

FROM THE EDITOR

WHAT'S A UNIVERSITY FOR?



By *Elbert Eugene Peck*

AS A STUDENT at Brigham Young University, I took its mission to combine revealed and rational truths with a zealotry perhaps only appropriate to idealistic undergraduates. I was frustrated and piously indignant when the Psych. 101 lab teaching assistant was more interested in ensuring that we understood B. F. Skinner's deterministic ideas than he was in holding them up to scrutiny against the restored gospel's teachings on agency. Today, I value parallel approaches to knowing and think such judgments should come after much work and contemplation. The T.A. wanted me to master fundamentals and acquire critical skills before rushing to theological judgments. Imagine.

With few exceptions, I left BYU feeling that the faculty had a lot more to give than I was willing to learn. Of course, I learned more with better teachers, but the fault lay not with the campus's stars but with myself. Fifteen years later, I still feel that way, except about my Religious Education classes.

Five years after college, I and other LDS friends formed an Old Testament study group to complement the Church's gospel doctrine course. As a result of being introduced to the incredibly rich world of biblical scholarship, I came to feel that my alma mater had cheated me. It had given me college credit for what were essentially expanded Sunday School classes. While exposure to different disciplinary approaches had been an essential component of psychology and other introductory classes, there had been no attempt to introduce me to the different approaches to Bible studies. Nor had there really been any attempt or desire to get me to think critically about my religious life. The purpose had been to get me to understand and believe the world view of the Restoration. I champion that purpose and think one's college years are a crucial time for that to happen; it just shouldn't have had the

vener of a university education without the critical methodology. (There are religion professors who do endeavor to cultivate religious critical thinking, but that's not a goal of the program.)

Recently, I've been pondering the tensions between the competitive, pluralistic assumptions of American university education and the authoritative, prophetic demands of our religion. Those two modes of knowing often come into harsh and painful conflict at BYU. Good, faithful professors have been disciplined for applying rational approaches to areas traditionally left to Church leaders. BYU has academic freedom in almost everything but religion, yet it wants the prestige of the academy in its religious scholarship, too.

A couple of years ago, BYU President Rex E. Lee told the faculty that the university had created for religious studies, BYU has more academic freedom than anywhere else. He illustrated the point with four hypothetical examples of faculty research:¹

1. A constitutional law professor who wants to incorporate into both her teaching and scholarship her belief, rooted in modern scripture, that the U.S. Constitution "did not come into existence by pure chance—that God played a deliberate role in its establishment." She wants to explore supporting objective indicia, scriptural and non-scriptural, and the theoretical and practical consequences.
2. A human anatomy professor who wants to build both her teaching and scholarship on her conviction that "the human body is a divine creation, and that many of its functions and characteristics can be better understood and appreciated once one accepts that premise."
3. A psychology professor whose "thesis is that human behavior cannot be fully understood unless the spiritual component is taken into account."
4. An LDS professor so convinced that "the

Book of Mormon is one of the most remarkable pieces of literature in the 19th century, but that it is nothing more than remarkable literature," that he wants to teach it to his students and build his scholarship around it.

President Lee noted that the first three individuals have greater freedom to pursue the "intersections and interrelationships" of faith and their discipline at BYU than at public universities and at most private ones. The fourth professor would be asked to leave BYU but could pursue his studies "virtually anywhere" else except at an LDS institution, he said. BYU, however, is the only place where the first three could pursue their academic interests. Lee also championed the fact that BYU gives the first three professors "the opportunity for candid discussion among ourselves."

No university can be all things; I accept BYU's restrictions on scholarship that opposes Church doctrine. Nevertheless, the history of religiously motivated research, even in Mormonism, is so quirky that the first three individuals need the constant checking a critical scholarly community provides. And it seems to me that that essential collegial dialogue is in danger of becoming seriously diminished at BYU through the silencing of diverging religious views. If a faculty member who strongly challenges the scholarship of any of the first three hypotheticals feels reluctant to disagree and argue over points because her testimony will be suspect, then the refining nature of the university is threatened. If that philosophy is carried to its extreme, BYU becomes not a university but a center or an institute dedicated to one-sided explorations. Such places have their function—conservative think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute, for example—but they must be balanced in the larger idea marketplace by other groups and individuals. A fundamental purpose of a university, in contrast to an institute or center, is to embrace critical diversity within its walls—otherwise we get wishy-washy religious scholarship that is of little long-term use and students who are ideologues without the refining of critical thinking.

Instead of labeling and excluding sincere but diverging students and scholars, there must be better ways to inculcate faith, commune on essentials, and allow for the rigorous exchange of diverse opinions and approaches in our religious thinking. That is perhaps not entirely possible at the moment, but our reach must exceed our grasp, or what's a university for?

1. Rex E. Lee, Annual University Conference, Brigham Young University, 25 August 1993, 13–15.