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Religious Education in BYU's Prophetic Historical Context

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Dean Daniel Judd has invited me to offer a historical perspective on Religious Education within BYU's larger historical context. In doing so, I speak more from experience than with authority, having been blessed with some opportunities to learn about the subject at fairly close range for several decades.

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 (like 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 US higher education has become almost universally available. To explore what may have motivated the key founders, let's consider some historical context.

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” (Doctrine and Covenants 97:3). 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 to find the right balance between the religious and the secular in its approach to higher education have a long history.

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, by 1900 the Church had created more than thirty stake academies for secondary education, 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.¹ BYU in Provo was the only school designated as a university, a decision the Church Board of Education (“Board”) 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 principal of the Weber Stake LDS Academy. He recommended to the Board that the Church divest itself of all but a handful of its postsecondary schools because the Church simply couldn't afford to provide a college education for all its members.

Then in 1926, also citing costs, Elder 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. 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.” However, Elder McKay replied that the Church had not established Church schools “merely because the state didn’t do it”; rather, he said, the Church established these schools “to make Latter-day Saints.” Thus, he continued, “*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.*”²

Elder McKay later said he had therefore “voted against . . . [giving] the Church’s junior colleges to the states of Utah, Arizona, and Idaho.”³ 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 now Ensign 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, even though the Church 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 1937.⁴

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 the president of BYU and Commissioner (then the “Chancellor”) 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 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.⁵

Nonetheless, the Church’s support for BYU, Ricks, and Hawaii remained strong. 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 2,900.⁶

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 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 of human conduct and duty which are found in the character and will of God. One may study theology without being religious.⁷

This is an expanded version of what President McKay had told the Board in 1926: “We established the schools to make Latter-day Saints.” 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.”⁸ He was also disturbed as early as 1926 by “the growing tendency all over the world to sneer at religion” in secular state education.⁹

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, 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. And the first of the "Aims of a BYU Education" ("Aims"), a formal part of the university's official purpose since the early 1990s, states that "the founding charge of BYU is to teach every subject with the Spirit." In the words of President Spencer W. Kimball, this doesn't mean "that all of the faculty should be categorically teaching religion constantly in their classes," but it does expect "that every teacher would keep his subject matter bathed in the light and color of the restored gospel."¹⁰

"Aims" goes on to say that a BYU education should be "intellectually enlarging" with regard to intellectual skills, depth, and breadth. Yet, in describing the desired breadth of an intellectual education, "Aims" 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."

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 a 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."¹¹ 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. 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." Thus Elder Maxwell, like President McKay or President Romney, "looked at all knowledge through the gospel's lens." They knew they "could integrate a secular map of reality into the broader sacred map, but the smaller secular map, with its more limited tools and framework,

wasn't large enough to include religious insights. Thus the gospel's larger perspective influenced their views of the academic disciplines more than the disciplines influenced their view of the gospel."¹²

Similarly, Elder 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, we should "judge the professions of man against the revealed word of the Lord."¹³

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. 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."¹⁴ Roberts did write with uncommon objectivity—but his faith was not in brackets. As Truman Madsen wrote in his biography of 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."¹⁵

I know it isn't easy to emulate that example, even though it's 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 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 life, 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's 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” 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 guidelines recognize,¹⁶ 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 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.”¹⁷

Expectations of Religious Education Faculty at BYU

Just last night, President Kevin J. Worthen distributed to you some new “Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Education” in Church-sponsored higher education adopted by the Church Board of Education on 12 June 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.” The statement then describes the conditions that guide religion faculty hiring, work, and promotion—providing, for example, that faculty must “be sound doctrinally.”¹⁸

This document reaffirms principles 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 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.”¹⁹ Three of the four men held graduate degrees in biology, philosophy, education, and psychology from the University of Chicago, Harvard, and Cornell; the other had studied at Harvard, Chicago, and the University of California.

The new faculty 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.”²⁰ Thus they embarked on a well-intentioned campaign to “enliven [BYU] students academically by introducing the latest developments” in the major disciplines.²¹ As it turned out, however, their views essentially “discounted the historical reality of any scripture.”²²

In a 1909 article in BYU’s student newspaper, for instance, Ralph Chamberlin “drew a sharp distinction between history and legend,” because “*history countenances only such reports as are [empirically] verifiable.*”²³ 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 religious truth.”²⁴

Initial student reactions to these ideas were positive, partly because the new professors were “dynamic, articulate, and very popular.” 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,” 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 over 80 percent of the BYU student body supported the professors.²⁵

By 1911 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.”²⁶ Noel 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] LDS intellectuals.²⁷

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 he saw a group of BYU professors casting, as if fishing, some kind of bait into the sky where a flock of snow-white birds were 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.”²⁸

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. The three professors were given the choice of conforming or resigning.”²⁹ All three left BYU, along with a few other professors.³⁰ Some who disagreed with this outcome were distressed, believing that the Board’s approach meant BYU would never be able to teach essential academic subjects with the depth and rigor required of a legitimate, let alone a superior, university 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.”³¹ Some of them, such as Sidney B. Sperry, returned with superb graduate school training guided by a bedrock of faith that enabled a lifelong contribution of teaching and scholarship to BYU’s mission in religious education.

Indeed, Sperry’s experience at the University of Chicago Divinity School was so successful that Apostle (and then Commissioner of Church Education) Joseph F. Merrill invited several professors from the Chicago Divinity School to teach at BYU’s summer school in the 1930s³²—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.³³

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 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 ’30s]. Some who went never returned. And some of

them who returned never came back.” A few of these actually left the Church, and “with each [of these] went a following of [their] students—a terrible price to pay.”³⁴ 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.”³⁵

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 heard 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.) President Clark paid tribute to the faculty’s loyalty, sacrifice, faith, and righteous desires. He asked God to bless them with “entrance to the hearts of those you teach and then make [sure] you know as you enter there that you stand in holy places.” He praised the youth of the Church, saying they “want to gain testimonies of [the gospel’s] truth,” adding soberly that these youth are “not now doubters but . . . seekers after truth, [and] 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.”

A generation later, when Boyd K. Packer was the supervisor of Seminaries and Institutes, he heard some local Church leaders report that members of their stakes had “lost their testimonies studying religion at Church schools,” because some faculty were teaching “the unusual things they had discovered in their academic wanderings.” 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 1959 the faculty in BYU’s Division of Religion successfully petitioned the Board to be designated the “College of Religious Instruction” and to be authorized to grant graduate degrees in religion as part of their effort to “elevate religion . . . to a higher level of academic respectability.”³⁶

However, in 1972, during President Dallin H. Oaks’s first year as BYU president, he 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." 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." Another implicit message, Elder Packer later said, 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 on the history of Church religious education, some of which I have quoted today. 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 were given last night—and those given and repeated since 1910.

During the 1970s and '80s, 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* 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 they felt toward 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 1910. 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—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.³⁷

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.

Therefore,

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.³⁸

As part of its response to this need, in 2015 the Church posted eleven new Gospel Topics Essays on churchofjesuschrist.org, 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—such as plural marriage, race and the priesthood, gender, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, Heavenly Mother, and Joseph Smith's translation 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, Elder 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 LDS.org and other resources by faithful LDS scholars.”³⁹

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.” 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*.”⁴⁰

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” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30) 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 lens of their academic discipline—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 BYU’s 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 Nelson’s recent counsel about the use of *Mormon* by Church members.⁴¹

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.”⁴² And while these programs may provide “a thoughtful consideration of the Restoration’s distinctive culture and convictions,”⁴³ such secular premises for teaching and writing by Latter-day Saints for Church audiences or on the BYU campus would be “certainly . . . troubling” to the BYU trustees.⁴⁴

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.”⁴⁵ He 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.”⁴⁶ 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”—an approach that “has cost scholars credibility with readers because . . . no one knows” where the authors stand.⁴⁷

So, to come full circle on the matter of the Board’s expectations of BYU religion faculty, the history of BYU is pretty clear that the guidelines President Worthen gave us last night are indeed a restatement of principles and values the Board has upheld since 1910—consistently applying those principles as needed to the changing circumstances of the times.

Notes

1. Harold R. Laycock, “Academies,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:111–13.

2. The quoted language is from an unpublished report by a committee appointed by the Church Board of Education in 1964; emphasis added. See “To Labor in the Most Honorable Cause,” unpublished talk to the BYU Religious Education faculty in 1990 by Bruce C. Hafen, then provost of BYU.

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

4. 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 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, ID: Ricks College, 1997), 142. For a complete account, see 109–51.

5. See report cited in note 2. See also President McKay's diary entry in Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 196–97.

6. Current enrollment estimates are from the websites of the respective three campuses.

7. David O. McKay, "The Church University," (Provo, UT) *Messenger*, remarks delivered at BYU, October 1937, <https://brightspotcdn.byu.edu/3e/2a/7e333e2f49aba476da6a9041dfbf/the-church-university-david-o-mckay.pdf>; emphasis added.

8. David O. McKay, "True Education," quoted in Prince and Wright, *David O. McKay*, 160–61.

9. Church Board of Education minutes, quoted in Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years*, 4 vols. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 2:75.

10. Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," address to BYU faculty and staff, Provo, UT, 12 September 1967, in *Educating Zion*, ed. John W. Welch and Don E. Norton (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1996), 54.

11. Nathan Oman, "'Out of Zion Shall Go Forth the Law' (Isaiah 2:3)," *FARMS Review of Books* 12, no. 1 (2000): 132.

12. Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 166–67.

13. Boyd K. Packer, "The Mantle Is Far, Far Greater than the Intellect," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 3 (1981): 1.

14. Douglas D. Alder, "Comprehensive History of the Church," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 303.

15. Truman G. Madsen, *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), 366.

16. Church Educational System, "Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Education in Institutions of High Education" (unpublished document, 12 June 2019).

17. Alan L. Wilkins to Bruce C. Hafen, email, 23 December 2016; emphasis added.

18. Church Educational System, "Guidelines for Strengthening Religious Education," 1–2.

19. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:409.

20. Ralph Chamberlin, *Life and Philosophy of W. H. Chamberlin* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1925), 137.

21. Richard Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis: BYU's Earliest Conflict between Secular Knowledge and Religious Belief," *Sunstone*, May 1985, 30; emphasis added.

22. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 20.

23. Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis," 31; emphasis added. "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," 34n7.

24. Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis," 31.

25. Sherlock, "Campus in Crisis," 33.

26. Boyd K. Packer, "The Snow-White Birds" (Brigham Young University Conference address, 29 August 1995), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/boyd-k-packer/snow-white-birds/>.

27. Reynolds, "Coming Forth," 21.

28. As told to Horace Cummings, recorded in his autobiography. See Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:421–22.
29. Sherlock, “Campus in Crisis,” 32.
30. Reynolds, “Coming Forth,” 22.
31. Boyd K. Packer, “Seek Learning Even by Study and also by Faith,” in *“That All May Be Edified”*: Talks, Sermons & Commentary by Boyd K. Packer (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 43.
32. Packer, “Seek Learning,” 44.
33. Packer, “Seek Learning,” 43.
34. Packer, “Seek Learning,” 43–44.
35. John A. Widtsoe, as quoted in Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 2:455.
36. Packer, “Seek Learning,” 47.
37. “Academic Freedom Policy,” Brigham Young University, <https://policy.byu.edu/view/index.php?p=9>.
38. M. Russell Ballard, “The Opportunities and Responsibilities of CES Teachers in the 21st Century” (address to CES religious educators, 26 February 2016), <https://churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/evening-with-a-general-authority/2016/02/the-opportunities-and-responsibilities-of-ces-teachers-in-the-21st-century>.
39. Ballard, “Opportunities and Responsibilities.”
40. “Mormon Studies,” Wikipedia.
41. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Maxwell Legacy in the 21st Century,” *2018 Annual Report* (Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship), 14.
42. Holland, “Maxwell Legacy,” 15.
43. Terryl Givens, David Holland, and Reid Neilson, External Review of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, December 2014, 6, as quoted by Jeffrey R. Holland in *2018 Annual Report*, 15.
44. Holland, “Maxwell Legacy,” 15.
45. Holland, “Maxwell Legacy,” 16.
46. Neal A. Maxwell, “Discipleship and Scholarship,” *BYU Studies* 32, no. 3 (1992): 8.
47. Holland, “Maxwell Legacy,” 16.