

“The World Is Charged with the Grandeur of God”: A Mandate for Eternal Education

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My dear fellow students seeking learning, even by study and also by faith: I salute you in this noble effort. I consider myself doubly blessed to be permitted to serve some of you as a faculty mentor, others as a campus bishop. My life and that of my family is unmeasurably richer because of our associations with BYU students, whom Linda and I (sort of as doting surrogate parents) consider to be the brightest, the sweetest, the most faithful, the most diligent, the most talented, and the most beautiful young people ever assembled in one place in the history of the world. (I admit to a slight bias about this, but only a slight one!)

Consequently I view the invitation to speak to you today not as a chore or as a chance to make points with the administration, but as a simple opportunity to share with you something I hope will help you in your educational and spiritual endeavors here at BYU and throughout your life.

And though it sounds a bit simplistic to state it in the following way, I wish to discuss with you for a few minutes today whether the world is good or evil; that is, whether there is some evil in a world that is essentially good (and potentially all good) or whether the

world is inherently and essentially (or ontologically) evil, albeit with some good to be found in it. (I’ve already said *you* were good!) It’s a bit like asking the old question about whether the glass is half full or half empty, or whether zebras are black with white stripes or white with black stripes.

This question came into focus for me almost exactly one year ago when my son Jeremy and I were traveling from Avignon in the south of France to Rome, and we made the mistake of taking a night train. When we arrived in Rome we realized that an American gentleman with whom we had been sharing a train compartment had stolen several hundred dollars from Jeremy during the night.

And so as we walked around the Eternal City, viewing the marvels of classical and Renaissance Rome, this issue occupied our thoughts and conversation a bit. For a few days Jeremy strongly suspected that the world and the people in it were essentially evil and

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that his earlier experiences with good people and good things had just been exceptions that prove the rule. (Of course I don't want to trivialize the problem of evil. After our visits to Mauthausen, the Reichstag in Berlin, and seeing the aftermath of Communism in East Germany, we know there is plenty of real evil in the world, not just petty thievery.)

Gradually, however, as we encountered more and more wonderful people and more and more evidence of the existence of wonderful people in earlier generations, Jeremy decided—I hope permanently—that the world is essentially good but that there's a whopping amount of evil in it and you have to be just a little bit careful about where you leave your valuables! (Near the end of my talk I will describe one of the high points of our trip, a performance in London of Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, which permanently convinced me, at least, that the glass is half full.)

But first I wish to explain why this simple theological paradigm—good world with some bad versus bad world with possibly some good—has such important educational-psychological implications. In an Honors history of civilization course that I team-teach with Professor Wilfred Griggs of the Department of Ancient Scripture, we almost never fail to have students raise this issue, though with a slightly different twist.

This usually occurs after we have been engaged in a study of some texts or artifacts that seem particularly similar to—and yet somehow quite different from—familiar LDS ideas. By their questions, students let us know that they have been moved to the edge of their comfort zone, that the paradigms by which they had been operating do not adequately accept these new ideas.

The last time I recall this happening, for example, was just last year when we had been discussing ancient myths about the death and dismemberment of the god. From the Greek myths about Ouranos and Orpheus to the

Egyptian myths about Isis and Osiris, there seems to be a consistent pattern whereby the creative, life-giving, good god is overcome by his evil antagonist, who represents death, chaos, and destruction. The evil force kills the god, then cuts up his body into little pieces and scatters them all about in the hope that he will remain dead and be utterly destroyed.

But instead of this having the desired effect, to the surprise and frustration of the evil one, everyone and everything in the places where the pieces of the god are placed become godlike themselves: everyone and everything takes on his life-giving and life-affirming essence. Then the god himself is gathered back into a complete whole—in the case of Osiris with the help of his eternal companion the goddess Isis—and resurrected, whereupon he then gathers his myriad sons and daughters, who have sprung up from each bit of his body, into his eternal presence.

Our students' instincts to divide things into "this is the gospel, that is the world, hence not the gospel" are at first quite strong (and it does not help when we refer to these stories as myths, which means "falsehood" to most people, though to scholars it means "powerful manner of expressing truth"). But after some hesitation one or another of our students usually gets up the courage to observe that these myths seem similar to our belief in the sacrament, in which the bread representing the body of God is ritualistically broken up, scattered out, and literally planted within members of the kingdom, whereupon they take upon themselves his essence and renew the covenant by which they have become his sons and daughters.

Eventually, students mention that these myths also seem similar to our belief in a literal resurrection of the broken body of Christ and in the gathering of all those who have become his sons and daughters, all of which thwart the plans of the evil one: rather than destroying

goodness, evil has inadvertently helped multiply it.

At times like these, students often ask questions like the following: “By the way . . . I’ve been wondering . . . How come these people believed things that are so similar to what we believe?” The unstated concern seems to be that these are texts not contained in our authorized canon, so how can they contain so much truth?

At least one student, usually a returned missionary, will attempt to solve the problem by stating categorically: “Well, they’re just apostate imitations of the truth (probably inspired by the devil!).” This seems to preserve for that student, for the moment at least, the distinction between “us” and the “world.” And his attitude is understandable: he has been careful to shun evil and to embrace good, and he has spent two years proclaiming to the “world” that there is a better way.

Another way of stating this is that we notice not a few of our students, missionaries and non-missionaries, have been quite concerned—sometimes subconsciously—about what things are “safe” to deal with at the university. Many came here with familial warnings ringing in their ears not to let university learning corrupt them. And of course their family members are right: we must learn to distinguish good from evil, joy from misery, bitter from sweet, as Father Lehi taught his son Jacob: “It must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). And there is much evil in the world that deserves to be avoided like the plague—that is very true.

But taken to an extreme, anything can be dangerous, and one of the most damaging things to the educational process is an extreme case of radical dualism, the notion that the world is essentially evil and that one must retreat to a very small island of safety to avoid being contaminated by it. This is not the same thing as being careful about avoiding sin.

Let me give you a really clear example of what I mean by radical dualism. Manichaeism was a movement originating in Mesopotamia in the third century A.D. that spread thereafter throughout the world as far as China, the Middle East, and Europe. It is a form of Gnosticism, which has become a kind of synonym for radical dualistic thought. Its founder, Mani, taught that the world is “dominated by evil powers,” that created matter is itself entirely evil, that our bodies are especially evil because sex is involved in creating them, and that humans should strive to “break the chains holding the divine and luminous principle [the soul] inside the prison of matter and of the body” (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, editor in chief [New York: Macmillan, 1987], 9:161). Manichaeism views the world as a “burning house” from which we can at best only escape. Needless to say, they do not view the world as a fitting object of study or as a pleasing place to linger and love and enjoy.

And while there are probably no professed Manichaeism among us, the phenomenon I see from time to time among students and colleagues is a milder form of pessimism vis-à-vis the world, which can spontaneously and understandably arise from our struggle against sin and evil. The problem is that it can become a theology and psychology of educational retreat.

It’s really a question of balance, as so many things in life are. As people wanting to avoid evil, and keenly aware of the existence of evil in the world, how do we individually and collectively, as a university, avoid throwing out the baby of eternal learning and curiosity and excitement and delight about the world and about learning with the bathwater of sin and evil? It’s not an easy dilemma to deal with.

For our class, the breakthrough seems to come when we begin to realize that the texts we are dealing with—though unthinkable far removed from us in time, space, culture, language, and theological labeling—nevertheless

shed real new light on our own belief system and profoundly deepen our understanding of and commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But this happens only if we are solidly founded on the gospel in the first place and if we allow its light to illuminate these texts as well.

We are aided in our task by the scriptures, which contain many admonitions to view the earth positively—whether you are studying ancient civilizations or astrophysics, Zen Buddhism or zoology. Some examples are found in unlikely places, such as in the words of Alma to Korihor, who had asked to be shown a sign that there is a God. After Alma reminds him of the fundamentals of knowledge by invoking “the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets” and saying: “The scriptures are laid before thee,” he continues by adding to these fundamental sources of truth the challenge to study God’s handiwork:

Yea, and all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator. [Alma 30:44]

This is not only a fitting rebuke to Korihor, a persecutor of the faithful believers in God, it also constitutes a remarkable invitation to us all to study these things. It sounds, as a matter of fact, for all the world exactly like the Lord’s familiar admonition given through Joseph Smith in Doctrine and Covenants 88:77–80:

And I give unto you a commandment that you shall teach one another the doctrine of the kingdom.

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;

Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things

which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—

That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you, and the mission with which I have commissioned you.

As in Alma’s words, at first there is an admonition here in the Doctrine and Covenants to get the fundamentals right: the scripture says that we should be properly instructed in theory, principle, doctrine, and law of the gospel. Then comes the liberating invitation to fearlessly tackle, on that solid footing, everything else under the sun, no holds barred, to come to grips with all the learning in the world (there is a dash after countries and kingdoms, which I read to mean “etc., etc., etc.”). And when we do, applying this scripture to ourselves, I take it to mean we will all be more prepared and useful in magnifying our calling and fulfilling our mission with which the Lord has commissioned us. (And, by the way, I think the word *expedient* in that scripture tells us that this kind of broad learning is not simply optional: it’s expedient!)

In my opinion, the same spirit that inspired those prophets, Joseph Smith and Alma, to write those scriptural invitations to view the earth and the world as fit subjects of serious study also inspired the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

*It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.*

In his next lines, Hopkins laments that men have forgotten God (a bit like Korihor!), and, buying and selling, selling and buying, have come to view the world in mundane terms

rather than as God's miraculous handiwork. (I will read the first lines again and then continue a bit.)

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared
with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's
smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

But the poet, who has seen the grandeur of God flame out from the world like "shining from shook foil," gathering to greatness like the ooze of oil crushed in the olive press (a remarkable religious image in its own right), ends his poem with *his* statement about whether the world is ontologically or only temporarily evil. Even though the earth is bent and plunged into blackness, the morning of a new dawn will soon break:

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*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down
things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward,
springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent*

*World broods with warm breast and with ah!
bright wings.*

[Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems* (1918), "God's Grandeur"]

This stirring image of the dovelike Holy Ghost brooding birdlike over the egglike world with its warm incubating breast recalls to my mind perhaps the most moving (and most often overlooked) scriptural statement about whether the world is essentially good or bad: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). As Enoch learned when he observed God weeping for his wicked children who would not repent, God does not give up on any of his children, nor has he abandoned the world that he loved so much even though so much of it lies in darkness. I believe the poet was justifiably inspired to write that a new day would soon dawn and new light would drive out the darkness.

Part of that new light consists in our efforts to follow the invitation of the Doctrine and Covenants and fulfill our mission better. But it's a daunting challenge! Perhaps some of us fall back on the dualistic idea of the world being so corrupt that it doesn't make sense to study it, simply to avoid having to get outside our comfort zones and meet this supreme educational challenge head-on! Some of us no doubt feel safer searing, blearing, and smearing the world with trade and toil, rather than looking for the grandeur of God flaming out from it like shining from shook foil or gathering to greatness like the ooze of oil crushed. Think of the remarkable things we have yet to learn about, individually and collectively: about the human brain, possibly God's greatest creation; about superstrings and mesons and quarks; about the behavior of super-cooled matter and social groups; about rain forests and other complex ecosystems; about chaos theory, metalinguistics and metacognition and metahistory; about things both in heaven and in the earth, etc., etc., etc.

When I think of this daunting educational challenge and sometimes lose heart, I think of President Hinckley. I have observed with astonishment and admiration how well-read and knowledgeable he is, how well he has risen, over his whole lifetime, to the challenge of learning, and I have observed how eager he seems to be to learn and with what zest for life and learning he plunges into new tasks and new learning environments. I have never detected the slightest sign of fear in him or a dualistic, pessimistic rejection of the “other,” that which is outside the narrow circle. His circle seems to be one within which all truth has a place.

President Hinckley has come to personify for me an openness toward the world and toward all the things that are there for us to learn and to embrace (keeping well away from things that are clearly evil!), but he is not the first Church leader to do so. I happened recently to pick up a handout on religious tolerance prepared by Dr. James Toronto that Linda brought home with her from her very exciting and broadening class on world religions taught by Professor Lanier Britsch. Because I was thinking about this talk when I read the handout, I appropriated (perhaps I misappropriated) a number of quotes from LDS Church leaders on religious tolerance that also fit, in my view, the theme of my talk today. (I thank Dr. Toronto for his work in compiling these citations.)

How does this idea strike you, for example, from a statement in 1978 by the First Presidency—President Spencer W. Kimball and his counselors President Marion G. Romney and President N. Eldon Tanner:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of

*understanding to individuals. [In Spencer J. Palmer, *The Expanding Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978), frontispiece]*

Or this statement by Orson F. Whitney from 1882:

*[The gospel] embraces all truth, whether known or unknown. It incorporates all intelligence, both past and prospective. No righteous principle will ever be revealed, no truth can possibly be discovered, either in time or in eternity, that does not in some manner, directly or indirectly, pertain to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. [“The Gospel of Jesus Christ,” *Millennial Star* 44, no. 36 (4 September 1882): 568; also in *Elders' Journal* 4, no. 2 (15 October 1906): 26]*

How about B. H. Roberts:

While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is established for the instruction of men; and is one of God's instrumentalities for making known the truth yet he is not limited to that institution for such purposes, neither in time nor place. God raises up wise men and prophets here and there among all the children of men, of their own tongue and nationality, speaking to them through means that they can comprehend; not always giving a fulness of truth such as may be found in the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ; but always giving that measure of truth that the people are prepared to receive. “Mormonism[”] holds, then, that all the great teachers are servants of God; among all nations and in all ages. They are inspired men, appointed to instruct God's children according to the conditions in the midst of which he finds them. Hence it is not obnoxious to Mormonism to regard Confucius, the great Chinese philosopher and moralist, as a servant of God, inspired to a certain degree by him to teach those great moral maxims which have governed those millions of God's children for lo! these many centuries. It is willing to regard Gautama, Buddha as an inspired servant of God, teaching a measure of the truth, at least giving to these people that twilight of truth by which they

may somewhat see their way. So with the Arabian prophet, that wild spirit that turned the Arabians from worshiping idols to a conception of the Creator of heaven and earth that was more excellent than their previous conception of Deity. . . . Wherever God finds a soul sufficiently enlightened and pure; one with whom his Spirit can communicate, lo! he makes of him a teacher of men. ["Revelation and Inspiration," *Defense of the Faith and the Saints*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News, 1907), pp. 512–13; emphasis added]

(The only quibble I have with Roberts is that he says "men" when he should have said "men and women.")

And, of course, there is Joseph Smith, perhaps the greatest and most eager learner, tackling in his brief life Hebrew, Latin, German, philosophy, history, natural science—in a word, probably the most fearless and tolerant non-dualist in our tradition. Here's what he said:

The inquiry is frequently made of me, "Wherein do you differ from others in your religious views?" In reality and essence we do not differ so far in our religious views, but that we could all drink into one principle of love. One of the grand fundamental principles of "Mormonism" is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may. [Teachings, p. 313]

How about this quote from Joseph Smith:

Have the Presbyterians any truth? Yes. Have the Baptists, Methodists, etc., any truth? Yes. They all have a little truth mixed with error. We should gather all the good and true principles in the world and treasure them up, or we shall not come out true "Mormons." [Teachings, p. 316]

Just one more:

But while one portion of the human race is judging and condemning the other without mercy, the Great Parent of the universe looks upon the whole of the human family with a fatherly care and paternal

regard; He views them as His offspring, and without any of those contracted feelings that influence the children of men, causes "His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." He holds the reins of judgment in His hands; He is a wise Lawgiver, and will judge all men, not according to the narrow, contracted notions of men, but, "according to the deeds done in the body whether they be good or evil," or whether these deeds were done in England, America, Spain, Turkey, or India. He will judge them, "not according to what they have not, but according to what they have." . . . We need not doubt the wisdom and intelligence of the Great Jehovah . . . when the designs of God shall be made manifest, and the curtain of futurity be withdrawn, we shall all of us eventually have to confess that the Judge of all the earth has done right. [Teachings, p. 218]

As I draw to a close, let me tell you the promised anecdote about *The Magic Flute*. When Jeremy and I arrived in London for the final leg of our trip and had stopped by the BYU London Center for a moment to say hello, Jeremy was reading the bulletin board when he suddenly blurted out: "Dad, you've gotta see this: John Eliot Gardiner is performing *The Magic Flute* in Queen Elizabeth Hall."

"Ha," someone standing nearby said, "those performances have been sold out for months!"

"Never mind," I replied, only half in jest, "it's our destiny to see this performance, and we're going to!"

I don't know how much I can risk boring you about *The Magic Flute* and about John Eliot Gardiner, so suffice it to say that Mozart's great opera about eternal marriage and temples and the brotherhood and sisterhood of all humankind is absolutely my favorite work of art in the whole world, bar none. Some of my students know about my interest in it. In what seemed to me—in my fatigued condition, at least—a great cosmic coincidence, I had, during my sojourn in Europe, just definitely

decided to write a book about its amazing parallels to Mormon theology. (I won't mention the fact that Isis and Osiris play an important role here as well.)

And then there is John Eliot Gardiner, who directs the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists, an ensemble of the finest musicians, the latter who play on period instruments. John Eliot Gardiner is absolutely my favorite interpreter of music in this period. I own, I think, nearly every compact disc he has released.

What I did not know was that he and his musicians had been performing all the Mozart operas and had recorded them in the process. *The Magic Flute* is the last in the series, and we had arrived just in time for the concert. Obviously, I wouldn't be telling you this story if we hadn't, miraculously, found two tickets, which just HAPPENED to be on the front row, about ten feet away from Gardiner and the orchestra.

And to make the evening even more magical, through another minor miracle we had been able to help our good friends the Britsches (past academic vice president Todd Britsch and his wife, Dorothy), who also happened to be in London, find tickets for themselves as well (although theirs were not on the front row). I mention this because they are our witnesses about the magic of that performance. The joy that radiated from the performers that night, the celebration of the divine potential of humankind that is unique to this opera, the power of the arts to lend a spiritual confirmation about the goodness of this life and the love and mercy of our Father in Heaven—these all were present in indescribable measure. Even Jeremy, who had patiently stood through many hours of Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungen* in Vienna, was swept away, knocked off his feet, by this remarkable experience.

When the final chords had melted away, we were filled, and I believe everyone in the

hall was filled, with the absolute joy that comes from the redemption at the end of the opera. I felt like embracing all humanity, as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony says, and I felt like I was walking some distance off the floor. When we met up with the Britsches, we discovered, not to our surprise, that they had had the same remarkable experience.

I thank my Heavenly Father that I have had the opportunity to stand with my feet firmly planted on gospel fundamentals and—through the blessing of this and other great universities, through the great example of my Mormon and non-Mormon teachers, colleagues, and students—to have reached out into the world and discovered the grandeur of God, which flamed out at me that night and at other times as well like shining from shook foil, which gathered to greatness like the ooze of oil crushed. I'm grateful that Jeremy and the Britsches were able to be there, too, and I wish for each of you something like that kind of thrill somewhere along the line in the course of your educational endeavors.

I close with a poem by my dear friend and colleague Professor Leslie Norris. Linda and I and many of our good friends consider this poem a symbol of our commitment to each other in eternal marriage, and thus a symbol of one of the highest of our LDS aspirations. And yet it's just a poem about geese. Or is it?

When we have heard this poem, rather than asking whether Leslie Norris is a Mormon poet, let us rather ask ourselves if our Mormonism is wide enough to circumscribe his inspiration into our great circle:

*Hudson tells us of them,
the two migrating geese,
she hurt in the wing
indomitably walking
the length of a continent,
and he wheeling above,
calling his distress.
They could not have lived.*

*Already I see her wing
scraped past the bone
as she drags it through rubble.
A fox, maybe, took her
in his snap jaws. And what
would he do, the point
of his circling gone?
The wilderness of his cry
falling through an air
turned instantly to winter
would warn the guns of him.
If a fowler dropped him,*

*let it have been quick,
pellet hitting brain
and heart so his weight
came down senseless,
and nothing but his body
to enter the dog's mouth.*

[Leslie Norris, "Hudson's Geese," *Collected Poems* (Bridgend, Wales: Seran Press [Poetry Wales Press], 1996), p. 174]

I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.