Oh say, what is truth? ’Tis the fairest gem / That the riches of worlds can produce,
/ And priceless the value of truth will be when / The proud monarch’s costliest diadem / Is counted but dross and refuse.” Hearing these words, sung with devotion and considerable musical talent by a congregation consisting of two hundred mostly freshmen students at Brigham Young University, my Catholic guest and I were moved. The students clearly believed what they were singing. The occasion was a regular Latter-day Saint Sunday worship service (“sacrament meeting”). But for me this was a special meeting, my last Sunday with such a student congregation, having served for three years as the bishop, or lay minister, for one of more than a hundred such campus wards. We were gathered as always in a law school lecture hall just large enough to accommodate our congregation, almost every member of which was present that and every other Sunday. That same Sunday morning, all across the campus, every available large lecture hall was similarly occupied, and almost every student was attending a similar worship service. (More than 90 percent of BYU students are Mormons.)

The Victorian lyrics are quaint, but the central idea is one anchored deep in Latter-day Saint belief and in the founding purposes of Brigham Young University: the unity of truth, revealed and rational, to be pursued at once “by study and also by faith.” Brigham Young himself was persistently emphatic on the spiritual and eternal value of intellectual
labors: “All our educational pursuits are in the service of God, for all these labors are to establish truth on the earth . . . that we may become fit subjects to dwell in a higher state of existence and intelligence than we now enjoy.”

Mormon students come to BYU well acquainted with both sides of this statement from the Book of Mormon: “To be learned is good if [we] hearken unto the counsels of God.” And on the whole these students are at least as committed to the religious proviso as to the endorsement of learning. In order to be admitted, students must be endorsed as morally worthy and religiously committed by their local church leaders, and the endorsement must be renewed every year. I am convinced that the level of moral obedience and religious practice is extraordinary. The level of religious practice among faculty—almost all of whom are Latter-day Saints—is, if anything, even higher, and it is not left to chance: All BYU employees must be certified by their local church leaders as religiously fit for their educational responsibilities.

In a word: BYU is a massively, intensely, and, notwithstanding inevitable human lapses, sincerely Latter-day Saint institution of higher learning, and the broad and deep religious commitment of students and faculty is by far the greatest asset the university possesses, and the chief source of the deep gratitude I feel for the privilege of serving on its faculty for the past twenty-seven years. It is a genuinely and pervasively Mormon institution, and this must be kept in mind as we attempt to weigh its promise against the daunting challenges it now faces.

Our alumni magazine recently republished a statement delivered in 1975 by then-president of the Latter-day Saints (whom we had sustained as Prophet) Spencer W. Kimball. Sometimes, he had said, “we must be willing to break with the educational establishment (not foolishly or cavalierly, but thoughtfully and for good reason) in order
to find gospel ways to help mankind. Gospel methodology, concepts, and insights can help us to do what the world cannot do in its own frame of reference.” The university must help the world when it “has lost its way on matters of principle.” Mormons “can, as Brigham Young hoped we would, ‘be a people of profound learning pertaining to the things of this world’ but without being tainted by what he regarded as the ‘pernicious, atheistic influences’ that flood in unless we are watchful. Our scholars, therefore, must be sentries as well as teachers!”

At a recent faculty meeting, I asked my colleagues whether we did not need to pay attention to his concerns. I did not expect most of the faculty and administrators to attach the same urgent importance I do to his warning, but I was still somewhat startled by their casual dismissal of Kimball’s concerns. In their responses, his lack of credentialed expertise in specialized matters of higher education was noted, and it was argued that he was then addressing the social upheaval of his time and it no longer was of concern to us. The call to be distinct from the academic mainstream did not apply to us.

And in case the practical conclusion was not clear to all faculty, particularly to untenured professors concerned to keep their jobs, what was expected of us was spelled out plainly: Your job, we were told, is to be good scholars and teachers as these functions are defined by the broader (secular) educational establishment by which we measure ourselves. Should you choose to break with this establishment by seeking to fulfill some distinctive Latter-day Saint mission—well, there you are on your own, and you must assume for yourself the professional risks involved. It was pointless for me to press the question of BYU’s mission any further.

For some decades, BYU had managed a compromise between the academic mainstream and its own aspiration to a distinctive mission. It must be said that
there have been reasonable arguments for this “mainstream” strategy, which so far has served us well, and that those who promote it do so with the sincere interests of BYU as a Mormon institution at heart.

Nothing could be better for our students, and for the reputation of the church as whole, than for us to prove our excellence in the scholarly communities in which we participate. The strategy has helped protect us against the inevitable temptation to use our distinctive religious commitments as an excuse for sloppy or idiosyncratic thinking: The only way to show we’ve got the right stuff is to compete vigorously in the existing academic marketplace. The policy of increasing alignment with the academic mainstream thus reflects legitimate concerns.

One must sympathize as well with colleagues who, with full respect to Kimball’s authority, do not see what it would mean to apply his prophetic language to the article they need to write or the class they need to teach. Just what “pernicious, atheistic influences” ought we to guard against, and just what are the “gospel methodologies” that might serve as alternatives? In 1988, Jeffrey R. Holland, then BYU’s president, proposed a positive linkage between our educational and religious missions when he urged the faculty to resist hyper-specialization, by which we seek merely to “imitate others or win their approval,” and instead to assume the responsibility of “those educated and spiritual and wise [to] sort, sift, prioritize, integrate, and give some sense of wholeness . . . to great eternal truths.” But the machinery of specialization was already in place, and it has only accelerated.

While the mainstream academic suppression of all questions of transcendent purpose and of associated moral limits was taken as a given across the disciplines, and while most researchers and teachers deferred intellectually, in their specialized professional capacities, to the authority of a rationalist and reductionist framework of understanding, they were
not for the most part concerned to draw the moral, political, and religious implications. The authority of a reductionist scientism and an ethic of limitless personal freedom grew steadily in the human sciences and humanities, but most BYU professors were happy to consider their scientific or scholarly work as “value-neutral” and to compartmentalize their religious and moral beliefs in a “private” domain supposedly exempt from the ordering paradigm of their discipline. Even the relatively few professors knowingly committed to the moral and political implications of the secular–progressive paradigm often felt no urgent need to convert less enlightened students.

During this period of compromise, faculty and students were often encouraged by church and university leaders, beginning with Kimball, to develop a capacity for “bilingualism”: an ability to speak both the language of the academy and the language of revealed truths. It was generally stipulated or assumed that the language of faith would be the primary idiom that reflected a scholar’s deepest understanding. But the risk was always present that the language associated with academic prestige would, often quite surreptitiously, become the dominant or default language, and religious language secondary and eventually subordinate. There comes a point where the secular framework, having been purged of old, integrating questions concerning the moral and religious dimensions of the human condition, can no longer be translated into the community’s authoritative religious idiom. When this happens, faith is left speechless, defenseless, resourceless.

In the larger Western academic culture, the truce between reason and faith has been broken. Only at the cost of all that is truly distinctive in its mission can BYU pretend to continue on as if the old conditions were still in force. Religion classes will still be taught and in fact required, and a few teachers may occasionally lapse from their professionalism and resort to the old dialect of faith, but BYU scholars and teachers will have lost all access to a more holistic understanding of the intellectual enterprise that once
made possible a fruitful dialogue between reason and revelation.

Most of my colleagues will surely be surprised, not to say appalled, by my suggestion that on the whole they are succumbing to a secular paradigm. Many teach in pre-professional, technical, and natural-scientific fields that can for the most part be safely insulated from the questions of ultimate purpose that condition our understanding of the meaning of education. It is in the social sciences and humanities that the tension manifests itself between a specialized and reductionist view and a more holistic understanding of human existence, social, moral, and political. Even in these disciplines only a minority of faculty, perhaps a very small minority, espouse a paradigm of knowledge they know to be incompatible with their ostensible religious commitments.

Our disciplines and ever more specialized subdisciplines are designed to bracket and ultimately to suppress the larger, integrating questions that once defined liberal education, but it is comforting, not to say professionally advantageous, to imagine that no paradigm or assumptions frame our approach to psychology or sociology or political science or literary criticism, or at least that it is not our job to exhibit or to question those assumptions. A teacher “progresses” (produces articles, accumulates citations, gains tenure) by suppressing the perennial questions about human nature and its purposes and proceeding on the basis of the accepted methodologies, as if these were neutral and had no bearing on such questions.

BYU professors, much like most others who are well “professionalized,” or integrated into the ascendant disciplines, assent explicitly not to the content of any secular worldview but to the ongoing process of specialization and its attendant imperative of methodological rigor. But the secular, reductionist assumptions are implicit in the specialized methodological form. If the humanities and human sciences at BYU are succumbing to
these assumptions, it is because they assent to the technical specialization driven by the academic mainstream rather than assume the responsibility to excavate and engage first principles.

The norms and incentives of the specialized disciplines exert a usually subtle but relentless and almost irresistible influence on the recruitment and professional development of BYU faculty. Most faculty trust implicitly in the authority of a prestigious doctoral program and so find it almost incomprehensible when I ask whether a well-credentialed young candidate recruited to join the faculty has received the kind of education in moral and political philosophy that would equip him or her to question the regnant secular liberalism and thereby to guide our students in engaging the contemporary world from a faithful Latter-day Saint perspective.

Once a colleague took the argument a step further, arguing that the whole field of moral philosophy is being replaced by neuroscientific explanations of the moral choices people think they are making, and that therefore we social scientists have no responsibility for educating our students in moral reasoning but should leave this wholly to dogmatic religious instruction (which apparently works just fine with neurons). If any of my colleagues found this embrace of thoroughgoing naturalism and derogation of reason’s moral responsibility appalling, they chose not to say so. We cannot be surprised that few BYU faculty are now prepared or inclined to question such naturalism by engaging the large, integrating questions that touch on our moral and spiritual commitments, because the faculty over decades has been selected, developed, and paid to pursue quite different objectives.

An unorthodox research program would almost certainly ruin a professor’s chances for success in the mainstream and tend to lower BYU’s standing in the eyes of the larger
profession. And so what seems to be the ideologically neutral imperative of professionalization has the effect of stacking all incentives on the side of ascendant cultural forces and marginalizing all scholarly efforts to articulate and defend goods and principles fundamental to a Christian and Latter-day Saint view of the world.

This unilateral disarmament comes at a moment when more and more of our students and our larger audience in the church are being formed by schools and by a general culture deeply invested in secular liberal assumptions. We now see a strong tendency among a confident and vocal minority of Latter-day Saints, especially younger, more educated, or more intellectually and professionally ambitious members, to reread the Gospel from an ethical standpoint decisively shaped by the ascendant secularism and progressivism.

Of course the church has long been at peace with political liberalism in the generic sense—that is, with the practical benefits of a society encompassing diverse religions and tolerating many differences of “lifestyle.” But now we see a strong and rapidly growing tendency for liberalism to migrate from politics and to penetrate and reshape ethics at the deepest level, and thereby to transform religious understandings. The new Mormon liberals make the liberal principle of toleration or nondiscrimination—which they hear in the scriptural teaching “all are alike unto God”—into the most fundamental touchstone of religious truth. To be truly religious is to be compassionate, and to be compassionate is to acknowledge the legitimacy of each individual’s view of his own good. Every individual therefore has a sovereign right to define his own “good” and, in particular, his own idea of the meaning of sexuality and “family.”

It follows that the Family Proclamation, a statement first published on the authority of the highest church leaders in 1995, must be discounted or relativized. The Proclamation
teaches, for example, in the plainest terms, that “the family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity.”

For the still small but vocal and increasingly influential group of Mormon progressives, this statement may be dismissed as the prejudice of a passing generation: After all, it’s not actually “scripture,” they argue, and in any case its tradition-bound teaching is clearly less compelling ethically (to say the least) than the progressive commitment to “equality,” which reflects the very heart of Christianity. If it seems that this new progressive–liberal ethics is at odds with plain church teachings on sexuality and the family, the new liberals recur to a progressive recasting of the doctrine of continuing revelation to explain away any contradiction: Church leaders will catch up with the progress of equality eventually.

BYU on the whole is by no means favorable to emancipation from traditional moral restraints. But, as a highly professionalized—that is, specialized—institution, neither is it well equipped to counter liberationist or reductionist arguments by critiquing fundamental ideas. One student remarked to me: “I have noticed in my classes that it is almost taboo to defend a conservative position on issues that align with church doctrine. I feel like I am being bold by stating my opinion on issues that are supported by the doctrine. I wonder if other students feel similarly.” Without engaging the ideas underlying the moral and political forces of secular progressivism, BYU can only cooperate by default with the dominant movement. To acquiesce to the authority of the secular academic establishment is effectively to endorse it and to bolster it, even if most do not intend this effect.

This endorsement by BYU faculty of an essentially secular–progressive viewpoint has up
until now been mostly subtle and implicit, but it is already becoming more public and straightforward. Previous irruptions of unorthodoxy or dissidence at BYU—for example, the feminist discontent of twenty years ago—have been localized and containable.

Now, however, the collapse of the working compromise between secularism and other languages of learning opens the possibility of the liquidation of all learned resistance to the secular establishment. Under the unchallenged dominance of this secular academic establishment, most BYU faculty simply defer to its authority over the profession, while a few of the most intellectually prestigious or ambitious celebrate it and seek to discredit any remaining backwaters of faithful learning supportive of older moral and familial norms.

A prominent lecture by a BYU professor, recently published and featured in BYU’s flagship scholarly journal, addressed the question of social and moral change across the ages. The lecture, titled “What Happened to My Bell-Bottoms?: How things that were never going to change have sometimes changed anyway, and how studying history can help you make sense of it all,” was charming, often amusing and, for most listeners, I’m sure, without controversial moral or ideological content. The point was that we should recognize that much that once seemed permanent has changed, and so we should not resist further change. Religion once defended slavery, so we shouldn’t make too much of religion’s current defense of heterosexual marriage. You may be uncomfortable with gay marriage, but that discomfort is based on a transitory historical trend, no better grounded than the 1970s fashion of bell-bottom jeans.

A plainer statement of historical relativism cannot be imagined: We were clearly given to understand that the authority of history supports our emancipation from traditional moral restraints. Although the contrast with the recent and repeated emphases of church leaders on permanent moral standards could not be greater, few seem to question the
distinguished author’s dismissal of enduring principles or limits. History is a rational, objective discipline, and history teaches us that resistance to “change” in the name of some supposed higher principle is pointless.

The tragic result of BYU’s movement from its distinctive, countercultural mission is that many good young Latter-day Saints feel that they have to choose between being thoughtful, reasonable, and well-informed and being loyal to fundamental moral and religious principles. Happily, many faculty provide living counterexamples to this generalization, but few take up the task of providing an intellectual alternative. The secular culture intimidates some of the best of the rising generation by presenting them with this alternative: You can be counted among the smart people, or you can cling to your groundless and cruel prejudices. BYU shows little interest in articulating a third choice: an intellectual defense of openness to unfashionable truths.

I call this situation tragic because the power of this relativistic liberalism depends fundamentally upon the illusion of an unimpeachable rational basis. An institution of higher education, especially one with a substantive religious mission, ought to make it a high priority to develop the capacity to dispel this illusion and thereby to increase students’ confidence in the intellectual respectability of traditional restraints and structures. But little footing for the work of such dispelling is provided in the present array of specialized disciplines.

What, then, is to be done? First, many significant attempts have been and are being made at BYU to reach a perspective beyond the specialized disciplines and the reductionist assumptions that underlie that specialization. Most important are continuing efforts by individual faculty in their research and teaching, despite the structural disincentives, to articulate and defend alternatives to the dominant reductive secularism. A number of
institutional resources support such efforts. For example, the Faculty Center and the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding have promoted faculty discussions relating directly or indirectly to BYU’s distinctive mission that have ranged from close readings of Emmanuel Levinas to colloquies of James Davison Hunter’s *To Change the World*.

The university hosts high-profile speakers several times a year, and some of these have broached fundamental questions very relevant to BYU’s highest aspirations. A few years ago, large audiences were exposed to challenging remarks on the problem of religious freedom in contemporary American society, first by Robert P. George of Princeton University and then two years later by Francis Cardinal George, archbishop of Chicago and, at the time, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Wheatley Institution, a broadly conceived policy center at BYU, regularly hosts speakers such as Daniel Robinson, Michael Novak, and Roger Scruton (and will soon be hosting David Bentley Hart). I might also mention, with gratitude, that I have twice been the recipient of BYU research grants established to encourage the articulation of Latter-day Saint perspectives within the academic disciplines.

All these inter- or transdisciplinary initiatives provide significant opportunities to BYU faculty interested in the integration of religious and intellectual life, but their effect is limited by their being completely disconnected from the career incentives that shape the faculty’s priorities and therefore the opportunities open to their students. Any time a scholar might invest in learning about Daniel Robinson’s Aristotelian critique of the paradigms of contemporary psychology, or about Roger Scruton’s critique of the reductionism of neuroscience, it must be regarded as a sacrifice of his own professional interests and not as constitutive of his BYU functions, for he is effectively getting paid to publish as much as possible as quickly as possible in the organs sanctioned by the
scientistic and specialized mainstream.

If I had a detailed strategy to redirect the inertia now leading BYU toward a potentially disastrous collision with its religious mission, this would not be the place to lay it out. Let me just make it clear that a radically separatist strategy, one in which we simply turn our backs on the academic establishment, is not only impossible but incoherent. If we believe the development of the spirit is in some way bound up with the development of the mind, then the only way beyond secular philosophies is through them—with the guidance, to be sure, of scripture, prophecy, and personal revelation. The task of transcending the world is inseparable from that of understanding and appreciating what is good in it, including the good reasoning of people with whom we ultimately disagree.

There is no way, moreover, for a university to be a university without participating in the meaning of a university in our larger society. If this shared sense has dissolved, or if it has evolved in a direction that obliges us to secede, then all hope of an institutional synthesis of faith and reason dissolves as well. Such dissolution is far from impossible, alas, but we must hope that it is not yet inevitable. Any hope that remains for a university aspiring to integrate faith and reason depends on cooperative alliances with academically respected and influential individuals and institutions (other universities and colleges, accrediting agencies, scholarly associations) outside the secular mainstream.

Fortunately, such individuals and institutions exist. There are scholars, colleges and universities, and other organizations, rogue research programs or vestiges of ancient intellectual traditions, that can contribute to the articulation and implementation of standards of academic rigor while pushing back against the secular and reductionist mainstream in various ways and to varying degrees. There is every reason to hope that BYU would find significant allies should it apply itself seriously to the task of honoring its
distinctive mission.

Unfortunately, however, our progress in building such friendships is retarded by our addiction to the respect of the mainstream and by our lack of courage and insight in opposing intellectual trends fundamentally averse to our deepest religious and moral commitments. In weaning BYU away from its dependency on the secular mainstream, the cultivation of such alliances would have to be joined with the application of substantial resources to a vision of faculty development carefully attuned to the distinctive nature of the institution.

BYU’s distinctive mission has already been seriously compromised by indulging the illusion that we can accept without reservation the understanding of humanity that is implicit in the academic mainstream. A cultivation of alternative intellectual frameworks open to our essential religious commitments is urgently needed if the currents of contemporary intellectual culture are not to carry the university irreversibly away from distinctive religious moorings. Leadership as courageous and perseverant as it is wise will be required over the next generation to meet the challenge of the secularization of the academic world. We may not want the culture wars, but they want us. To pretend to neutrality in today’s moral and intellectual environment is in effect to endorse the ascendant secular and reductionist orthodoxy.

In the face of the confusion sown by contemporary secularism and relativism, the deeply rooted Latter-day Saint belief that eternal truth is “the brightest prize” to which any spiritual being can aspire still provides a firm foundation for the edification of a Mormon university seriously devoted to learning “by study and also by faith.” To preserve what remains of BYU’s legacy and to build a truly distinctive and enduring university on this foundation of openness to Truth will require much of BYU’s faculty and administration in
the very near future.

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