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Photo by Brent R. Nordgren

Engaging Intellect and Feeding Faith: A Conversation with Robert L. Millet

INTERVIEW BY LLOYD D. NEWELL

Robert L. Millet (robert_millet@byu.edu) retired as Abraham O. Smoot University professor and professor of ancient scripture at BYU in January 2014.

Lloyd D. Newell is a professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

Robert L. Millet has been engaged in religious education as a teacher, writer, and administrator for nearly four decades. He has seen many changes in religious education over the years and is a good example of what it means to be a highly effective gospel scholar and educator. He is well known as a prolific writer and visionary leader, but is less well known as mentor and friend to countless students and faculty over the years. One BYU Religious Education faculty member told me that “Bob has certainly raised the bar in all aspects of what it means to be a religious educator—in good citizenship, in teaching and writing, and in caring about students and colleagues.” This interview is intended to provide valuable insight and inspiration into what it means to be an effective religious educator and scholar.

Millet joined the BYU Religious Education faculty in 1983 after working for LDS Social Services and Seminaries and Institutes of Religion. He received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in psychology from BYU and his PhD in religious studies from Florida State University. During his thirty years at BYU he has served as chair of the Department of Ancient Scripture, dean of Religious Education for ten years, Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding,

and publications director for the Religious Studies Center. He is the author or editor of more than seventy books and 180 articles and book chapters, dealing mostly with the doctrine and history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its relationship to other faiths. In the Church, Brother Millet has served as a Sunday School teacher, high councilor, bishop of two wards, stake president, temple ordinance worker, and member of the Church Materials Evaluation Committee. He and his wife, Shauna, are the parents of six children and twelve grandchildren and reside in Orem, Utah.

Newell: I've noted that there are religious educators who either know the Bible really well, or they know the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants. But something that has always impressed me about you is that you seem to know all the scriptures really well. How have you come to know the scriptures?

Millet: People will often ask about my method for studying. It's kind of like my goal-setting program. I don't have a single method, but I'd have to say that the one thing that's probably made me more conversant with all of the scriptures than I might otherwise have been is that I do a great deal of cross-referencing. I was doing a tremendous amount of cross-referencing before we ever received the new editions of the scriptures in 1979 and 1981. Now many of those cross-references are in the notes, but many are not. There are connections and patterns and principles and precepts I have seen that aren't found in the footnotes. I've always felt that one of the best things I could do as a teacher was identify and focus briefly on scriptures beyond the scriptural text under study that semester—if I were teaching a New Testament class, let's say, and the principle we were discussing was really expanded upon in the Book of Mormon or the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price, I needed to touch on that. I did this for two reasons: not just so that the students got everything that the scriptures taught on that topic, but also it seemed to me that the students needed to know that the scriptures all bear a united witness of Christ. Yes, if this is a New Testament class, we will focus 90 percent of our attention on the New Testament, but it was so much the better when I could draw upon other scriptures and demonstrate how they were connected to the New Testament. The phrase I stumbled across in the Book of Mormon (3 Nephi 23:14) and in the Gospel of Luke (24:27) is that the Savior "expounded all the scriptures in one." Now I think that means he opened all the scriptures and showed how they all bore a united testimony of

him. It was what the Master Teacher did and thus seemed to me to be a pattern for gospel teachers. Yes, it's a New Testament class, but in some ways it's only partially true to say this is a New Testament class. It's a class in the gospel of Jesus Christ with the New Testament as our guide through that study. And we're going to hit the text in the New Testament really heavy, but where another book of scripture bears witness of a principle—maybe even better than the New Testament does—we're going to turn to it. I never once had students complain about that in forty years of teaching the gospel, and I think they appreciated the connections.

Second, I never wanted to get stale in my teaching. I tried to teach different scriptural texts every year. As an illustration, I remember standing in the Maeser Building teaching an honors class, which was the third Book of Mormon class I had taught that day, all on the same things. I almost felt like I was saying, blah-blah-blah. I was just mouthing the material, the same ideas expressed the same way, and it frightened me. I left the building that afternoon, came back over to the Ancient Scripture department office, and I said I didn't want to teach Book of Mormon for a while. The secretary asked, "Have you had a bad experience?" I said, "No, no. I love the Book of Mormon. I just need some time to think." I spent the next year poring over the Book of Mormon in my personal study and came away at the end of the year with new eyes and new insights into the Nephite record. Because I never wanted to get stale, because I didn't want to sound staged or memorized, I always tried to teach a different preparation each year.

Newell: What do you do for your personal scripture study—when you're not preparing for a class, when you're not writing a book, what do you do for personal scripture study?

Millet: I generally read sequentially, but once in a while I read and study topically. I'll go to the Topical Guide on a given subject and read everything I can read, over and over. I finish that topic and go on to a new one. I don't want to get stale in my personal study either. I have tried to stay up with what the Church is studying in Gospel Doctrine. I've tried for the last thirty years to read through the standard works about every year and a half.

Newell: What books outside of scriptures have been the most important to you and have shaped your understanding of the gospel and your theological framework?

Millet: Good question. Beyond the scriptures, the most important book would be *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. After that, *Gospel*



Photo by Brent R. Nordgren

I probably wish I'd been home a little more. It's like people say: "Very few people look back on their life and say, 'I wish I'd stayed at the office more.'"

Doctrine by Joseph F. Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* by Joseph Fielding Smith, *The Promised Messiah* and *The Millennial Messiah* and *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith*, all by Bruce R. McConkie. It seems to me that a doctrinal mind like Bruce R. McConkie's comes around about once per dispensation. I was always drawn to the speeches and writings of Boyd K. Packer—I still am. I think the first thing I read by Brother Packer was his book on teaching, *Teach Ye Diligently*. Interestingly I read it in 1975 when it came out because that's the year I started teaching seminary. I soon thereafter discovered *The Holy Temple* and have read it many times. At about that same time the first collection of his writings called *That All May be Edified* came out. I turn to

that book regularly. His sermons through the decades have been powerful, comforting, and very insightful. Then one after another, as Brother Packer's books came out, I have devoured them and continue to refer to his teachings frequently.

I did the same with Elder Neal A. Maxwell's works. I occasionally have people ask me, "Why do you spend so much time with Church books? You ought to spend more time with the scriptures." Well, I spend an appreciable amount of time with the scriptures, but I've always appreciated the commentary that great teachers and thinkers offer. Brother Maxwell represented an intellectual approach to the gospel coupled with deep faith and testimony that was distinctive. There was no one, as you know, no one, quite like Neal A. Maxwell when it came to turning a phrase and teaching a profound lesson. I have read all of Elder Maxwell's books more than once.

I remember when Dallin H. Oaks gave a BYU devotional talk entitled "Pure in Heart." I was stirred by it, and not too long thereafter the book *Pure in Heart* came out. Later his book *The Lord's Way* was published; again, I consumed it. Elder Oaks combines a wonderful doctrinal mind with a legal background and an apostolic mantle that make his words powerful and penetrating.

Another thing—beginning when I was department chair, I stumbled across a radio channel in Provo that was an evangelical Christian channel. I would listen to that channel as I drove to work in the mornings, and I would listen to it as I drove home in the afternoons. There would be times when I was so caught up in what the speaker/teacher/preacher was saying that I sat in my car for forty-five minutes to an hour once I got to campus, just listening to those sermons. I was introduced to a whole new group of thinkers, a group of religious minds outside the LDS faith. I would listen to Chuck Swindoll and John MacArthur on the way to work. I would listen to Haddon Robinson and James Dobson on the way home. I began reading their books and have broadened out into other Christian perspectives. I haven't always agreed with everything they say, but I was often fascinated with how they came up with what they did. This excursion into Christian history and Christian theology has been life-changing for a couple of reasons. One, I am fully aware that I can learn a lot from people of other faiths. Some Mormons don't know that. Second, the more you study another faith, the deeper becomes your understanding of your own faith. I often say, "I have learned a ton about Christian history and theology in the last twenty-five years, but I've learned half a ton

about Mormonism.” So my whole entrance into the interfaith world I owe initially to some books I was reading and to some radio programs I was listening to. In looking back, I don’t believe this endeavor was in any way coincidental. Today I subscribe to several magazines and journals that are religious in scope. It seemed to me early on that the greatest compliment I could pay to the person I’m having a dialogue with is to know about their faith, to know enough about them to speak intelligently, maybe even to know who the key players in the field are and what the hot topics are. I have to say that this particular reading program has opened a number of doors; just being able to say, “Yes I am aware of that work” demonstrates that we are not narrow-minded, self-absorbed, or parochial.

Newell: Tell us about your administrative assignments in Religious Education, particularly your time as dean of Religious Education. In your judgment, what were some of the significant accomplishments during your tenure?

Millet: I will mention a few, and they are somewhat related. First, I felt the need to try our best to reinstitute a graduate program in Religious Education for S&I men and women. We had S&I teachers who were earning degrees in fields they didn’t really want to study, but they knew it would get them a bump in pay to have an advanced degree. My thought was, Why not provide a degree for them in something that’s right up their alley, the gospel, the restored gospel? But that was not an easy path. There had been graduate programs in religion when I was here as a young student that I had thought seriously about entering. But there was a part of me that said, “Yes, but what would you do with that degree? What would you do with a master’s or PhD in ancient scripture or Church history, with a clear LDS emphasis, unless you are working in the Church Educational System (S&I or one of the Church schools)?” It didn’t seem the wisest course to pursue at the time. Then the Brethren discontinued graduate degrees in religion in the mid-1970s. After I became dean, I began to push a little. I’m really grateful that Stan Peterson was the head of S&I and that we were good friends. We spent a lot of time together—a lot of time on the phone. I convinced Stan that it would be a good thing for his people, that it wasn’t necessary for them to take degrees in fields they weren’t even interested in just to have a master’s degree. Why not study something you like? Why not study something that had a direct bearing on your immediate work? After a lengthy period of study and investigation, and, I would add importantly, with Stan’s strong recommendation, the Brethren approved a Master of Arts degree in Religious Education. This

proved to be a boon to the chaplain candidates, as well, because the government began to require more and more credit hours in theology.

The other development, of course, is the creation of the journal the *Religious Educator*, which was an outgrowth of our discussions about the master’s program. I felt there needed to be an academic journal produced by the Religious Studies Center. The more Stan Peterson and I talked, the more we thought, “Why don’t we do this jointly? Why don’t we provide a journal for our people in Seminaries and Institutes and at BYU–Idaho, BYU–Hawaii, BYU–Provo, as well as Gospel Doctrine teachers throughout the Church? What about a journal whose whole focus is on teaching the gospel: including pedagogy and a study of the doctrines of the gospel and history of the Church?” I think that was an important move.

Another matter. We began to take a stronger academic thrust in the area of hiring new faculty—men and women who had excellent training in their fields, persons who taught the gospel well and knew the gospel thoroughly and at the same time had acquired the skills that would enable them to research and publish more often in serious academic venues. I don’t think we overdid it; I think the mix was about right. It became clear after a few years as dean that the greatest single challenge the dean of Religious Education has is allowing the pendulum to swing, but not too far either direction. On the one hand, we insist that our classroom, principally and primarily, is an experience for the student that is spiritually strengthening. At the same time, the students ought to be learning things, ought to have their minds stretched, ought to be acquiring a religious education that is intellectually enlarging. This shouldn’t just be a rehash of what they did in Sunday School or seminary; we should be helping them discover new intellectual insights into the scriptures and the history of the Church. Consequently we hired some amazing people during those years, professors who are still with us, men and women who have impacted the kingdom in important ways. Our administration didn’t initiate that development, but we—my associate deans Larry Dahl, Don Cannon, Brent Top, and Paul Hoskisson—moved it forward a bit. I also learned some things about leadership during that decade. I learned that a wise leader surrounds himself or herself with people smarter than he or she is; persons more capable than he or she is; persons who often have different perspectives.

Newell: Talk a little more about leadership. You’ve certainly been in leadership here at BYU, but you’ve also been a bishop twice, stake president, and had other responsibilities.

Millet: Well, a leader is first and foremost a teacher. With that in mind, and I've believed that for a long time, during the years I was dean I made it a habit to speak regularly in the Friday Forum. I wanted to remind the faculty that one could be a very busy person and yet find time to think, research, write, and publish. I suppose I wanted to set an example. But it also was good for me because very often I would choose a topic, research and write on it, and deliver it in Friday Forum to receive the feedback of the faculty; I knew they would provide it. I can't tell you how many of my books began with a Friday faculty forum talk on a given subject. Everyone's administrative style is different, but I felt personally that as a dean I needed to try to be something of a visionary. For me that meant that I needed to spend a substantial amount of time thinking about where we're headed and how to get there. And so I spent a lot of time reflecting seriously on the purposes of Religious Education and a correspondingly significant period of time kneeling in the office beside the desk, praying for direction, for an elevated perspective, for insight beyond my own. The phrase that became almost a daily expression to the Lord was "Bring to pass thy purposes" and occasionally "Bring to naught every influence that would in any way hinder the accomplishment of thy purposes." I believe he did.

I think a leader, to be effective, at least in this church, has to be a "people person." Those you are charged to lead simply cannot feel you're either unavailable or unreachable. The people must be able to meet with you and feel you are one of them—that we're all in this together. The great leaders I've had through the years were men or women who could go to ball games with us, watch a good movie with us, have lunch with us—things like that. So I think an effective leader is a teacher, a visionary, someone who loves and enjoys regular association with people. In fact, they have to love the people more than the project, and that's not always easy.

Newell: *What, in your view, is the hallmark of a truly effective religious educator?*

Millet: I've always believed in both the academic and the spiritual legs of the stool, and that we need to both inspire and stretch the students. Having said that, I have never really been one who felt that the academic and the spiritual ought to be weighted equally. I believe both are vital, but I'm always going to favor effective, spiritually inspiring gospel instruction. To me, that has to be number one if Religious Education is to prepare a generation of excellence at Brigham Young University. Now, our challenge is this: we

don't want people hiding behind their spiritual competence to cover their lack of academic preparation. And we don't want people hiding behind their academic excellence to cover their lack of spiritual depth. In my mind, the most effective religious educator is someone who is not afraid of letting it be known that he or she believes what they're teaching. I don't think they have to formally bear their testimony at the end of each lesson or every class period, but I do think the students ought to know that they know. It only happened a few times through the years I was dean, but I've had students come and ask this haunting question about their professor: "Is this person a member of the Church?" That's a little discombobulating, don't you think? When I would speak to the professor about the concern, the response might be something like this: "Well, I try not to wear my testimony on my sleeve" or, "I'm not teaching a Sunday School class." There's a fallacy afloat, and the fallacy goes something like this: If you increase the spiritual atmosphere within the classroom, you by necessity will decrease the intellectual climate. That is a false dichotomy and reflects really shallow thinking. It just isn't so.

Now, not every class will be that fifty-fifty. The percentages will change, often as a result of the specific content that day. But through the semester the students should have felt some things deeply from that professor, they should have learned some things, significant things, from that class. Our task is not to resolve the tension; it's to manage the tension. And that means there are times that I'll come to class, and I might spend the whole day informing them about some historical moments concerning the Joseph Smith Translation that they would not know on their own. I've got to lay out the facts first. And it may be that the next class period I'll spend a lot of time focusing on how the JST builds faith and testimony and sharing the testimony I have of it. Peter says that we're to give them a *reason* for the *hope* within them (see 1 Peter 3:15). A reason is largely intellectual, while hope will be largely spiritual. And that means we need to have class periods that are as stimulating to the mind as they are soothing and settling to the heart. That is not easy to find in a teacher, but we've been pretty successful through the years; God has been good to us.

If I have a concern, it would be that we tend to get out of balance. The balance that has to exist is in the life of the person we're considering hiring. If a person comes here to BYU as a professorial faculty member and supposes that it's somehow profane to have to research and publish, they don't understand what we're about. If a person comes here and somehow supposes that it is a compromise of their integrity to bear their testimony, I want to know why

they came here in the first place. So there can't be a sterile academic spirit in the classroom. They can't leave not feeling built up spiritually and have it be what the prophets and our leaders have expected it to be. On the other hand, our classroom cannot be a syrupy, sentimental occasion where we sit around and sing "Kumbaya." That just doesn't cut it. The students pay money to come here; they're paying money to sit in our classes. That means they need to leave knowing more than they knew when they came and feeling more than they felt before.

Newell: What do you feel about the current state of Religious Education? Any concerns about the future?

Millet: I feel confident that we're in good hands; we have strong leadership. As for the two departments, I think it's critical that every so often we stop what we're doing and check our bearings. That may come in the form of re-reading foundational documents—"The Charted Course of the Church in Education," the Second Century address by President Spencer W. Kimball, and reminding ourselves why we're here. If students don't get anything in our religion class any different than they would have gotten at Stanford, something's wrong. If they only rehearse what they received in their seminary classes, and they didn't leave knowing more about the cultural and historical background in the days of Jesus, for example, we have failed them. We've got to create classroom experiences that accomplish both objectives. The great fear I have is that we will forsake our mother tongue, that is, our responsibility to teach the gospel principally and primarily to the Saints. Do I believe we ought to be speaking to people of other faiths and entering into academic discussions on religious themes? Absolutely. Do I think we ought to find better, more powerful, more inspiring ways to teach the gospel through our articles and our books to the Latter-day Saints? Absolutely. If we get away from that, we've strayed from our moorings. And so we don't want to stray either way. It's going to take a good management of that tension. The last thing in the world we want to do as a college is to try to make everybody into one mold. What a mistake that would be. We need to let individuals, given their background, their training, their interests, their studies, do what they do best. We brought them here. Let's let them do what they do best. Now, if they need help with this or that, that's what the job of the senior faculty is—to mentor. But I don't think we have to make Bill into John, or to make Gloria into Rebecca. We don't need one kind of religious educator.

Newell: What advice can you offer to young scholars to engage their intellect while feeding their faith?

Millet: This is such an important question. My advice is to become involved early on with writing opportunities. The more you do, the better you become at it. Secondly, be willing—and this takes guts—be willing to throw your material out to people and take it when they chop it to pieces. Almost always they intend the criticism for the right reason. Occasionally someone who is wrestling with either arrogance or anger will criticize out of ignoble motives, but that is rare. Most people want to help. On many occasions I sought Larry Dahl out for a serious review of my work. It almost always came back covered in red ink. Now after I'd managed to re-paste my feelings of self-worth together again, I would look at that paper and realize, "You know what? He's right." So seek out people to review your work. Be aware of what areas of research the rest of the faculty are pursuing. That may simply entail going to their office and saying, "What are your areas of specialty? What are you working on? What are your projects?" I think it would be tragic to be here for very long and not know what your colleagues are working on. Part of this is practical: you want to be a good neighbor, a good citizen. But really the most important part of it is that you can know who to turn to for help with specific areas; we have people here who are the experts in the Church on certain matters. But it's possible, if you don't ever get out of your office or don't ever go visit anyone, that you wouldn't know that. So I would say, get yourself out of your office once in a while, walk the hall a little bit, meet new people, ask questions of people who have been doing this a long time.

There ought to be a growing edge in your life so that you are getting better at what you do. If your scores in your classes are average or fairly high, what do you need to make them even better? Why? So the students will feel like they're being fed, and so the students feel the kind of spiritual rapport between student and teacher that ought to exist in a religion class. We cannot afford to get lazy or stale, especially in the classroom. It's too easy to get in a rut and do things the same way over and over.

Newell: What counsel would you give to those who seek to become effective gospel scholars? And what does it mean to be a gospel scholar?

Millet: To me it means that you are pretty solid in your understanding of all the standard works. Now, agreed, you're going to know the Pearl of Great Price better than you know the Doctrine and Covenants because you've specialized in it. If the department chair says, "You know, I need you

to teach this class,” and you’ve never taught it before, it shouldn’t be a traumatic experience for you. I think you begin with becoming a serious student of scripture, in the sense of knowing even those things that are not in your particular department. Stephen Robinson found once he had mastered, as it were, the subjects in ancient scripture, that he wanted to know more about the Doctrine and Covenants. So he taught it until he eventually, with his colleague Dean Garrett, wrote an impressive four-volume commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants. So I think first we need to be better than we are.

Second, I think we need to know the teachings of the Presidents of the Church well, starting with the Prophet Joseph Smith. If I’m serious about gospel scholarship, my library ought to begin to cover most of the bases. That is, I really do need, eventually, to have a library that contains all the teachings of all the Presidents. There’s really something valuable, when you’re teaching a point in scripture, to be able to pause and say, “It reminds me of what President David O. McKay used to say about . . .” or “I remember President Harold B. Lee teaching that. . . .” This is so good for these young people to hear.

Now, third, I think we ought to know who the key thinkers in Mormonism have been. And that’s why I say everybody will have their different favorites. I think it matters that we know who Orson Pratt was and what he taught. I think we ought to know what Parley P. Pratt taught. We can’t know all the people through the history of the Church well, but we can know who the key thinkers were. What are and have been some of the difficult or sensitive doctrinal and historical issues? What is the doctrine of the Church and how do we know it? I think that such a background builds a sense of security, not just respect, but security in the minds of the students. They know their teacher is competent enough to know when he doesn’t know something and he says so, but when he does know you can trust him, because he knows what the diamond-true facts are, and he knows where there are no diamonds.

Newell: What projects and plans do you have for the future?

Millet: Well, I have two book projects where the publishers are pressing for completed manuscripts. Both of these books will be published by non-LDS companies, and both will be coauthored with colleagues. One is a part of a series called “Guide to the Perplexed,” and I’m doing the book *Mormonism: A Guide to the Perplexed*. The other book is entitled

Mainstreaming Mormonism? The subtitle is “The Journey from Suspicion to Relative Acceptance.” I want to do a book down the road for members of the Church on the eternal quest to become like God. I want to deal with deification, what we know about it and what we do not know. What have the prophets taught? What does this mean? What do the scriptures teach? And of course one of the most important projects before me is a biography of Robert J. Matthews. I’ve been collecting materials now for a few years, and I had a wonderful research assistant, Andrew Bateman, who has done a marvelous job of systematizing everything. Following retirement, one of my major tasks in the next two to three years is to get the Matthews biography done. He’s too important to be forgotten. I also plan to continue working, at least to some extent, in outreach, in interfaith relations.

Newell: Is there anything you would do differently if you could start your professional career over again?

Millet: You know, I’ve thought about this. I wouldn’t change too many things. I’ve had such a wonderful life. Although I enjoyed my study of psychology, I’ve often wished I had done a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in history. I’ve done so much work in the study of Christianity, and so I wish I had a better background in history; I’ve had to teach myself quite a bit.

Brother Matthews told me a story several times, and I don’t think it was because he was losing his memory. He told me the story of Sidney Sperry and of meeting with Brother Sperry not long before Brother Sperry died. Bob asked him, “Brother Sperry, if you had it all to do over, what would you do differently?” Brother Sperry paused a moment and then said, “I think I’d write fewer books and go fishing with my boys more.” I’ve loved my work, but I probably would have stayed home a little more. It’s a horrible thing to wonder while you’re out trying to save souls how your family is doing. My wife has been angelic and absolutely supportive, but in looking back, I probably wish I’d been home a little more. It’s like people say: “Very few people look back on their life and say, ‘I wish I’d stayed at the office more.’” **RE**