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Religion Matters: A Conversation with Kevin J Worthen

INTERVIEW BY THOMAS A. WAYMENT

Kevin J Worthen is president of Brigham Young University.

Thomas A. Wayment (thomas_wayment@byu.edu) is publications director of the Religious Studies Center.

Wayment: *Religious Education at BYU has a unique charter or mission, and it also incorporates that mission into the larger goals and mission of the university. I wonder if you could reflect on the role of Religious Education.*

Worthen: It has a distinctive role on campus, one that goes across the whole university. Religious Education is central to achieving one of the key aims of a BYU education, which is to spiritually strengthen students. That responsibility is shared with everybody, in a sense, but Religious Education is the only place where we know that all students are taking classes where that goal is systematically pursued. It's the core of what happens at the university, and yet that work can't be limited to Religious Education.

We don't want to be just a university with an institute of religion. And distinguishing Religious Education from a typical institute of religion is kind of an interesting challenge both for Religious Education and for the rest of campus. On the one hand, the rest of campus could say, "Religious Education owns the spiritual strengthening aim; we don't have to do that." That would be a mistake. All need to be involved in that. But, at the same time, we want our students to come out of Religious Education classes understanding

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the doctrine, the way in which it's presented, and the way in which it's discussed in the world. This may be different from what might be done at other universities.

Wayment: *Conversely, would you say that we don't want to make Religious Education the sole proprietor of spiritual education, and we don't want Religious Education to leave the academic discussion to everybody else, that there should be more integration going both ways?*

Worthen: Yes. I don't really know what the research expectations are at an institute of religion, but my guess is that there are not the same scholarly expectations there as there are here. There's something distinctive about the role of Religious Education here, because we really want the Religious Education faculty to be engaged in the scholarly conversation with the rest of the world, and we want to help our students engage in that conversation as well.

Wayment: *We clearly see in our spiritual identity the need to help mentor students, to help educate them. And we also have this kind of academic identity as well, with the faculty being very passionate about their fields. How do you see a religious educator balancing those two roles? Do you have a sense of those boundaries?*

Worthen: As I understand the gospel, there ultimately isn't any tension between those two roles. It all fits together in some way, though it doesn't always easily fit together. I think that if you start with the idea that the two can fit together, the right balance emerges in particular cases.

Wayment: *It does; I would think so.*

Worthen: It reminds me of President Uchtdorf's saying "Doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith." It's saying, "We really do have faith that this will all work out. There are some things that don't seem to square away right now, but we'll keep working on them." It isn't simply putting the issue on the shelf, but continuing to work on it with the belief that there is a resolution that will bring this into harmony.

Wayment: *I see a lot of maturity in Religious Education today, with the idea that we don't see it as tension anymore between competing interests. Would you agree with that?*

Worthen: Yes; I don't see tension within the university. It's a little like in the rest of the more traditional academic world, where we discuss setting the balance between teaching and scholarship. I really think in the ideal world, those two coexist and reinforce one another. I think that's true of faith and

scholarship as well; faith and academic scholarship really can help each other, because part of the mortal experience is learning how to deal with uncertainty and how to resolve ambiguities.

Wayment: *And it seems the Church is probing in that area with the gospel topics.*

Worthen: Exactly.

Wayment: *I think there's some trust now that we can go into these difficult areas, that we're mature enough to say, "I don't have an answer today, but I have answers to the following, or witness to the following."*

Worthen: Yes, and that's a good way to go about it. It is a sign of progress that we can say, "OK, let's talk about it. What do we know? What don't we know?" We can be confident that, in the long run, discussion will move us towards the truth, rather than worrying that knowing more facts will somehow destroy someone's faith.

Wayment: *That's a great perspective. I appreciate that. My next question is about BYU students. As a religious educator, I have an increasing number of Spanish-speaking students in my classes, along with students of Asian descent. We're starting to see a bigger percentage. Can you share with us how that's happening? Is that part of an intended mission? Or is it just happening on its own?*

Worthen: There are some efforts to reach out to communities where people may not have had the same opportunities or access to BYU; that's part of our enriched-environment effort. However, what you've seen is more of a reflection of what's happening in the Church, particularly in the United States and Canada, where most of our students come from. Beyond that, we don't have a targeted goal where we say, "OK, we've got to make sure that we reflect what the Church looks like." I think that just happens as result of the growth in Church membership. There hasn't been, and I don't see in the near future, a real push to get more international students. We'll continue to welcome international students in the same way we welcome those from the United States, but it would be a real challenge to make BYU look exactly like the Church internationally.

Wayment: *Yes, I see that. We're on the cusp of needing to offer courses in other languages, and that's new since I've been here. I've been here for fifteen years, which isn't a terribly long time, but I wondered if that was intentional and how it was going.*

Worthen: Well, you know the mission statement does indicate a role for BYU in helping the Church throughout the world. The next-to-last

paragraph says, “In meeting these objectives, faculty, staff, students, administrators should also be anxious to share their service and scholarship with the Church in furthering the work of the Church worldwide.” Then it says, “In an era of limited enrollments, BYU can continue to expand its influence.” So, we’re going to keep the enrollment cap in order to keep the focus on the students, but we “can expand [the university’s] influence by encouraging programs that are consistent with Church purposes, and by making our resources available to the Church when called upon to do so.” So you get two things from this part of the mission statement. One is to ask, “How can we enhance this education experience and maximize it so that its benefits go out to the rest of the world through the students or other ways?” Second, there may be an occasional time when the Church will say, “Look, we really need the university to do this for us.”

Wayment: *Thanks. You’ve become president in a time where the university is in great shape. You made it very clear when you were called as president that we’re going to continue the same direction, at least for a time. We don’t want this question to come across as, “Do you have radical changes in store?” However, do you see certain trends that you want to address that you’re comfortable sharing?*

Worthen: Well, one key objective of mine is to keep people focused on the mission of the university. If we do that, I think inspiration will come to people at the individual and department level. That’s the way that I see new ideas emerging. If people really think about what they can do in their roles to enhance the students’ experience, as described in the mission statement, things will happen that will be good for that department and for the whole university. For example, I’m not sure how mentored learning really got started here, but I’m quite certain that it wasn’t someone sitting in the Abraham Smoot Building saying, “OK, what we need to do is mentored learning.” I think that’s an example of a trend that has emerged, and I think we’re going to continue to emphasize that kind of individual, mission-focused innovation.

Mentoring fits directly in the mission of the university in terms of providing the students with a unique experience. It prepares them well for graduate schools and for other things. I think the outside world would say, “Look how well prepared they are academically,” but what happens in the relationship between faculty and students is just as significant, because you see what happens when students connect with faculty members in an individual way, and their conversations can go well beyond what the lab work is about. They’re the kinds of conversations that really shape and strengthen the testimonies of

students in ways that are hard to measure but that are really important. That’s one aspect of a BYU education that we’ll continue to put resources into.

The major limiting factor on mentored learning is the time of the faculty. And I say that not to criticize the faculty, but to remind the administration that we need to be sensitive to the fact that mentoring is labor intensive. We’re not diminishing traditional classroom teaching; we’re not diminishing scholarship; mentoring is an add-on, so we need to be thoughtful as an administration about it. But I think that it’s a key component that’s essential for us to keep focusing on.

Wayment: *OK. So your approach is to kind of let things come forward and then evaluate and strengthen as needed.*

Worthen: Occasionally the board may have some things, and there may be ideas that we have as an administration, that we want to go forward. But I really think that as people get inspiration, the right kinds of things will happen for the university as a whole. So we’ll facilitate that process and sometimes we’ll see university-wide adoption of what faculty or departments are doing individually.

Wayment: *Excellent. That’s a great insight. We’re going to ask you some questions about the RSC. You may not have known this when you quoted Karl Maeser in your opening remarks to the faculty, but Called to Teach: The Legacy of Karl G. Maeser is one of our most recent books. I take it you’ve had a chance to read the book, at least in part?*

Worthen: Yes, I read it all this summer. I know it’s egocentric to think it was written just for me, but it was very timely to have the book come out just as I started my presidency. I knew some about Karl Maeser and some other things in the book, but not much. I have reread it a couple of times; it’s a wonderful story.

Wayment: *We are proud of it obviously, and we were so very pleased to hear that you had used it. Is there anything that stands out in the book as helping you, like Pestalozzian philosophy or knowing Karl?*

Worthen: Yes, a few things come to mind. One is the extent to which Maeser’s secular education prepared him for his spiritual insights. The philosophy of Pestalozzi and others was about the broader education of the entire person. Now, I’m not enough of a historian about educational theory to know if that was more commonplace than I thought, but you see a lot of Karl G. Maeser’s ideas coming from what others taught him outside the LDS context. I think that has a couple of lessons for me. Number one, we need to

remember we haven't got a corner on the truth. Therefore we must engage with the world: many people out there will have insights for us that will prepare us for our unique mission.

Wayment: Which represents Karl well.

Worthen: Exactly. It's a reminder there are a lot of people who may not share our doctrine but who do share our values, and we should not be afraid to share our ideas with them, to say, "Here are some things that you might resonate with." The other lesson I learned from reading about Karl's formal education was the need to recognize God's hand in this work. Karl G. Maeser was really the founder of the academy in many ways, and all the things that happened to prepare him and to prepare others to be in that position are pretty remarkable. It's more evidence of the hand of the Lord in establishing and guiding this university.

Wayment: These last couple of questions that we have are more about you. You were a BYU student, and you've been here for a quite a while. Could you speak to our college students, basing your statements on your own experiences here? What counsel would you give them?

Worthen: This statement wasn't original to my father, but my father, who was a school administrator as I was growing up, constantly said, "Don't let schooling get in the way of your education." I have to be careful when I say this: I don't want students to skip their classes. But there's a lot to an education that happens outside the classroom. It's easy for students who have been very successful and who are now in an environment where everybody's been successful to think they've got to spend all their time studying. It's important to spend a lot of time studying, but there are so many other things to do to enhance your education. There are two kinds of things that happen on campus that I would urge students to get involved in. One of those is all the things that happen on any campus, like artistic performances, athletic events, and lectures. There's just always something happening on campus, and this is really a wonderful time to enjoy life. Add to that the spiritual things, like devotionals, that happen at BYU. It's interesting that as we survey our students three years after they graduate, they say that the thing that most affected them spiritually was attending devotionals. There are more students who watch devotionals outside of the Marriott Center rather than inside, so they're getting it. But I think that if you were to ask, "What would you do over again?" a lot of those alumni would say they would have gone to devotionals more often.

Wayment: Yes, and been physically in attendance.

Worthen: And been physically in attendance. I wish I would have paid attention to those kinds of things when I was a student. The Sperry Symposium is an excellent example. Attendance at something like that might have an impact spiritually that will be more important than most of the classes that students take here. So it really is important to take full advantage of what's here at BYU.

That idea also provides a way of thinking about one of our challenges, which is that we have an increasing number of students who would succeed here academically but who are turned away because of our enrollment cap. The challenge is to come up with a mechanism of getting the right students here—and by right students, I don't just mean academically qualified. We need the students who are going to take full advantage of the things that are unique to BYU. When we get students who say, "I don't really care where I go; BYU is just another place to me. I could go to Stanford, Yale, or BYU; it's all the same," I say, "Then maybe you should go somewhere else, because we want people to whom it matters." They are the ones who are going to take full advantage of the unique aspects of BYU.

Wayment: That's a good insight. Would you speak to religion students for a moment? Would you share what you came away with or how it shaped you?

Worthen: Yes, that's a good question. But my answer may be a reflection not so much of what I experienced here, as what I now wish I had known more fully at that time. And that is, to just reassure students that, as simple as it sounds, the gospel really is true, and it's all-encompassing. It really answers all of our questions, and though that doesn't mean that the answers are easy or that we'll even discover them, they are out there. There is certainty out there, and in Religious Education, especially, we have the chance to look for truth with confidence. The gospel reassures us that truth really does exist, and part of our mortal experience is discovering true principles and learning how to apply them. We couldn't sit up in the spirit world and just memorize all gospel truth. You don't really understand those principles fully until you've experienced them in the midst of all the turmoil that comes with our mortal existence. It's easy to get lost in that turmoil. Religious Education provides a place where you can step back and say, "There really are answers to these questions." Think about how this Living Prophets class or this New Testament class relates to the struggles you are having in biology and everything else in life. Because of the gospel, you can put those struggles in context and learn

those skills that will enable you to move forward with faith in times of uncertainty, secure that there are answers out there.

It is focusing in on the basic skill set, if you will, of how you study, how you reconcile ideas, and how you approach uncertainties or things that appear to be inconsistent. Helping the students understand uncertainty is as important for learning as the content they acquire.

Wayment: *So the comfort in seeing someone handle uncertainty and seeing how they handle it is more important than the answer.*

Worthen: Yes, exactly, and I think it's better if you can help them have the experience themselves. It's helpful for the students to see that the faculty are really bright people who have studied with the best in ancient languages or ancient scripture and that they're still faithful, and they still ask questions. It's helpful for students to see faculty who can say that the original Greek word or the original Hebrew word means this, and that this provides a new way of thinking about the issue. For students to see that approach is good, but for them to experience it is even better.

Wayment: *Well, I want to ask one concluding RSC question. Are you broadly familiar with us?*

Worthen: Broadly familiar, that is a good description.

Wayment: *We were founded by Elder Holland in 1975, and our mission has been to publish meaningful LDS studies that are academically responsible but at the same time faithful in their tone. If you reflected on that mission now, what would you say about it?*

Worthen: Well, I'm certainly familiar with various RSC publications over the years—say, the *Religious Educator* and other publications. I think those publications are a good example of the part of the mission statement that says, “In meeting these objectives, faculty and students should be anxious to share their service and scholarship with the Church in furthering its mission worldwide.” I look at the *Religious Educator* and say, “That's what it's doing.” Its influence is not limited to BYU. I know that kind of material is used by lawyers I know. They read that kind of thoughtful material from BYU, and it makes a difference for them. They're in an environment where there is a lot of cynicism. There's a lot of uncertainty about things, and it's easy sometimes to lose their way. It's so good to have somebody who can say, “Here's a thoughtful way to approaching this particular topic.” I think it's easy to underestimate what a profound effect that kind of publication has on

people—people who never set foot on campus, but who still read those kinds of things.

Wayment: *That's really helpful feedback. Sometimes we fall into the notion that we're speaking to other professional faculty who teach religion. It helps to have a broader perspective that we are actually speaking to the Church and are sharing our skills.*

Worthen: Yes, I really think it fits that part of the mission statement that speaks to our being “anxious to share” our service and scholarship in furthering the work of the Church worldwide. And it's helpful not just for other professional educators. Everybody is a teacher in the Church at one time or another. Over the years people have told me, “Have you seen this article in this BYU journal?” They are people who want to be able to articulate the reason for the hope that lies within them. The *Religious Educator* provides it in a way that helps them explain it to others, and that's a very powerful impact that goes well beyond professional educators. **RE**