



4-1-2010

## Inquiry, Scholarship, and Learning and Teaching in Religiously Affiliated Colleges and Universities

Gerrit W. Gong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gong, Gerrit W. (2010) "Inquiry, Scholarship, and Learning and Teaching in Religiously Affiliated Colleges and Universities," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 49 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol49/iss2/2>

This Introduction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

INTRODUCTION

# Inquiry, Scholarship, and Learning and Teaching in Religiously Affiliated Colleges and Universities

*Gerrit W. Gong*

Not long ago, I had opportunity to visit my other alma mater. Especially when the late afternoon sun burnishes Oxford's Cotswold sandstone buildings, the City of Spires radiates a passion for ideas and life, as if ready to crackle into open flame—all, of course, in an understated British sort of way. Oxford memories layer across the years. I remember riding my bike, academic gown in hand, to Christ Church College, where Peter Pulzer conducted European international history tutorials. During our one-on-one discussions, he might Socratically mention in passing that Cardinal Woolsey gave Christ Church the trees visible from his window in the back meadows even as we analyzed competing interpretations of Bismarck's balance of power and German hegemony strategies as they illuminated contemporary Middle East developments involving Iran.

Among other such memories, I smile as I recall my college crew team wanting to kick me off the boat. Instead of rowing according to the cox's command, I was daydreaming about a girl as the beautiful autumn light sparkled on the Cherwell River. Because my wife and I courted from two different continents, I can honestly say I earned a PhD in international relations.

The oldest in the English-speaking world, Oxford as a university dates to the eleventh century, certainly to 1167 when British students lost options to study abroad. Universities hold a special place in Western civilization. We repose wisdom, knowledge, and the inculcation of attitudes and values in universities. We entrust universities to pass the torch of open and consequential inquiry from generation to generation, hopefully burning brighter as it goes. At Brigham Young University, as with sister universities everywhere, we are committed to free and open inquiry,

creative and rigorous pursuit of knowledge and truth, and the instilling of attitudes and skills for lifelong learning and service.

Convened on February 27, 2009, BYU's university-wide conference on "Inquiry, Scholarship, and Learning and Teaching in Religiously Affiliated Colleges and Universities" was intended to evidence and celebrate the university's abiding commitment to the principles and values of free and open inquiry, to seeking and asking, to inviting ongoing vigorous testing and discussing of who we are and how we become the best we can be. Our questions are fundamental and challenging. How does BYU preserve and promote the values of free and open inquiry as extolled by the American academy of which BYU is part, at the same time preserving and promoting the standards and values of faith central to a religiously affiliated learning and teaching community? How is scholarship, as well as learning and teaching, pursued in religiously affiliated universities, and at BYU in particular?

Over time and across experience, a broad diversity of universities and colleges has arisen. This wide spectrum of institutions—each with its own mission and constituent populations—is a strength of higher education, in the best sense, in America and abroad. Some institutions are large, others small. Some draw from international, national, or regional audiences; others serve specific communities—for example, Native American tribes or adult, professional, or nontraditional students. Some universities emphasize undergraduate teaching; others conduct research; and some—like BYU—do both. Some universities offer comprehensive general education and specialized curricula across multiple disciplines; others provide targeted academic offerings. Some universities offer primarily distance education while others maintain traditional on-campus cohorts of freshmen to seniors. Truly one size does not fit all.

Whatever their shape, size, or mission, universities across the United States, including BYU, share a common commitment: They seek to demonstrate educational excellence and to engage in continuous improvement as defined by their institutional missions. Universities encourage and support each other through voluntary peer review. Such peer-review processes recognize and respect each institution's unique circumstance and mission within a tradition and context of American higher education rooted in free inquiry, open scholarship, and the best practices of learning and teaching, which challenge faculty and students to advance understanding and truth in consequential ways.

Brigham Young University attracts the best and brightest from every state in this country, and from over 120 countries across the world. Our faculty and students come largely but not solely from the faith tradition of

BYU's sponsoring church—and those at BYU not of the Latter-day Saint faith represent a cross section of the world's religions, a cross section of Christian faiths, and some without religious affiliation. All at BYU voluntarily agree to adhere to the university's honor code, which endorses honesty, integrity, and respect for others.

Among the thirty thousand students at BYU, about 90 percent are undergraduate students and about 10 percent are graduate students. Our board of trustees has defined BYU as primarily an undergraduate teaching institution, with selected graduate programs of excellence. Our mission and university aims, as expressed in our BYU foundational documents and in our daily practice, bespeak our commitment to our students being exposed to and mastering general and discipline-specific education, every aspect of sound reasoning and communication (including critical reading, writing, oral, and other forms of presentation), and the nurturing of a passion for learning and service. In the spirit of the phrase attributed to Yeats, for us “education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.”

BYU also seeks to help prepare our students to take responsible and contributing places in families, communities, and countries around the world. Today's interconnected world is simultaneously borderless and constituted by a competing diversity of sovereign political countries.<sup>1</sup> This world needs everywhere university graduates who are competent, compassionate, contributing individuals of character and skill, who exhibit the humility of lifelong learning and the passion and commitment of practicable service.

By definition, universities thrive on the exchange of ideas, whether among faculty, students, and administrators or among freshmen, alumni, university supporters, and trustees. In the end, we are all learners and all teachers.

Seeing the world from multiple perspectives and in multiple dimensions opens inquiry, challenges conventional wisdoms, and facilitates exchange of best practices. Especially for that reason, BYU openly invited and was pleased to have strong participation in its Inquiry Conference from students, staff, faculty, and administrators representing disciplines and backgrounds all across campus. Audience and program likewise included distinguished alumni and BYU's always-generous supporters. President Henry B. Eyring, an officer of the BYU Board of Trustees, participated, bringing his lifetime involvement with American higher education, as did President Cecil O. Samuelson, who provides the concluding presentation in these proceedings.

In addition, BYU was honored to welcome distinguished academic leaders from beyond BYU. Professor Thomas Hibbs, Dean of the Honors

College at Baylor University, and Dr. Sandra Elman, president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, added vital perspective and insight to the conference. Such cross-pollinating perspectives allow us all to test assumptions and refine the articulation of our experiences and views.

Fundamental, enduring questions often reflect enduring dynamic tensions. Some issues relevant to preserving and protecting academic freedom are best resolved in the daily scholarship, learning, or teaching of an individual faculty member or student. Other such issues invite continued discussion in departmental, college, or university forums, such as this conference. In that sense, it is the ongoing spirit of free and open inquiry that provides its best confirmatory evidence, as well as the best safeguard for its own continuance.

Overall, the BYU Inquiry Conference sought to affirm by policy statement and living practice BYU's deep commitment to the shared values and approaches of the American academy and to our own unique mission. This collection of contributions to the conference seeks to capture this ongoing campuswide discussion. It invites readers to join the continuing open dialogue, so pertinent in this time, regarding approaches, roles, and relations as they involve inquiry, scholarship, and learning and teaching in religiously affiliated colleges and universities, including Brigham Young University.

---

Gerrit W. Gong was sustained a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 3, 2010. In February 2009, when the Inquiry Conference took place, he was Assistant to the President for Planning and Assessment at Brigham Young University. Dr. Gong holds PhD and master's of philosophy degrees in international relations from Oxford University, England, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He has researched and taught at Oxford, Johns Hopkins (School of Advanced International Studies), Georgetown, and Brigham Young Universities. At the invitation of the U.S. Secretary of Education, Gong served on the Department of Education's National Advisory Committee for Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). He participated in two national education summits. He worked for twenty years at the U.S. Department of State and as China Chair and Asia Director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. He has also worked with multinational companies, nongovernmental organizations, and research institutes around the world. Gerrit Gong was raised in Palo Alto, California. He and his wife, Susan, have four sons and a yellow Labrador named Huckleberry.

1. The United Nations recognizes 192 countries; the United States 194 sovereign entities.