across northern Spain.

About the middle of our walk, I got a text from Steve about presenting tonight. Hopefully, you can forgive me if this is less than a completely coherent discussion—at least from my end. I just finished putting these thoughts on paper right before I drove here.

And please know that I know I'm NOT the smartest person in this room. If you don't believe me now, you soon will.

I appreciate Stephen's invitation to be with you. It has been several years since I've thought about Mormon Transhumanism.

9 years ago I had Lincoln Cannon, co-founder of MTA, lead a discussion about Mormon Transhumanism for my monthly FaithAgain discussion group.

Not long after I helped Sarah Collet of A Thoughtful Faith, do a podcast with him regarding the topic. And a few years back I had co-founder, Carl Youngblood, lead a discussion for my group touching on its themes.

My head is naturally inclined to Mormon Transhumanism. But my heart leans towards mysticism, which is constantly in conversation—sometimes argument—with my more rational side.

So that I have a better lay of the land—or landmines—are there any here who aren't familiar with the LDS Faith? I ask this because I want to be sensitive to those who may not be or don't subscribe to it.

Those who attend my monthly ThinkAgain-FaithAgain group range from always-been atheists to those who are believing active members of the LDS faith. And everything in between. All are welcome and respectful and we all learn from each other.

If you are interested in my day-to-day discoveries along the Camino you can go to my Instagram @jaygriffithiv.

I want to first describe a little of what the Camino de Santigo is about and then share some ideas that came to me in relationship to that experience. An experience that I am still processing. Then I'll have a question for you to discuss.

In 2023, 446,000 Compostelas were issued. These are official personalized certificates indicating the pilgrim completed at least the last kilometers of one of several routes of the Camino. Jane and I wanted a more authentic and meaningful experience so we did the most famous and traditional route, the Camino Francis—800 kilometers or 500 miles. Not everyone who walks these routes registers at a pilgrim's office so the total number of participants is larger.

We averaged between 12 and 18 miles a day. It depended on the distance to the next village or city where we would stay. At the small and crowded pilgrims office in Saint Jean we received our Pilgrim Credential. This is a long accordion fold booklet that you get stamped in

alburgues, churchs, bar/cafes, or cathedrals to indicate that you have walked the entire path. It felt a little like a game for adults. But it's an old game, having been instituted in the 13th century to keep people honest.

At the end of our daily walk we would stay in a hostel or alburgue. This is an interesting experience. It was probably one of the most challenging things for Jane, who has legitimate OCD. If going on this adventure had been my idea, she may have divorced me before we even got home. But she was a trooper and did remarkably well.

Most of these alburgues house and sometimes feed anywhere from 20 to 200 or more pilgrims a day. The bunk beds can seem to go on forever in the large ones. The city municipals and Catholic-run alburgues are the largest and often the cheapest—8-9 euros. One delightful alburgue we stayed in was a donativo—by donation only. Each alburgue and host offers a different flavor, even though loud snoring is consistent. More than half the time, multi-occupant showers and bathrooms are unisex.

At the alburgues, in the cafe/bars, churches, cathedrals, and especially during the long walks, opportunities to learn about people and hear their stories abound as well as opportunities to serve and be served each day.

And this is where most of the magic happens. This is why some people we met had done the Camino multiple times. Zora, a sixty something trans woman of 4 years had already done it 6 times when we met her. I just received a text a couple of days ago from a forty-year-old Fin we walked with who just got home and said he is already planning his next Camino.

Every day nearly everyone greets each other with "Buen Camino"—wishing them "a good way" or "a good life." Despite the

multitude of languages and cultures, this is a universal encouraging exchange that always felt sincerely expressed.

Given the cultural differences and the historical and current animosities between countries and even religions, it is remarkable to me that this ancient Catholic pilgrimage has such a unifying, humanizing, and spiritually connecting effect—at least for most.

This constant intimate sharing of time, space, and purpose has created an experience that challenges these modern pilgrims physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. Many are in life transitions. My wife just retired earlier this spring.

Many younger folk in their 30's are seeking a purpose or something more meaningful in their lives than what they've experienced. Some middle-aged and older pilgrims have had serious loss in their lives and are working through their grief. And some, like Zora, simply thrive on the abundant and beautiful sociality of the experience.

All these positive outcomes are built from many centuries of Catholic beliefs and practices stratified with good intentions as well as mixed and even unsavory motives. Power, wealth, and politics were at play at times as the route created opportunities for commercial gain and territory. Early on, Catholic indulgences came on the scene, creating a way for people to receive forgiveness of sins to avoid spending time in purgatory in the next life. The wealthy could pay others to vicariously walk for them. Pilgrims today, who walk to Santiago, can still receive official indulgences for themselves or those who are deceased. However, as far as I can tell, it no longer requires the exchange of money.

The foundation of the Camino de Santiago is built on a belief in Jesus Christ as God and a legend regarding his Apostle James. Suffice it to say there would be no Camino without these convictions.

The story of Saint/apostle James goes like this: After Jesus ascended, James preached on the Iberian peninsula until he was beheaded by Herod Agrippa. After his martyrdom, Saint James's followers carried his body to the coast and put it into a stone boat. The boat was guided by angels and carried by the wind to Northern Spain at Padrón, near Finisterre. Finisterre means end of the earth.

In 814 CE, a hermit living in that part of Galicia had a vision of a field of stars leading him to an ancient tomb. He reported his experience to the local bishop who declared the remains to be those of Santiago (Saint James) and two of his followers. The bishop then reported the finding to the King of Asturias, who then declared Santiago the patron saint of what would eventually become Spain.

Not many years later a church, monastery, and small village named Campus de Ia Stella (Field of Stars or Compostela) were established there. As news of the discovery of the bones of the apostle James spread, pilgrims were drawn to come and be near them. Miracles came to be attributed to the site. The miracles encouraged more pilgrims and the pilgrimage elicited more miracles. All this was encouraged by the Archbishop of Galicia and cathedral authorities interested in promoting Santiago Campus de Ia Stella as a pilgrimage destination.

The Camino de Santiago's existence still depends on the Catholic church's history, beliefs, and institutional and member/support. The Camino is not a money-making venture. It does help many small villages survive as well as add significantly to the bottom line of merchants, cafes, and bars in large cities. And every village or city has at least one church or cathedral that not only points people to higher hopes and values but also creates community and support for those in need.

Despite the hard-to-believe storyline (and Latter-Day Saints should be able to empathize with this) the Camino and the Catholic institution

and its members have created a remarkable vehicle for spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical flourishing. And not just for believers but also for the atheist, heretic, and non-Christian religions.

So with that introduction, how is the Camino path and its history like LDS history and its covenant path? And what relationship might the Camino have with Mormon transhumanism?

COMMENTS

LDS historian and writer Matt Bowmen noted a couple of years ago regarding the covenant path:

BYU professor Stephen Robinson once told a story about his wife, Janet, who, at one point in their marriage, ceased her church service. When Robinson asked what was wrong, Janet said, "I can't do it anymore. I can't lift it. I can't get up at 5:30 in the morning and bake bread and sew clothes and help my kids with their homework and do my own homework and do my Relief Society stuff and get my genealogy done and write the congressman and go to the PTA meetings and write the missionaries. … I cannot keep all the commandments all the time."

Many religious systems have similar systems. (to the LDS covenant path) Muslim children begin fasting during the holy month of Ramadan in puberty. After their bar or bat mitzvahs, held usually at age 13, Jewish children are formally held responsible for understanding the law. All of this is, of course, not unlike how Latter-day Saints understand baptism or the temple endowment. But a rite of passage is as much about growth and an altered place in the world as it is about taking on obligations. One might think of covenants less as a mandate to do something and more as a new way to conceive of one's relationship with the divine.

Another analogous system might be the Roman Catholic "sacramental economy." Like covenant path, it is a phrase with roots in scripture. The Apostle Paul uses the word "economy" to describe God's management of his relationships with humans. Roman Catholics speak of sacraments as covenants, and covenants less as forms of obligation than as varying ways of relating to other people and to God. The sacraments are routes to different sorts of spiritual fulfillment, avenues to distinct qualities of grace, not a set of rods to measure yourself against or a set of tasks to accomplish.

Now I want to read you something more directly related to Transhumanism and get your thoughts:

On Apr 7, 2023, Sahir Maharaj wrote an article called: Dawn of a New Humanity: AGI and Transhumanism, The Intersection of Technology and Human Potential

Imagine that you put on a sleek, shiny headset when you wake up in the morning rather than getting out of bed. You simply blink, and your virtual office is right there before your eyes. Your physical body stays in the comfort of your bed while you work, while your mind effortlessly communicates with your coworkers in real-time. This isn't science fiction; it's the near future. A future in which transhumanism and artificial general intelligence (AGI) coexist, forever changing the course of human evolution.

It's crucial that we understand the implications of AGI and transhumanism as we delve further into these fields. AGI describes machines that have intelligence comparable to that of humans and are capable of carrying out any intellectual task. On the other hand, transhumanism is a movement that supports improving human abilities through cutting-edge technology, eventually leading to a post-human

society. Whether AGI will be the key that unlocks the door to transhumanism is the question on everyone's mind.

This reminds me of how social media had been originally conceived and then perceived as a completely positive technology that would bring people closer in relationship and wellbeing. The metadata has been suggesting otherwise.

I remember my 7th grade science teacher had an image of what some scientists thought humans would look like in the future. We looked like the common alien with a large head and weak little body.

Now we know that exercising our bodies, moving in nature, and putting our bodies and minds in challenging and uncomfortable situations is actually good for our wellbeing and for human flourishing.

That being the case, how is off-loading more of the repetitive and arduous tasks of thinking and problem-solving to AIG helpful and/or hurtful? What will we use this newly captured brain-processing time for? Virtual realities? Endless Entertainment? Unhelpful rabbit holes? Doom scrolling? More consumption? Political religiousness? Our record has not been great so far.

THOUGHTS?

(Creative and humanitarian pursuits were mentioned on the positive side.)

I'd like to close with some thoughts spurred by the Camino and a series of interviews by Bill Moyers with Joseph Campbell about the Power of Myth. You likely know that Campbell's work was credited by George Lucas for influencing his Star Wars saga. His book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces is well known and respected.

At one point Bill Moyers clarifies what Campbell has just said by asking "so it is not the destination that counts, but the journey?" Joseph replies: "Yes."

This got me reflecting again on a thought that had only briefly crossed my mind several years ago: In whatever ideological end we choose to believe in and promote, I think we have to be cautious not to let that destination become an idol.

As an active Latter-Day Saint who deeply believes in the simple truths of Jesus, I have to be careful not to make my savior my idol. Not to idolize him. For if I do, I am no longer on the path or camino of becoming like him.

If Jesus is as he said—the way, the truth, and the life—those are not endpoints, destinations, or achievements. They are all journeys—paths—ways of being. The way of Jesus as well as the Camino de Santiago is movement through the past, present, and future at any given moment.

Like the Camino that I experienced, truths, beauty, wisdom, divine connection and important relationships arise as we walk and humbly receive the abundant gifts we are presented with. Gifts such as:

Lucious landscapes and expressive ancient architecture; jarring annoying noise walking next to highways; bleak stretches, and more subdued walks along less interesting canvases.

Gratitude for the precious trees and bushes planted along The Way to give pilgrims shade. Trees that those who planted never enjoyed.

Slippery, rocky, steep downhills in the rain and sticky mud-heavy sandals struggling to climb steep uphills.

The constantly changing suite of strangers becoming friends that you walk, talk, sleep, shower, and eat with. And the frustration and joy of communicating across many languages.

The signs or lack of signs to indicate The Way. The anxiety when you aren't sure and the relief when you spot the next yellow arrow or clamshell symbol.

Fresh squeezed orange juice when thirsty—or anytime. Heaven on earth!

The small personal house gardens as well as the industrial fields. The olive, almond, and grape orchards with their rhythmic rows of life-giving trees and vines.

The daily loud and sonorous sound of cathedral bells calling. The sometimes tinkling sound of sheep bells countered by the deeper tones of cow bells.

Stopping and watching a sheep herder guide his dog to gather and move his sheep.

To many stretches of enduring the stench of cow and sheep shit that is hard to shake off.

Noticing a spider and her web glittering at first light.

A happy selfie with newly made well-traveled friends.

Passing through dying villages and villagers with some villages surviving only because they provide services so the pilgrims can survive.

Surprised delight in entering a village during a festival filled with loving communal connecting pomp and circumstance;

The humble worn tiny churches offering warm refuge and often a blessing. The grand ostentatious cold cathedrals that create awe at the immense capital, many artisans, and much time required to create;

The Masses attended but not understood. The personal blessings from Priests and nuns received as moving chants felt deeply in the heart but not understood in the head.

The many devout Catholics who cross themselves and kneel and pray at benches made for kneeling and praying.

The path smooth, the path treacherous, thunderstorms and sunshine, frost on grass, wet clothes, numb fingers and shivers—all in the same day on multiple days.

Backpacks heavy and backs that hurt. Blisters and broken sandals. Body aches and weariness. Illnesses that come and stay and then go.

Being witness to how the Camino takes and the Camino gives: How some miracles can't be coincidences.

Prayers expressed repeatedly in your heart for those who you know are hurting or hoping.

Experiencing sacred moments of awe as you deeply connect with strangers who let you into their life, their truths, their way—their divinity—seeing and hearing god manifest.

The religious icons in paint and stone expressed in so many creative ways. Icons of Saint James; Mary, mother of Jesus; Mother Mary cradling baby Jesus; Mother Mary cradling her crucified son; Jesus suffering on the cross; and Jesus's apostles.

The calm shell as symbol for the Camino creatively manifest in so many ways.

The realization of how many hundreds of thousands of pilgrims have walked much of this same path for nearly nineteen hundred years. How much more difficult it would have been until the last 30 years. To reach back further and contemplate walking on ancient Roman roads.

To rarely think of home, work, news, days of the week, or past preoccupations. To simply rise and walk each day, being curious, present, prayerful, and receptive to rich relationships.

To unknowingly be God's hands and heart as you attend to others in that shared desire to be fully awake walking to Santiago, and for some even to Finisterre—the end of the earth. Or maybe the beginning of heaven.

This is life. This is the life I believe Jesus is pointing us to. Jesus the Christ was very attentive to making life better for people in the present. Mormon Transhumanism feels like it is oriented around that idea. But as Mormon transhumanists, we may want to be cautious about being so overly preoccupied with a godlike future destination that we miss The Way The Truth and The Life in the present. This can be a similar mistake as those who have been obsessed with the second coming of Christ. Being overly focused on getting good real estate in heaven can be just as bad. This apocalyptic coming of Christ has ramped up again fed by climate change, political divisions, economic distress, and the real worry of a World War III erupting.

So if Mormon transhumanism is to have efficacy it has to be deeply embedded in the physical evolution of the here and now. Mormon scripture and prophets suggest that we are eternal as God, that we are meant to be gods, and that those who have become gods are still becoming even more godly.

Science and our sacred texts strongly suggest that the messy way of evolution is how we get there. That means there will be false starts, dead ends, and a lot of painful loss along the way. Fortunately, energy and matter are never lost, just transformed.

Staying in active relationship with our physical bodies, seeking mental challenges, having lots of in-person pro-social interactions within communities of families, neighborhoods, churches, and larger institutions, and living in curiosity and spiritual wonder seem to be critical for our continued human/transhuman/divine advancement.

Becoming more embodied, not less embodied. Spending more time and energy working within our bodies for enlightenment rather than seeing them as a hindrance. This is what the Camino does for people as it unites them in kindness and wonder walking on a common path with a mutually challenging destination. And it works even when the purpose for walking is different from pilgrim to pilgrim.

Absence of evidence is not evidence. But so far in our space and planet exploration, we are not finding any other machines or technology—at least in the forms we typically associate with those words. The most advanced and complex technology in the universe that we've discovered so far is all in our head—our brains. And maybe more complex and mystical is the consciousness or spirit that appears to accompany our brains.

One final question: Is becoming post-human really the destination? Did Jesus cease to be human? Or did he become even more human? Maybe becoming fully human in this life what heaven is all about?

Thoughts?