

Religious Education in BYU's Prophetic Historical Context

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I begin with a question of perspective about BYU. For Latter-day Saint students, is education on the three BYU campuses qualitatively different from education at a state school with a nearby Latter-day Saint institute? Many key variables are hard to measure—comparative educational quality, social opportunities (especially a temple marriage), and the likelihood of real religious growth, in both understanding Church doctrine and learning to live it. Moreover, how can one quantify the unique, multilayered effects of simply living for a few years in a Zion-like village (such as Laie, Rexburg, or Provo)—experiencing daily the spirit of “the gathering” as the Saints knew it in Nauvoo or in the early pioneer settlements? Obviously, some students will benefit more than others in such a place, depending on what a given student brings to the campus. Yet clearly many thousands of Latter-day Saint students and their families believe passionately that these qualitative differences—“the BYU experience,” whatever that is and however it is measured—are worth years of preparation and sacrifice.

How have the most influential founders of the three modern BYU campuses seen these differences? By substantially enlarging all three student bodies in the last seven decades, what were they trying to create, and why? They didn't need to invest vast tithing resources in the Church universities just because state schools didn't have space. On the contrary, in recent years, access to higher education has become almost universally available in the United States. To explore what may have motivated the key founders, let's consider some historical context.

The History of Church Education

The Church's commitment to educating Latter-day Saint youth came as a doctrinal mandate of the Restoration. For example, “I, the Lord, am well pleased that there should be a school in Zion.”¹ The applications of this premise are further displayed in the impressive historical exhibit *Educating the Soul: Our Zion Tradition of Learning and Faith* in the Joseph F. Smith Building on the Provo campus. On this foundation, Church efforts

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to find the right balance between the religious and the secular in its approach to higher education have a long history.

By 1900—due primarily to inadequate public education in Utah, an influx of settlers of other faiths, and the creation of new pioneer colonies beyond the Great Basin—the Church had created more than thirty stake academies for secondary education in locations stretching from Canada to Mexico. And even though the Utah Territory began establishing public schools in 1890, most of the academies continued to function as private Church schools and colleges until well into the twentieth century.² Brigham Young University in Provo was the only school designated as a university, a decision the Church Board of Education made in 1903.

By 1920 the commissioner of Church education was a young apostle named David O. McKay. Before his call to the Twelve in 1906, he had been a faculty member and then the principal of Weber Stake Academy (now Weber State University). He recommended to the board that the Church divest itself of all but a handful of its postsecondary schools because the Church simply could not afford to provide a college education for all its members.

Then in 1926, also citing costs, Adam S. Bennion went even further as commissioner. He recommended that the Church *entirely* “withdraw from the academic field [in higher education] and center upon religious education” by creating new institutes of religion near selected state colleges.³ The first institute began that same year at the University of Idaho in Moscow. Elder Bennion told the board that he believed the people teaching in the state universities were “in the main . . . seeking the truth.”⁴

However, Elder McKay felt that the Church had not established Church schools “merely . . . because the state did not do it”; rather, the Church established these schools, he said, “to make Latter-day Saints.”⁵ He continued, saying, “We ought to consider these Church schools from the standpoint of their value to the Church more than from the standpoint of duplicating public school work.”⁶

Elder McKay later said he had therefore “voted against . . . [giving] the church’s junior colleges to

the states of Utah, Arizona, and Idaho.”⁷ However, the First Presidency decided in 1930 that the Church should (1) divest itself of all its colleges except BYU and LDS College in Salt Lake City (later LDS Business College) and (2) expand institutes of religion on selected other campuses. For example, the Church transferred Snow, Dixie, and Weber Colleges to the state of Utah. The Church also offered Ricks College (now BYU–Idaho) to Idaho beginning in 1931, but the state legislature repeatedly declined it, even though the Church had offered to donate all of the college’s assets if Idaho would agree to operate the school. With encouragement from President McKay as a new member of the First Presidency, the Church finally decided to keep Ricks College in 1937.⁸

The institutes of religion grew during the 1930s and 1940s. Then in 1951, David O. McKay became president of the Church and Ernest L. Wilkinson was appointed as both president of BYU and Church commissioner of education. During the next twenty years, President McKay actively established a new vision of Church higher education. Both BYU and Ricks College grew rapidly, and the Church College of Hawaii (now BYU–Hawaii) was founded in 1955.

In 1957 the Church announced plans to create eight additional junior colleges as potential feeder schools for BYU. Then, for financial reasons, in 1963 the First Presidency dropped the junior college plan and reaffirmed its commitment to the institutes of religion.⁹

Nonetheless, the Church’s support for BYU, Ricks, and Hawaii remained strong. For example, during the McKay presidency, BYU’s enrollment expanded from 5,500 in 1950 to 25,000 in 1971. It is now about 32,000. In 2001, Ricks College became BYU–Idaho. It is now a four-year university with a current on-campus enrollment of about 19,000. BYU–Hawaii enrolls about 2,900.

BYU as a Religious Institution

So the three BYU campuses are significant exceptions to a general policy of not providing higher education on a Church campus. The spiritual architect who most magnified the window of exceptions was President McKay, acting in his prophetic role. These three campuses are

thus living monuments to his educational vision and inspiration.

And what was his vision? President McKay answered that question with his entire life's work and teachings. As he told a BYU audience in 1937:

Brigham Young University is primarily a religious institution. It was established for the sole purpose of associating with facts of science, art, literature, and philosophy the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .

In making religion its paramount objective, the university touches the very heart of all true progress. . . .

I emphasize religion because the Church university offers more than mere theological instruction. Theology as a science "treats of the existence, character, and attributes of God," and theological training may consist merely of intellectual study. Religion is subjective and denotes the influences and motives to human conduct and duty which are found in the character and will of God. One may study theology without being religious.¹⁰

This is an expanded version of what President McKay had told the board in 1926: "We establish[ed] the schools to make Latter-day Saints."¹¹ He also taught repeatedly his conviction that "character is the aim of true education," and he believed that "modern education" gave inadequate emphasis to helping students develop "true character."¹² He was also disturbed as early as 1926 by "the growing tendency all over the world to sneer at religion" in secular state education.¹³

I sense in President McKay's attitudes an implicit belief that providing religious education in an institute next to a secular university would not do as much "to make Latter-day Saints" as might be possible on a BYU campus. His concept was to create a conscious integration of fine academic departments, extracurricular programs, and the teaching of the religious life—all on the same campus, pursuing a unified vision about becoming educated followers of Jesus Christ and blessing the Church by blessing the youth of Zion. So when he said, "We ought to consider these Church schools from the standpoint of their value to the Church," he was describing a religious mission, not simply an educational mission—but it is a religious mission in which higher education plays a central role.

Inspired by this vision, other Church leaders have often encouraged BYU faculty to integrate religious perspectives into their teaching. For example, when the J. Reuben Clark Law School was founded at BYU in 1973, President Marion G. Romney said the school's purpose was to study the laws of man "in the light of the 'laws of God.'"¹⁴ And the Aims of a BYU Education, a formal part of the university's official purpose since the 1990s, states that "the founding charge of BYU is to teach every subject with the Spirit."¹⁵ In the words of President Spencer W. Kimball, this does not mean "that all of the faculty should be categorically teaching religion constantly in their classes," but it does expect "that every . . . teacher . . . would keep [their] subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel."¹⁶

The aims document goes on to say that "a BYU education should be . . . intellectually enlarging" with regard to intellectual skills, depth, and breadth.¹⁷ In describing the desired breadth of an intellectual education, the aims document states:

The gospel provides the chief source of such breadth because it encompasses the most comprehensive explanation of life and the cosmos, supplying the perspective from which all other knowledge is best understood and measured.¹⁸

This approach doesn't simply balance the sacred and the secular, or faith and reason, as if the two realms were of equal importance. Rather, President McKay's vision consciously avoids allowing the academic disciplines to judge or stand superior to the gospel or the Church. As one Latter-day Saint scholar observed:

There is the danger that [the] use of scholarly tools—which requires the privileging of those tools—will breed habits of mind that reflexively privilege secular scholarship over the gospel.¹⁹

This is a risk in some approaches to Mormon studies, which may look at the gospel primarily through the lenses of the academic disciplines.

Because of that risk, Elder Neal A. Maxwell "was always dismayed by Latter-day Saint

[scholars and] professionals who” allowed the premises and perspectives of “their disciplines [to] take priority over their understanding of the gospel.”²⁰ And he was disappointed by teachers who, as he put it, “‘fondle their doubts’ . . . in the presence of Latter-day Saint students who [are] looking for spiritual mentoring.”²¹ Thus Elder Maxwell, like President McKay or President Romney, “looked at all knowledge through the gospel’s lens.”²² They knew they

*could integrate a secular map of reality into the broader religious map, but the smaller secular map, with its more limited tools and framework, often wasn’t large enough to include religious insights. Thus the gospel’s larger perspective influenced [their] view of the academic disciplines more than the disciplines influenced [their] view of the gospel.*²³

Similarly, President Boyd K. Packer once urged Church Educational System (CES) faculty to avoid judging “the Church, its doctrine, organization, and leadership, present and past, by the principles of their own profession”; rather, he said, we should “judge the professions of man against the revealed word of the Lord.”²⁴

All BYU faculty enjoy full academic freedom to teach and model this expansive view of education. At most other universities, faculty are constrained by understandable academic conventions from mixing their personal religious views freely with their teaching and scholarly work. Indeed, on most campuses these days, they would probably be expected to bracket their faith to avoid such mixing.²⁵ The institutional academic freedom allowed by BYU’s explicit, written religious mission consciously removes those brackets, like taking the mute out of a trumpet. And that unmuting allows the talented trumpets of BYU faculty to give an especially certain sound while integrating their faith with their academic teaching—a fortunate quality both for BYU students and for Latter-day Saints generally.

One historical example of this integrated scholarly paradigm was Elder B. H. Roberts, who wrote the six-volume *Comprehensive History of the Church* in 1930. Some current Latter-day Saint historians consider his work

*a high point in the publication of Church history to that time. Most earlier works were either attacks upon or defenses of the Church. Although Roberts’s study was a kind of defense, he set a more even tone, a degree of uncommon objectivity.*²⁶

Elder Roberts did write with uncommon objectivity, but his faith was not in brackets. As Truman G. Madsen wrote in his biography of Elder Roberts:

*Some of Roberts’s critics have sought to discredit the approach to history that makes it a passionate part of one’s own being—lived through—and they make it instead a specialist’s retreat, a professional game for which only the detached are qualified. Those critics build their reputations by poking at the ashes. At his best B. H. Roberts took from the altars of the past not the ashes, but the fire. And in the pages of his best writing, the fire still burns.*²⁷

I know it isn’t easy to emulate that example, even though it is desirable. For my own research and writing on constitutional law and family law, I found myself instinctively looking to the gospel for the most basic premises for my reasoning—but I also knew that I had to speak the language and accept the constraints of my academic discipline if I wanted the best scholarly editors to publish my work.

The best way for a Latter-day Saint student to reconcile the competing values of faith and intellect is to be mentored by teachers and leaders whose daily lives, attitudes, and teaching authentically demonstrate how deep religious faith and demanding intellectual rigor are mutually reinforcing.

Academic disciplines and individual circumstances obviously vary, but many BYU faculty today do try to see their disciplines, the world, and their students through the lens of the gospel. That is why since the early 1990s, BYU devotional speakers now regularly include BYU faculty, not just General Authorities, as had typically been the previous pattern. That is also why the most capable BYU faculty from other academic disciplines have at times been recruited to teach religion classes on campus.

In addition, faculty whose lives reflect a completeness of heart, soul, and mind can fulfill much of President McKay's vision by the way they mentor their students—in how they share themselves both in class and in personal interactions. Recent research among BYU students tells us that a great deal of “spiritually strengthening” and “intellectually enlarging”²⁸ teaching on the campus comes from personal examples and mentoring by professors in all disciplines.

When faculty feel responsible for students' personal development as well as for their cognitive education, they will find ways to let their students see how gifted Latter-day Saint teachers and scholars integrate their professional competence into their overarching religious faith—“complete person” role modeling that those students are much less likely to find elsewhere. As BYU's academic stature keeps growing, its faculty will feel increased pressures to be more concerned with published scholarship and national reputation than with their students. Yet at the same time, as the new CES guidelines²⁹ recognize, the current moment seems to pose greater challenges to students' religious faith, which heightens each student's need for informed and faith-filled mentoring.

Alan L. Wilkins, former BYU academic vice president, recently described the sobering implications of these competing pressures:

*Some will argue that we just have to be more scholarly in today's context to have much influence in the larger academic community. How and whether that can be done and still strengthen our students spiritually in ways that build faith and character . . . is the most important question before us at BYU currently.*³⁰

Expectations of BYU Religious Education Faculty

President Kevin J. Worthen has distributed to you a document titled “Strengthening Religious Education in Institutions of Higher Education,” approved by the Church Board of Education on June 12, 2019. These guidelines state that “the purpose of religious education is to teach the restored gospel of Jesus Christ from the scriptures and modern prophets in a way that helps each student develop faith in” the Father, the Son, His

Atonement, and the restored gospel; to help students “become lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ”; and to “strengthen their ability to find answers, resolve doubts, [and] respond with faith.”³¹ The statement then describes the conditions that guide religion faculty hiring, work, and promotion—providing, for example, that faculty must “be sound doctrinally.”³²

This document reaffirms principles that the board (which has always included the First Presidency) has needed to reemphasize every generation or so since BYU's founding in 1875, primarily due to the recurring tendency of some BYU faculty to teach and write about religion from a more secular perspective.

An important early example of this tendency unfolded in the early 1900s. The board had designated Brigham Young Academy as a university in 1903. Then, starting in 1907, President George H. Brimhall hired two sets of brothers—Ralph and William Chamberlin and Henry and Joseph Peterson—who had the academic credentials to help “transform the . . . college into a full-fledged university, comparable to the country's recognized universities.”³³ The men taught biology, philosophy, education, and psychology. Three of the four held graduate degrees from the University of Chicago, Harvard, and Cornell; the other had studied at Harvard, Chicago, and the University of California.

The new faculty members all believed they had successfully reconciled the modernist ideas they had encountered in graduate school with their religious faith; indeed, they were convinced that their enlarged intellectual perspectives would enrich the “ideal of education which had [always] been cherished in the Church” by harmonizing all knowledge “within an institution devoted primarily to religious education.”³⁴ Thus they embarked on a well-intentioned “campaign to enliven [BYU] students academically by introducing the latest developments” in the major disciplines.³⁵ As it turned out, however, their views essentially “discounted the historical reality of any scripture.”³⁶

In a 1909 article in BYU's student newspaper, for instance, Ralph Chamberlin “drew a sharp distinction between history and legend”³⁷ because “history countenances only such reports as are

[empirically] verifiable.”³⁸ Thus such early Hebrew stories as the Tower of Babel, the Flood, and Jonah are best understood as legends and poetic myths, he said, because “poetry is a superior medium for conveying religious truth.”³⁹

Initial student reactions to these ideas were positive, partly because the new professors “were dynamic, articulate and very popular.”⁴⁰ One student later said she had initially been disturbed to learn “that the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden may not be literally true,”⁴¹ but she, like most other students, had tried to be open to the enlightened modern views. Indeed, when President Brimhall was later threatening to release three of the new professors, a petition signed by more than 80 percent of the BYU student body supported the professors.⁴²

By the end of 1910, reports from disturbed local Church leaders and parents led Horace H. Cummings, superintendent of Church education, to investigate. After finding that most of the students and many of the faculty were accepting the new theories, Cummings reported to the board that the new professors were teaching BYU faculty to apply secular theories to Church teachings “in such a way as to disturb, if not destroy, the faith of the pupils.”⁴³ Noel B. Reynolds has aptly summarized Cummings’s report:

[The] *inspiration* [for the modernist views] *came directly from higher criticism of the Bible as articulated in the writings of Lyman Abbot, who regarded the Bible as a collection of myths and folklore. Christ’s temptation was regarded as allegory; John the Revelator was not literally translated. Sin was redefined as ignorance. . . . Visions and revelations were mentally induced; the literal reality of Joseph Smith’s visions was questioned. The application of the theory of evolution required new characterizations of the fall and Christ’s atonement. . . . Proponents argued that rather than downgrading the scriptures, this enlightened understanding made [them] “more dear and more beautiful . . . , being broader in their applications.” These avant-garde professors also enjoyed the clear support of many [other Latter-day Saint] intellectuals.*⁴⁴

President Brimhall, who was originally sympathetic toward the new faculty, was troubled when

he heard some students say they had stopped praying. Then he had a dream that convinced him Cummings was right. In the dream that he reported to Cummings, President Brimhall saw a group of BYU professors casting, as if fishing, some kind of bait into the sky, where a flock of snow-white birds was happily circling. When the birds took the bait, they fell to the earth and turned out to be BYU students, who said to President Brimhall:

“Alas, we can never fly again!” . . .

*Their Greek philosophy had tied them to the earth. They could believe only what they could demonstrate in the laboratory. Their prayers could go no higher than the ceiling. They could see no heaven—no hereafter.*⁴⁵

A special committee that included several members of the Twelve verified the findings in the Cummings report. The board accepted these conclusions, resolving that teachers appointed “in Church schools must be in accord with Church doctrine. [Three of the] professors were given the choice of conforming or resigning.”⁴⁶ All three left BYU, along with a few other professors.⁴⁷

Some who disagreed with this outcome were distressed, believing that the board’s approach meant that BYU would never be able to teach essential academic subjects with the depth and rigor required of a legitimate university—let alone a superior one—and that students would not be allowed to explore the ambiguities sometimes found in biblical and Church history and doctrine. However, experience since then on both counts resoundingly shows otherwise.

Then, in the years after the first institute of religion was founded in 1926 at the University of Idaho, a number of institute teachers and BYU religion teachers left Utah to seek advanced degrees in religion at noted universities in an effort to “set an academic standard in theology.”⁴⁸ Some of them, such as Sidney B. Sperry, returned with superb graduate school training guided by bedrock faith that enabled a lifelong contribution of teaching and scholarship to BYU’s mission in religious education.

Indeed, Professor Sperry’s experience at the University of Chicago Divinity School had been

so successful that apostle and commissioner of Church education Joseph F. Merrill invited several professors from the Chicago Divinity School to teach at BYU's summer school in the 1930s—echoing a pattern from the 1920s, when other prominent non-Latter-day Saint Bible scholars had been invited to lecture at BYU's summer school on religious education and how to teach the Bible.⁴⁹

Building on this Chicago connection, the Church encouraged a number of Latter-day Saint graduate students to seek divinity school training there and elsewhere, as Elder Merrill and the Brethren wanted to bolster the ranks of qualified teachers of religion for both BYU and the emerging institutes of religion.

A number of these teachers returned fortified with Sperry-like attitudes and training. Several others, however, were overly influenced by their graduate school religion professors who, like those three BYU faculty members in 1910, reflected the growing academic secularism of their time. As later described by Elder Boyd K. Packer, himself a career religion teacher before his call as a General Authority, “A number of them went [to graduate programs in religion in the 1920s and 1930s]. Some who went never returned. And some of them who returned never came back.”⁵⁰ A few of these actually left the Church, “and with each [of these] went a following of [their] students—a terrible price to pay.”⁵¹

Elder John A. Widtsoe agreed: “Heaven forbid that we shall send our men away again to Divinity schools for training. The experiment, well intentioned, did not work out.”⁵²

These unfortunate developments became the catalyst for what may be the most influential discourse on Church education in the last century: “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” delivered by President J. Reuben Clark Jr. to Church religion teachers at Aspen Grove in 1938. (For example, I saw President Marion G. Romney put aside his own notes and quote this entire talk as his message to the BYU faculty in the early 1970s.) In this address, President Clark paid tribute to the teachers’ loyalty, sacrifice, faith, and righteous desires. He asked God to bless them with “entrance to the hearts of those you teach and

then make you know that as you enter there, you stand in holy places.”⁵³ He praised the youth of the Church, saying, “They want to gain testimonies of [the gospel’s] truth,” and added soberly that these youth are

not now doubters but . . . seekers after truth. Doubt must not be planted in their hearts. Great is the burden and the condemnation of any teacher who sows doubt in a trusting soul. . . .

*These students fully sense the hollowness of teachings that would make the gospel plan a mere system of ethics.*⁵⁴

A generation later, when Boyd K. Packer was the supervisor of seminaries and institutes, he heard some local Church leaders report that, “while studying religion at Church schools,” members of their stakes “had lost their testimonies” because some faculty were teaching “the unusual things that they had discovered in their academic wandering.”⁵⁵ As had happened in 1911 and in 1938, these concerns led the First Presidency in 1954 to send Elder Harold B. Lee, assisted by other General Authorities, to instruct and correct all of the Church’s religion teachers during five weeks of summer school at BYU.

In 1958 the faculty in BYU’s Division of Religion successfully petitioned the board to be designated the College of Religious Instruction as part of their effort “to *elevate* religion . . . to [a] high level of *academic respectability*.”⁵⁶

However, in 1972, during his first year as BYU president, President Dallin H. Oaks felt a need to review a broad range of issues in religious education. So he asked me (I was then his assistant) to help research and evaluate those issues. In addition to extensive historical research and selected in-depth interviews, we invited written comments from all religion faculty.

After the board considered President Oaks’s findings and recommendations, they made some important changes that sent messages reaffirming familiar historic principles. For example, graduate degrees in religion were eliminated. As Elder Packer later explained, the Brethren hoped the nonreligion faculty at BYU would lead the world as authorities in their disciplines. But in

the field of religion, “it is not to a university . . . that the world must turn for ultimate authority.”⁵⁷ Rather, the First Presidency and the Twelve are those who have ultimate religious authority in the Church.

Moreover, the title College of Religious Instruction was replaced by Religious Education. One of the messages here was that religious education shouldn’t be limited to one college; rather, all BYU academic colleges should contribute to and draw from religious education. Aligning with this direction, President Oaks initiated a process to select carefully a number of faculty from the other colleges whom he then invited to teach a Book of Mormon class on a continuing basis. To underscore his commitment, he assigned himself to teach one of those classes. In addition, the board wanted to signal that the faculty from *all* disciplines should feel responsible “for the spiritual development of their students.”⁵⁸ Another implicit message was that the typical assumptions behind “publish or perish” shouldn’t apply in the same way to religion faculty as they might in other academic colleges.

In a meeting held two years after these changes were announced, Elder Packer delivered a key discourse—some of which I have quoted—on the history of Church religious education.⁵⁹ The occasion for that meeting was the retirement of Dean Roy W. Doxey and the introduction of Jeffrey R. Holland, then thirty-three years old, as the new dean of Religious Education at BYU. It was an appropriate time for reflection and recalibration. I recommend President Packer’s talk for frequent rereading.

Later on, my assignments at BYU–Idaho and then at BYU in Provo required my attendance at twice-monthly meetings around a conference table with the Church Board of Education and its executive committee. Listening to the Brethren in those small-scale settings for fourteen years taught me volumes about how the First Presidency and the Twelve have consistently viewed religious education and faculty issues at BYU. The priorities I heard during those meetings are completely consistent with the guidelines we have now been given—and those given and repeated since 1911.

Progress in Religion and Scholarship

During the 1970s and 1980s, BYU took an astonishing leap forward in the quality of its teaching, learning, and scholarship. The higher education community began to see the university in an increasingly favorable light. A national *U.S. News and World Report* poll in the mid-1990s ranked BYU among the country’s top twenty-five undergraduate teaching universities.

These decades ran parallel with a general cultural revolution that had been ignited on college campuses by student free-speech protests at Berkeley in 1964—a movement with vague but multiple causes that spread and eventually shook the very foundations of American education, challenging traditions and institutional authority at every hand. The momentum of the student movement was accelerated by perceived overlaps with such broader public causes as the campaign for racial equality and opposition to the war in Vietnam. It also fueled and was fueled by growing secularization and a passionate emphasis on individual rights.

In this environment, BYU’s increased academic quality attracted many able new faculty whose graduate school training often reflected the new individualistic, anti-institutional assumptions. Still, most of these new professors felt downright liberated by BYU’s religious atmosphere because nearly all of them were devoted Latter-day Saints who welcomed the freedom—not allowed elsewhere—to include their religious beliefs in their teaching. As the number of new faculty grew, so did the number of gifted students. Their presence and their curiosity enriched both the intellectual and spiritual quality of campus-wide conversations. They wanted to know how to articulate and how to exemplify BYU’s educational vision in ways that would enliven its spiritual foundations while helping the university contribute seriously to a society riven with intellectual confusion and growing moral decay.

However, as had happened in prior generations, a few of the faculty attracted by BYU’s increased stature felt more allegiance to the secular and sometimes politicized values of their graduate school disciplines than to the traditional

religious values of the campus. As the university's provost from 1989 to 1996, I saw repeatedly what happened when the values of these few faculty clashed with the expectations of the board, other faculty, students, and the larger BYU community. In some ways those days felt like a sequel to the Brimhall era of 1911. Yet the 1990s version was more subtle and complex because faculty and student attitudes ranged across a broad spectrum of mostly desirable values and attitudes rather than fitting into neat black-and-white compartments that asked for a simple choice between intellectual and spiritual values.

These circumstances required the board and BYU to clarify—once more—some key concepts and relationships among faculty, students, administration, and the board about the very idea of BYU. We needed a meeting of the minds; we needed to become of one heart. And our resolution needed full participation by the faculty and the board, with a written set of principles that would bless both us and those who came after us with clarity, harmony, and shared purpose.

In a story too long to recount here, the administration appointed a faculty committee on academic freedom chaired by John S. Tanner of the English Department and assisted by James D. Gordon of the Law School. Over the course of many demanding months, the committee drafted and redrafted a twenty-five-page policy statement that defined and integrated the roles of both individual faculty academic freedom and the university's institutional academic freedom as a Church-sponsored university.

As eventually approved by both the faculty and the board, this statement, which is still official BYU policy, represents an informed consensus that blends individual and institutional academic freedom into a harmonious reaffirmation of BYU's character and mission—in President McKay's familiar words, "a religious institution . . . established for the sole purpose of associating with facts of science, art, literature, and philosophy the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

A key portion of the policy is based on past board guidelines, applying them in more specific terms:

*The exercise of individual and institutional academic freedom must be a matter of reasonable limitations [on individual freedom]. In general, at BYU a limitation is reasonable when the faculty behavior or expression **seriously and adversely** affects the university mission or the Church. . . . Examples would include expression with students or in public that:*

- *contradicts or opposes, rather than analyzes or discusses, fundamental Church doctrine or policy;*
- *deliberately attacks or derides the Church or its general leaders; or*
- *violates the Honor Code because the expression is dishonest, illegal, unchaste, profane, or unduly disrespectful of others.*

Reasonable limits are based on careful consideration of what lies at the heart of the interests of the Church and the mission of the university.⁶⁰

Religious Education in the Digital Age

The decades from the early 1990s until today then ushered in the digital age, which has introduced totally unforeseen and massive challenges and opportunities for religious education everywhere. As President M. Russell Ballard said to all CES religious educators in 2016:

It was only a generation ago that our young people's access to information about our history, doctrine, and practices was basically limited to materials printed by the Church. Few students came in contact with alternative interpretations. Mostly, our young people lived a sheltered life.

Our curriculum at that time, though well-meaning, did not prepare students for today—a day when students have instant access to virtually everything about the Church from every possible point of view. Today, what they see on their mobile devices is likely to be faith-challenging as much as faith-promoting. Many of our young people are more familiar with Google than they are with the gospel, more attuned to the Internet than to inspiration, and more involved with Facebook than with faith.⁶¹

President Ballard also said:

Gone are the days when a student asked an honest question and a teacher responded, “Don’t worry about it!” Gone are the days when a student raised a sincere concern and a teacher bore his or her testimony as a response intended to avoid the issue. Gone are the days when students were protected from people who attacked the Church. . . .

You can help students by teaching them what it means to combine study and faith as they learn. Teach them by modeling this skill and approach in class.⁶²

As part of its response to this need, the Church posted eleven new Gospel Topics essays on churchofjesuschrist.org in 2015, providing thorough, well-documented articles on many of the topics that had attracted the most interest and visibility by anti-Church websites, podcasts, and blogs—topics such as plural marriage, race and the priesthood, gender, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Heavenly Mother, and Joseph Smith’s translations of the Book of Mormon and the book of Abraham.

All of these and similarly controversial topics had been described in detail for years by Latter-day Saint scholars—as reflected, for example, in the impressive four volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, jointly published by the Macmillan Company and BYU in 1992. But until the advent of the internet, encyclopedias, like typical anti-Church literature, had remained buried in accessible but little-used libraries.

In 2016, however, President Ballard counseled Church religion teachers to

know the content in these [Gospel Topics] essays like you know the back of your hand. If you have questions about them, then please ask someone who has studied them and understands them. . . .

You should also become familiar with the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Church history section on [churchofjesuschrist.org] and other resources by faithful [Latter-day Saint] scholars.⁶³

This general context helps to explain why the new 2019 guidelines for strengthening religious education include among the purposes of religious education “strengthen[ing] [students’] ability to find answers, resolv[ing] doubts, respond[ing]

with faith, and giv[ing] reason for the hope within them in whatever challenges they may face.”⁶⁴ It may also help explain why *Saints*, the new official history of the Church, is written not as a scholarly treatise but in narrative language and personal stories that are accessible to younger readers while providing the natural historical context for previously less understood issues.

Another development that has been hastened by the digital age is the emergence of academic Mormon studies programs at several leading universities, headed by either Latter-day Saint or other scholars. “Mormon studies is the interdisciplinary academic study of the beliefs, practices, history and culture of those known by the term *Mormon*.”⁶⁵

The Mormon studies movement is in many ways beneficial for the Church, having considerably increased awareness of the Church’s doctrines, history, and culture among many secular university students and faculty—both a cause and an effect of the Church’s having come increasingly “out of obscurity”⁶⁶ in recent decades.

At the same time, writing and teaching from a Mormon studies perspective poses special challenges for Latter-day Saint teachers, especially faculty at Church-sponsored campuses, because the general conventions of academic study typically expect participants to bracket their faith and to reason from secular, not religious, premises. In other words, Mormon studies scholars are expected to look at Church doctrine and history through the lenses of their academic disciplines—as opposed to looking at their disciplines through the lens of the gospel, as contemplated in President McKay’s vision of BYU.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland addressed these risks in a significant discourse to the faculty and staff at BYU’s Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship in 2018. Speaking on behalf of the BYU Board of Trustees, Elder Holland said that, for one thing, the term *Mormon studies* was no longer appropriate for use by the Maxwell Institute, given President Russell M. Nelson’s recent counsel about the use of *Mormon* by Church members.⁶⁷

Regarding secular premises, Elder Holland acknowledged that Mormon studies programs elsewhere are normally “oriented toward an

audience *not* of our faith and *not* for faith-building purposes."⁶⁸ And while these programs may "provide a 'thoughtful consideration of the Restoration's distinctive culture and convictions,'"⁶⁹ such secular premises for teaching and writing by Latter-day Saints for Church audiences or those on the BYU campus would be "certainly . . . troubling" to the BYU trustees.⁷⁰

As for BYU faculty who bracket their faith for the sake of Mormon studies expectations, Elder Holland said that "any scholarly endeavor at BYU . . . must never be *principally* characterized by stowing one's faith in a locker while we have a great exchange with those not of our faith."⁷¹ He then quoted Elder Maxwell's comment: "Some hold back by not appearing overly committed to the Kingdom, lest they incur the disapproval of . . . peers who might disdain such consecration."⁷² Elder Holland added that one who "studiously pursues strict *neutrality* by 'bracketing' will miss the chance for genuine, even profound, dialogue on matters of *common* interest"⁷³—an approach that "has cost scholars credibility with readers because . . . no one knows" where the authors stand.⁷⁴

So, to come full circle on the matter of the board's expectations of BYU religion faculty, the history of BYU makes it pretty clear that the new guidelines President Worthen has given us are indeed a restatement of principles and values the board has upheld since 1911—consistently applying those principles as needed to the changing circumstances of the times.

Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 97:3.
2. See Harold R. Laycock, s.v. "academies," in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:11.
3. Adam S. Bennion, quoted in minutes of the meeting of the General Church Board of Education, 23 March 1926, 160, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; quoted in Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Provo: BYU Press, 1975–76), 2:76.

4. Adam S. Bennion, quoted in board minutes, 23 March 1926, 160; quoted in Wilkinson, *Years*, 2:76.

5. David O. McKay, quoted in minutes of the meeting of the General Church Board of Education, 3 March 1926, 148, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU; emphasis added.

6. David O. McKay, quoted in board minutes, 3 March 1926, 150; emphasis added.

7. Gregory A. Prince and William Robert Wright, *David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005), 196.

8. Negotiations between the Idaho legislature, local college leaders, and the Church continued throughout the difficult Great Depression years of 1931 to 1937. In 1934, David O. McKay was called into the First Presidency, and he became "'the dominant educational advisor in the church.' His influence was evident when" the college finally "received the welcome news that Ricks was to be maintained as a Church school" (David L. Crowder, *The Spirit of Ricks: A History of Ricks College* [Rexburg, Idaho: Ricks College, 1997], 142; for a complete account, see pages 109–51).

9. See Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 196–97.

10. David O. McKay, "The Church University," *Messenger* 11, no. 10 (October 1937): 3–4; emphasis added and emphasis in original; quoting *Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. Noah Porter (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1907), s.v. "theology," 1495.

11. David O. McKay, quoted in board minutes, 3 March 1926, 148.

12. David O. McKay, "True Education," remarks at the dedication of the Church College of New Zealand, Temple View, New Zealand, 24 April 1958; quoted in Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 160–61. Also McKay, "True Education," *Instructor*, August 1961, 253.

13. David O. McKay, quoted in board minutes, 23 March 1926, 159; also quoted in Wilkinson, *Years*, 2:75.

14. Marion G. Romney, quoting Doctrine and Covenants 93:53, in "Becoming J. Reuben Clark's Law School," address delivered at the opening ceremonies of the first day of classes for the BYU J. Reuben Clark Law School, 27 August 1973.
15. The Aims of a BYU Education (1 March 1995).
16. Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," pre-school address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967.
17. Aims of BYU.
18. Aims of BYU.
19. Nathan Oman, "'Out of Zion Shall Go Forth the Law' (Isaiah 2:3)," *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 1 (2000): 132.
20. Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 166.
21. Hafen, quoting Neal A. Maxwell, in *A Disciple's Life*, 166.
22. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life*, 166.
23. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life*, 166–67.
24. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater Than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1981): 259.
25. See Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century," *2018 Annual Report*, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 16; J. Spencer Fluhman, "Friendship: An Editor's Introduction," *Mormon Studies Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 3–5; Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 105; and Stephen Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed: A Case for the Religion Scholar to Reveal More of Where He or She Is Coming From," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (Winter/Spring 2004): 10–11.
26. Douglas D. Alder, s.v. "Comprehensive History of the Church," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:303.
27. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 366.
28. Aims of BYU.
29. See Church Educational System (CES), "Strengthening Religious Education in Institutions of Higher Education" (12 June 2019).
30. Alan L. Wilkins to Bruce C. Hafen, email correspondence, 23 December 2016; emphasis added.
31. CES, "Strengthening Religious Education."
32. CES, "Strengthening Religious Education."
33. Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:409.
34. Ralph V. Chamberlin, *Life and Philosophy of W. H. Chamberlin* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1925), 137.
35. Richard Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict Between Secular Knowledge and Religious Belief," *Sunstone* 10, no. 5 (May 1985): 30.
36. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 20.
37. Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 31.
38. Ralph V. Chamberlin, "Some Early Hebrew Legends," *White and Blue* 13, no. 16 (4 February 1910): 130; quoted in Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 31. "The fundamental issue here is not the conclusion that Chamberlin comes to . . . but his insistence that the study of the Bible must be governed by the same canons of historical proof and evidence that are basic in historical research generally" (Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 34, note 7).
39. Chamberlin, "Hebrew Legends," 132; quoted in Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 31.
40. Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 31.
41. Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1941), 187; quoted in Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 31.
42. See Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 33; see also Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:427–28.
43. Horace H. Cummings, letter quoted in minutes of the meeting of the General Church Board of Education, 2 December 1910, 176, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU; quoted in Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:419.
44. Reynolds, "Coming Forth," 21; quoting Horace H. Cummings in report to Joseph F. Smith and members of the General Church Board of Education, 21 January 1911, appendix 17 in

Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:599. The Cummings report has also been published in Richard Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU, 1911," *Sunstone* 4, no. 1 (January/February 1979): 12–13.

45. George H. Brimhall, as told to Horace H. Cummings and recorded in "Lesson XLI: False Doctrines in Church Schools," in *Autobiography of Horace Cummings*, unpublished, page 41-6, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU; spelling modernized. Quoted in Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:422; see also page 421.

46. Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict," 32. See Wilkinson, *Years*, 1:425–26, 428, note 63.

47. See Reynolds, "Coming Forth," 22.

48. Boyd K. Packer, "Seek Learning Even by Study and Also by Faith," address to BYU instructors of religion, April 1974; in *"That All May Be Edified": Talks, Sermons, and Commentary by Boyd K. Packer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 43.

49. See Packer, "Seek Learning," 43.

50. Packer, "Seek Learning," 43.

51. Packer, "Seek Learning," 43–44.

52. John A. Widtsoe, letter to Howard S. McDonald, 19 November 1948, in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, BYU; quoted in Wilkinson, *Years*, 2:455.

53. J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Charted Course of the Church in Education," address given during BYU summer school at BYU Aspen Grove, 8 August 1938.

54. Clark, "Charted Course."

55. Packer, "Seek Learning," 45.

56. Richard O. Cowan, "A History of the College of Religious Instruction," unpublished manuscript, October 1972, 27–28; quoted in Packer, "Seek Learning," 47; emphasis in Packer.

57. Packer, "Seek Learning," 48.

58. Packer, "Seek Learning," 49.

59. See Packer, "Seek Learning," 41–55.

60. BYU Academic Freedom Policy (1 April 1993), policy.byu.edu/view/academic-freedom-policy; emphasis in original.

61. M. Russell Ballard, "The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century," address to CES religious educators, 26 February 2016, churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century.

62. Ballard, "Opportunities and Responsibilities."

63. Ballard, "Opportunities and Responsibilities."

64. CES, "Strengthening Religious Education."

65. Wikipedia, s.v. "Mormon studies."

66. Doctrine and Covenants 1:30.

67. See Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 14; see also Russell M. Nelson, "The Correct Name of the Church," *Ensign*, November 2018.

68. Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 15; emphasis in original.

69. Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 15; quoting Terryl Givens, David Holland, and Reid Neilson, External Review of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, December 2014, 6.

70. Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 15.

71. Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 16; emphasis in original.

72. Neal A. Maxwell, "Discipleship and Scholarship," *BYU Studies* 32, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 8; quoted in Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 16.

73. Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 16; emphasis in original. Paraphrasing Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible*, 84; see also page 105.

74. Holland, "Maxwell Legacy," 16, summing up Stephen Prothero's thoughts; see Prothero, "Belief Unbracketed," 10–11.