

Dare to Be Different: Preserving the Distinctive Light of Religious Universities

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As a young professor at Harvard University, I had occasion to visit Memorial Church for personal prayer and meditation. It seemed like a solemn sanctuary in an otherwise secular learning environment. As I walked out on the steps of the chapel, I stared across the courtyard to the wide, imposing columns creating the bulwark entrance to Widener Library. It was as if I was staring from the temple of faith to the hall of reason. These two ideals seemed to be facing off in a conflict that, at least in this formidable secular environment, would almost certainly end for many with the victory of reason.

This all-or-nothing Hobson's choice between faith and reason was antithetical to everything I had learned (and experienced) in my undergraduate studies at Brigham Young University. The most profound insights happened when secular and spiritual truths were brought together in inspired and reinforcing ways. As John Donne

penned, "Reason is our soul's left hand, faith her right, / By these we reach divinity."¹

Today, I find myself serving as the commissioner of education for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a system that includes BYU as well as BYU–Idaho, BYU–Hawaii, Ensign College, and a global online offering called BYU–Pathway Worldwide. Too often I have felt external forces trying to reassert on these institutions that same Hobson's choice I experienced standing on the steps of Memorial Church. I now recognize that these and other religious schools across the country enjoy a huge strategic advantage, but only if they dare to continue with and strengthen their religious identity—only if they dare to be different from their peers.

Harvard University's founding was decidedly religious. Its organizing laws and statutes from 1646 declare that "the main end of [a student's] life and studies [is] to know God and Jesus Christ

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which is eternal life (John 17:3).”² Harvard’s universally recognized motto, “*Veritas*,” was originally “*Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*,” translated from Latin as “Truth for Christ and the Church.”

It would take two centuries for the motto (and the university) to drop “for Christ and the Church.” The initial drift was not one of hostility but rather redirected focus. By the late 1800s, President Charles W. Eliot had firmly entrenched the philosophy that the way to serve Christ and the church was not through the founding ideal of knowing God but rather through cultivating open inquiry. Eliot proclaimed, “It is thus that the university in our day serves Christ and the church.”³ But once spiritual learning was decoupled from secular inquiry, the path to secularization had been set.

The purpose of this article is not to criticize Harvard’s path to secularization. In fact, the road that Harvard modeled has made it the envy of the world. Thousands of universities seek to replicate Harvard’s scholarly excellence. Indeed, Duke and Vanderbilt University had early aspirations as the “Harvard of the South.” Stanford University has also been referred to as the “Harvard of the West.” Since BYU is the flagship institution within the system of higher education for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, some are pushing it toward the same aspiration. And it is not irrational for BYU to consider that path. BYU recruits superb students and faculty, evidenced by its number of National Merit Scholars and Fulbright Scholars. The incoming freshman GPA averages nearly 3.9, and its admissions yield rate is among the highest in the nation. BYU is also a top-five producer of students who go on to earn doctoral degrees. National media regularly identify BYU as a leader in quality and value. *Forbes* named BYU no. 1 in value based on its cost and quality ratio.⁴

But even if BYU were to purely seek secular standing, would the world ever accept BYU solely on its academic merits? Moreover, if its sponsoring religious institution further expanded its already significant investment in the university, would BYU receive equal standing in the academy? BYU’s undergraduate mission is well supported by its sponsoring religious organization with over

\$500 million in annual operating funds coming from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But even with such a stable financial footing and the strongest student academic profile in the Intermountain West, attempting to replicate Harvard or any secular model is not a strategy for long-term success.

Religious schools must differentiate on their unique spiritual purposes, even as they strive to tie into the broader academic community. I had a conversation recently with Dan Sarewitz, former editor of *Issues in Science and Technology*, the journal published by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Sarewitz said, “The academy needs BYU. But we need BYU to be BYU and not a watered-down version of every other secular university.” In other words, simply trying to replicate other models hides the very sources of differentiation religious universities can (and do) bring to the academy.

What are the distinct strengths of religious universities? I will group these into three broad categories: (1) research and scholarly inquiry, (2) character development, and (3) innovative institutional design.

For Sarewitz, research and inquiry at religious universities have direct implications for research policy. Without religious engagement, a whole category of distinctive research questions might be excluded or minimized from the academy. For example, Sarewitz has encouraged BYU to invest in areas of genetic markers for disease and inheritable traits that draw on our faith’s extensive genealogical data. Similarly, he points to proprietary data sets that draw on the Church’s extensive efforts in humanitarian aid and poverty alleviation.⁵ Derrick Anderson, at the American Council on Education, looks beyond specific topics to a more general approach to science that he calls “humble inquiry.”⁶ Anderson believes religious scholars often have a built-in respect for the moral and ethical implications of scientific exploration. He argues that belief in deity can provide a modesty and a thoughtfulness needed in science.⁷

Second, many of my colleagues have articulated the unique ways religious schools teach moral character. Philip Ryken, president of Wheaton College, argues that religious education cultivates

informed and engaged citizens.⁸ *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and *Comment Magazine* editor Anne Snyder point out how a Christian education develops the whole person, inspiring not only intellectual but also social and community engagement.⁹ Rabbi Ari Berman, president of Yeshiva University, highlights how preserving religious identity preserves religious community.¹⁰ This can also be connected to broader measures of societal flourishing. Where religion wanes we also see declines in social engagement, philanthropy, and family stability. Thus, religious schools play a critical role in preserving civil society.

Third, religious schools often facilitate innovative institutional design. Distinctive religious purpose can provide the identity and confidence needed to transform traditional universities. Henry J. Eyring, president of BYU–Idaho, articulates how religious identity can help address the cost and completion crisis facing American higher education.¹¹ John “Keoni” S. K. Kauwe III, president of BYU–Hawaii, has shown how religious identity can focus institutional design toward greater access for first-generation students.¹²

Despite these important social and academic contributions, mounting secular pressures threaten to limit religious universities’ differentiating role in American higher education. Eric Baxter and Montse Alvarado at the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty articulate some of the legal pressures facing religious universities—from housing to honor code commitments to hiring practices.¹³ Standing by religious identity can risk loss of funding, exclusion from federal contracts, or loss of student aid.

Even with a strong legal defense and clear constitutional protections, perceived pressure for compliance in accreditation can be significant. Fortunately, most regional accreditors appropriately recognize distinctive mission and simply require that the religious expectations be transparent and broadly communicated. Presidents of religiously affiliated universities who also serve on regional accrediting boards, including Robin Baker of George Fox University and Kevin J Worthen of BYU, repeatedly remind religious schools that their religious missions are not only protected but even encouraged by accreditation.

Beyond legal and accreditation pressures, there remain deeper cultural and social pressures on religious schools. I used Harvard’s path to secularization as an example, but their story is not unique. Yale and Dartmouth also had Congregationalist origins. Princeton was Presbyterian, Brown was Baptist, and Columbia was Anglican. In his book *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, James T. Burtchaell provides an in-depth analysis of the path to religious disengagement. His study draws on the experience of universities with religious founding. His findings should give pause to any college seeking to preserve its religious identity. In most cases, the challenges to faith did not come from overt attacks on religious practice but rather from redirected priorities.¹⁴

Burtchaell’s conclusions can be summarized in three recurring mechanisms that lead to religious disenfranchisement:

- Decoupled leadership
- Decoupled funding
- Decoupled faculty hiring

First, instead of the sponsoring religious organization choosing leadership, many religious schools are encouraged to have their leaders chosen through outside search committees, donors, or faculty associations. The justification is that the school will benefit from outside expertise and prominent stakeholder buy-in. Unfortunately, this can indirectly lead to a decoupling of the institution from its most foundational stakeholder—the sponsoring religious organization.¹⁵

Second, as the cost of running a college or university continues to climb, the burden on religious organizations does as well. Many religious institutions worry whether they can continue to maintain their core ecclesiastical responsibilities while funding increasingly costly academic institutions. These realities lead many religious institutions to increase student tuition, seek government assistance, or lean on outside donors. Each of these comes with increasing risk of religious disengagement.¹⁶

Third is the decoupling of faculty hiring from religious mission. On the surface this does not

seem so daunting—don't universities control who they hire and more importantly who they promote? But as Burtchaell points out, with increasing disciplinary specialization, some academic departments feel they cannot evaluate faculty without outside expertise. In so doing, many religious colleges are effectively outsourcing faculty evaluation and promotion to the academy.¹⁷

In this climate, it is important for religious schools to assert the rights of their students and their communities to learn and work in a religious setting. Freeman A. Hrabowski, noted scientist and university president, while speaking to Loyola University Chicago, taught faculty and staff that their "Jesuit values . . . are the foundation of everything at the university . . . and that faith is [their] ultimate advantage."¹⁸ Catholic University president Peter Kilpatrick spoke on the importance of religious identity, stating: "We are serious about who we are."¹⁹ President Linda Livingstone described how Baylor University is "unapologetically Christian."²⁰ At BYU, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, former university president and now an apostle in the Church, recently proclaimed:

*BYU will become an "educational Mt. Everest" only to the degree it embraces its uniqueness, its singularity. We could mimic every other university in the world . . . , and the world would still say, "BYU who?" No, we must have the will to be different and to stand alone, if necessary, being a university second to none in its role primarily as an undergraduate teaching institution that is unequivocally true to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.*²¹

Leaders who can articulate a clear vision for religious identity are needed more than ever.

Let me next offer a word of encouragement to the administration and faculty of religious schools. While religious identity requires courageous leadership, it also calls for deep structural alignment. Take steps to ensure that religious governance remains strong at your college or university, beginning with the selection of university leadership. Our ecclesiastical leadership has encouraged our presidents to be the "chief moral and spiritual officer[s]" of our schools.²² That may

not mean that a president has to have the formal religious standing of priest or rabbi, but it does mean that the selection criteria should include strengthening the religious mission of the institution. In our own academic governance across five separate education institutions, that leadership decision is made by our Church leadership and not by outside search committees or powerful external stakeholders.

Preserving educational investment is difficult in an era of growing operating costs. It might be unrealistic to ask sponsoring religious organizations to underwrite all of the costs associated with running religious universities. I hope, however, that religious schools will courageously seek more sustainable and fewer cost-prohibitive approaches to the modern university. Self-reliant cost models may be one of the only ways religious universities maintain their viability and independence. Regardless, the more aligned a university is with the mission of its sponsoring religious institution, the greater the justification for ongoing financial support from that sponsoring institution.

Finally, a word about faculty hiring and promotion. Elder Holland, who chairs the executive committee of our board of education, has said that the hiring of faculty is the most important decision a university makes.²³ Religious mission benefits enormously at institutions that emphasize their faculty code of conduct or even their covenant commitment as part of faculty hiring and governance. For example, Wheaton College's faculty contract includes a covenant commitment. Baylor University has a similar faculty code of conduct in both hiring and ongoing employment. We have similar expectations of faculty at BYU and other colleges and universities in our Church Educational System. But to shape internal hiring and promotion across an entire university requires leadership that goes far beyond baseline ecclesiastical standards. To avoid outsourcing critical faculty decisions requires a knowledge of faculty scholarship and teaching deep inside the academic culture and administration.

The intent of this article has been to help religious universities and faith-oriented faculty to deepen their confidence in the power of religious strength identity. From Baylor to BYU,

from Catholic University to Notre Dame, and at Pepperdine, Yeshiva, Wheaton College, and so many other institutions, there are nearly one thousand religiously affiliated colleges and universities in the United States with over 1.5 million enrolled students. Colleges and universities across the country are preserving the light of religious mission. As secular forces sometimes bear down and make religiously affiliated schools feel isolated, it is increasingly important to understand that religious identity is not only important to a religious community, but it strengthens the academy and society more generally. Do not hide your light under a bushel; carry it with strength and conviction. Dare to be different in ways that are true to your distinctive light.

Notes

1. John Donne, “To the Countess of Bedford (‘Reason is our soul’s left hand’),” in *The Works of John Donne: With a Memoir of His Life*, ed. Henry Alford (London: John W. Parker, 1839), 6:461.

2. “The Lawes, Liberties, and Orders of Harvard Colledge” (1642–46), no. 2, p. 25, in *Harvard’s College Book 1, 1639–1795*, UAI 5.5 Box 1, Harvard University Archives; text modernized. See also “2. Rules, and Precepts that are observed in the Colledge,” no. 2, in [John Eliot], *New Englands First Fruits* (London: Printed by R. O. and G. D. for Henry Overton, 1643), 26.

3. Charles W. Eliot, inaugural address as president of Harvard College, 19 October 1869; in Charles William Eliot, *Educational Reform: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Century Co., 1905), 8.

4. See Caroline Howard, ed., “America’s Best Value Colleges 2019,” *Forbes*, 24 April 2019, forbes.com/best-value-colleges.

5. From a personal conversation with the author.

6. Derrick Anderson, “Discovering Truth,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 53, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319234/derrick-anderson-can-science-and-religion-coexist.

7. See Anderson, “Discovering Truth,” 53; also from expanded conversations between Anderson and the author.

8. See Philip Ryken, “A Life Worth Living: Why America’s Liberal Arts Tradition Is Essential,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 50, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319213/philip-ryken-wheaton-college-a-life-worth-living.

9. See Shirley Hoogstra, interview with David Brooks and Anne Snyder, in “The World Is Our Campus: What Religious Schools Bring to a World Looking for Meaning,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 66–69, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319237/the-world-is-our-campus-religious-schools-ccc.

10. See Ari Berman, “The Consumer vs. the Covenant: Has a Relentless Focus on Outcomes Stripped the Academy of Purpose?” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 48–49, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319231/ari-berman-yeshiva-university-the-consumer-vs-the-covenant.

11. See Henry J. Eyring, “The Innovative University: Why Business as Usual Won’t Save the Crisis of Higher Ed,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 70–72, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319239/henry-j-eyring-byu-idaho-the-innovative-university.

12. See John S. K. Kauwe III, “The Purpose Driven University: How a Unique Mission Helps Expand College Access,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 53–54, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319227/john-kauwe-byu-hawaii-the-purpose-driven-university; also from expanded conversations between Kauwe and the author.

13. See Eric Baxter and Maria Montserrat Alvarado, “The War Against Faith: Religious Schools Are Under Threat. Can They Survive?” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 52–54, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319235/becket-fund-the-war-against-faith-in-education; also from expanded conversations between Baxter, Alvarado, and the author.

14. See James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

15. See Burtchaell, *Dying of the Light*, 826–27.

16. See Burtchaell, *Dying of the Light*, 823–26, 837.

17. See Burtchaell, *Dying of the Light*, 828–37.

18. Eileen O’Gorman, summarizing Freeman A. Hrabowski III, “Strategic Planning,” lecture at Loyola University Chicago, 4 October 2019, in O’Gorman, “Looking to the Future of Higher Education,” Loyola University Chicago, luc.edu/features/stories/academics/freemanhrabowski; see also Freeman A. Hrabowski III, “Be Yourself: Why Higher Education—and America—Is Strengthened by Authenticity,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 49, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319228/freeman-a-hrabowski-be-yourself-university-of-maryland.

19. From an unpublished address given to religious educators; see also Peter Kilpatrick, “A Reasonable Proposition: How Faith and Reason Coexist,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 51, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319226/peter-kilpatrick-catholic-university-a-reasonable-proposition.

20. Linda Livingstone, quoted in Bobby Ross Jr., “Baylor’s First Woman President Brings Fresh Start to Baptist University,” *News, Religion News Service*, 27 June 2017, religionnews.com/2017/06/27/with-a-history-of-bucking-tradition-baylors

-first-woman-president-brings-fresh-start-to-baptist-university; see also Linda Livingstone, “Bringing Light to the World: Pairing Scholarly Discovery with Religious Commitment,” in “Dare to Be Different: The Fate of the Religious University,” special issue, *Deseret Magazine*, September 2022, 54, deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319218/linda-livingstone-baylor-university-bringing-light-to-the-world.

21. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021; emphasis in original; quoting Spencer W. Kimball, “Installation of and Charge to the President,” address at the inauguration of Jeffrey R. Holland as BYU president, 14 November 1980; see also Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

22. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Presidential Charge Given to John ‘Keoni’ S. K. Kauwe III,” BYU–Hawaii inauguration address, 19 October 2021, speeches.byuh.edu/inaugurations/presidential-charge-given-to-president-john-keoni-s-k-kauwe-iii; and Jeffrey R. Holland, “Installation and Presidential Charge Given to Brian K. Ashton,” BYU–Pathway Worldwide inauguration address, 10 March 2022, byupathway.org/speech/installation-and-presidential-charge-given-to-president-brian-k-ashton.

23. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has asserted this statement in meetings with Church Educational System presidents and in leadership meetings with the author.