

Mixing Reason and Faith

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It is always a pleasure to be with you as we celebrate the onset of a new year together. This is a wonderful time in our BYU history, in the history of the Church, and even the history of the world. Yes, we are faced with many problems, challenges, and disappointments in our personal and collective lives, and yet with all of the things we might wish were different, there is much evidence that these are the “best of times.”

A couple of months ago there was an interesting article in the *Deseret Morning News* that had been reprinted from the *Washington Post*. It was authored by the Reverend John I. Jenkins, president of the University of Notre Dame, and by his provost, Thomas Burish (“Reason and Faith at Harvard,” *Washington Post*, 23 October 2006, A21). Their article began with this question: “What should a properly educated college graduate of the early 21st century know?”

I immediately and reflexively asked myself the question “What should a properly educated LDS college graduate of the early 21st century know?” And, more specifically, “What should a properly educated and motivated Latter-day Saint BYU graduate of our day know?”

I shall return to my questions in a few moments. Let me first address the query of our friends from Notre Dame.

They noted that a task force on general education at Harvard University had recently proposed an answer to their question by stating that, among other things, such a graduate should know “the role of religion in contemporary, historical, or future events—personal, cultural, national, or international.” To meet this goal, the Harvard committee recommended that every Harvard student be required to take at least one course in the area that the committee described as “Reason and Faith.”

My understanding is that this recommendation has been suggested only and has not been enacted. It likely will never be, and Jenkins and Burish acknowledge this.

As reported by the Notre Dame leaders, the Harvard committee found that today’s college students struggle with an academic environment that they describe as “profoundly secular.” Most would agree with this assessment

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of Harvard University and perhaps most American institutions of higher education. I doubt our friends at Notre Dame consider that description to be completely accurate of their campus, and I know of no one, thank heaven, who would suggest that to be the case at BYU.

Father Jenkins and Dr. Burish gave a historical perspective that reminds us that secular preeminence has not always been the case at Harvard and other great universities. In fact, most have their roots in and early support from various religious communities. “For centuries,” Jenkins and Burish report, “scholars, scientists and artists agreed that convictions of faith were wholly compatible with the highest levels of reasoning, inquiry and creativity.”

Sadly, we know that is no longer the case at many places. On the other hand, we gladly proclaim our assertion that faith and reason are both vibrant and integrated at Brigham Young University. For this we are profoundly grateful.

Please make no mistake: I see no effort nor momentum to make BYU’s approach to learning the academic model for emulation broadly across this country or any other. What we do see is something of an awakening to the reality that both reason and faith have a place in the academy and that, for many, this is not only true but also appropriate. It increasingly seems to be recognized that religion, in spite of many detractors and critics, is clearly a fact of 21st-century life.

According to Harvard University’s own data, over 90 percent of entering Harvard students discuss religion and more than 70 percent attend religious services at least some of the time. The Harvard task force observes that when students get to college, they

often struggle—sometimes for the first time in their lives—to sort out the relationship between their own beliefs and practices, the different beliefs and practices of fellow students, and the profoundly secular and intellectual world of the academy itself. [Preliminary Report: Task Force on General

Education (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Faculty of Arts and Sciences, October 2006), 18; www.fas.harvard.edu/~secfas/Gen_Ed_Prelim_Report.pdf]

Without being unduly critical, I note that this observation from Cambridge, Massachusetts, gives added cogency to the BYU Mission and Aims statements.

Please be certain that the folks at Harvard are not talking about framing secular learning in an environment of sustaining faith such as we strive to achieve at BYU. Let me return again to the words of the Harvard Task Force:

Harvard is no longer an institution with a religious mission, but religion is a fact that Harvard’s graduates will confront in their lives both in and after college. We therefore require students to take one course in a category entitled Reason and Faith. Let us be clear [the committee continues]. Courses in Reason and Faith are not religious apologetics. They are courses that examine the interplay between religion and various aspects of . . . culture and society. [Preliminary Report, 19]

A number of other recent, credible academic studies have reached similarly interesting and somewhat surprising conclusions in contrast to those that subscribe to the “God is dead” school of thinking first rampant in higher education circles decades ago and persisting with some dominance in many American universities today.

The Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA is currently conducting a broad-reaching study of the spiritual life of more than 112,000 American college students representing 236 U.S. institutions. The survey so far has found that 79 percent professed a belief in God, 69 percent claimed to pray, and about three-fourths reported attending religious services at least some of the time (“Reason and Faith at Harvard”; also *The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students’*

Search for Meaning and Purpose [Los Angeles: UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, 2004–05], 4; <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/spirituality/reports/FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>).

Baylor University also recently conducted a national study entitled “The Values and Beliefs of the American Public.” They estimate that 85 to 90 percent of Americans “believe in God,” over two-thirds pray at least weekly, and half attend church monthly (*American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the U.S.* [Waco, Texas: Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, September 2006], 4; www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf).

All of these studies and some others confirm the assertion that many people have strongly held religious and spiritual values. While I personally might not be quite as optimistic as Sir John Marks Templeton, the 1998 recipient of a BYU honorary doctorate and head of the Templeton Foundation, which financed many of the aforementioned studies, his observation does deserve careful consideration:

Of all the encouraging trends that mark the closing years of the twentieth century, none is more heartening or more important than the remarkable spread of spiritual values. [John M. Templeton, *Is Progress Speeding Up?: Our Multiplying Multitudes of Blessings* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1997), 243]

While we might find all of these observations to be interesting and even comforting, you might well ask, “What does this have to do with us?” I believe a great deal. While we subscribe to, and occasionally glory in, the assertion of Peter that we are “a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9), there is so much that we have in common with all of Heavenly Father’s children.

I return to the question posed at the outset: “What should a properly educated Latter-day Saint BYU graduate of the early 21st century

know?” The answer is both in what we share and in what we have to share.

First, I would assert that the properly educated Latter-day Saint BYU graduate should know what any properly educated college or university graduate should know. Implicit in this assertion is that if we ask more of the BYU graduate in some area, we do not excuse corresponding or compensatory deficits in other areas of what constitutes a proper education. In fact, we aspire explicitly to have our graduates be in the first rank of those deeply and broadly educated in all the dimensions that the academy would deem to be both desirable and essential. You will know that our Aims and Mission statements do not equivocate on this matter.

Second, Brigham Young University and its supporting trustees have the expectation that our Latter-day Saint graduates will also have a deep and profound understanding of and faith in some fundamentals and principles related to our Church and its doctrines. Let me refer to the words of President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., given in 1938 in his “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” with which, hopefully, many of you students and all of the faculty are familiar:

In all this there are for the Church and for each and all of its members, two prime things which may not be overlooked, forgotten, shaded, or discarded:

First: That Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh, the Creator of the world, the Lamb of God, the Sacrifice for the sins of the world, the Atoner for Adam’s transgression; that He was crucified; that His spirit left His body; that He died; that He was laid away in the tomb; that on the third day His spirit was reunited with His body, which again became a living being; that He was raised from the tomb a resurrected being, a perfect Being, the First Fruits of the Resurrection; that He later ascended to the Father; and that because of His

death and by and through His resurrection every man born into the world since the beginning will be likewise literally resurrected. This doctrine is as old as the world. Job declared: “And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself and mine eyes shall behold, and not another.” (Job 19:26, 27.)

The resurrected body is a body of flesh and bones and spirit, and Job was uttering a great and everlasting truth. These positive facts, and all other facts necessarily implied therein, must all be honestly believed, in full faith, by every member of the Church.

The second of the two things to which we must all give full faith is: That the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods; that other heavenly visions followed to Joseph and to others; that the Gospel and the holy Priesthood after the Order of the Son of God were in truth and fact restored to the earth from which they were lost by the apostasy of the Primitive Church; that the Lord again set up His Church, through the agency of Joseph Smith; that the Book of Mormon is just what it professes to be; that to the Prophet came numerous revelations for the guidance, upbuilding, organization, and encouragement of the Church and its members; that the Prophet’s successors, likewise called of God, have received revelations as the needs of the Church have required, and that they will continue to receive revelations as the Church and its members, living the truth they already have, shall stand in need of more; that this is in truth the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and that its foundation beliefs are the laws and principles laid down in the Articles of Faith. These facts also, and each of them, together with all things necessarily implied therein or flowing therefrom, must stand, unchanged, unmodified, without dilution, excuse, apology, or avoidance; they may not be explained away or submerged. Without these two great beliefs the Church would cease to be the Church. [J. Reuben Clark, Jr., “The Charted Course of

the Church in Education,” talk given at Aspen Grove, 8 August 1938]

In this long quotation from President Clark’s foundational address we find an excellent summary of the special or additional things a properly educated Latter-day Saint BYU graduate of the early 21st century should know. I suspect in this regard most of you have already qualified, and I congratulate you. For those who may yet be struggling with any of the dimensions of President Clark’s outline, let me suggest that there is no better place than Brigham Young University—together with its student wards, stakes, and other support systems—to find, round out, and qualify for this remarkable knowledge.

As President Spencer W. Kimball taught when he asked Sister Naomi W. Randall to change one word in her wonderful hymn of testimony, “I Am a Child of God” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 301), more is required of us than just knowing, as vital as knowledge itself is. We must also “do.”

What is it that we must do? All of us—students, faculty, staff, and administration—are regularly reminded that as we come to BYU, we “enter to learn; go forth to serve.”

We, of course, serve in many and diverse ways and should always do so as we search for appropriate means and approaches to do even more and to do it better. One of the ways that we serve is by sharing what we have learned or polished or enhanced during our stay at BYU. Of course this means that if we have trained in education or engineering, nursing or neurosciences, in law or languages, in business or biology, or in any branch of learning available here at BYU, we apply the best and latest principles of these honored professions in the context of our ethical, gospel, and moral understandings. As we attempt to implement the counsel of the broad mandate of the Restoration scriptures, we commit to making a better world by contributing directly to strong

families, communities, congregations, companies, and other vital institutions. Listen to these words of the Lord:

Behold, I will hasten my work in its time. . . .

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. . . .

And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith. [D&C 88:73, 77–79, 118]

There is, however, even more that we can and must do. In addition to keeping the Lord's commandments faithfully, we must, as the Apostle Peter taught, "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

All of you who have served as missionaries and, hopefully, the rest of us as well know and appreciate that this is a very delicate and sensitive matter. It calls for decorum, tenderness, and tact. It demands great respect for the feelings, faith, traditions, and values of others. It requires understanding that those not of our Church background and culture often will not see things as we might or reach the same conclusions we do about the same observations and data. It mandates great reverence and respect for all individuals as children of God whatever their individual or current circum-

stances. It is expected that we not only preach the Golden Rule but also practice it. It asks for patience, long-suffering, forgiveness, and humility. Most of all, to have the opportunity to share the reason for our optimism, faith, and hope, we must live our lives with complete authenticity, including having full congruence of our behaviors and actions with the fundamentals we hold dear.

As we go about contributing in the ways that we have learned to serve while being students at Brigham Young University, we invite the verbal opportunities to share our hope and testimonies. Often it is more important that we can behaviorally bear our witness of these fundamental principles to those who observe and interact with us.

As I stated at the outset in reporting the interesting data on the feelings of so many college students with respect to reason and faith, I believe in many ways there are more with us than against us (see 2 Kings 6:16) and many "who are only kept from the truth because they know not where to find it" (D&C 123:12).

But it is not only in the outside world where we find these kindred souls. Across our campus are those who come seeking one kind of knowledge and find additional, unexpected light. These individuals not only come from the United States but also from around the world. They may be from California or Alabama, New Hampshire or Texas, from Turkey, Russia, Argentina, or from Sri Lanka, China, or Guatemala.

Each of their experiences is unique and personal. Yet there are some common themes. These individuals generally have big smiles across their faces. They are happy. They say they have found something of great worth. Listen to these comments:

"I felt something when I came to BYU. I felt something good like I've never felt before."

“I didn’t grow up believing there is a God, but now I have come to know my Heavenly Father. I know He loves me.”

“I used to think my life didn’t have any particular purpose. Now I know my Heavenly Father has a plan for me.”

“People were so kind and friendly. I wanted to know why.”

Sometimes it has been the example of great roommates or a caring faculty or staff member. Sometimes it has been the full-time missionaries. In one case it was the little LDS girl next door who many years ago tried to read the Book of Mormon to a young boy as he jumped on her trampoline.

The seeds of faith and light are planted, cultivated, nurtured, and grow bathed in the glow of His tender care—the behavioral and verbal testimony examples of Latter-day Saint BYU students and graduates on campus and around the world.

My prayer and the blessing I invoke upon us at the beginning of another year brimming with potential is that we will reflect regularly on what a properly educated Latter-day Saint BYU graduate of the 21st century will know and do and that we will then continue to get on with the exciting adventure of becoming and helping each other become more authentic examples of such. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.