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The Authority of "Academic Freedom": On Two Cases of Miseducation at BYU

Ralph C. Hancock

As the authors report with admirable candor in their preface, this book arose from controversies at Brigham Young University (BYU) in which they were involved as young student journalists. Upon the “firing” of two professors (Cecelia Konchar Farr and David Knowlton), Bryan Waterman and Brian Kagel (editors, respectively, of the Student Review and the Daily Universe) were motivated “to begin plotting books about academic freedom at the Mormon school” (p. vii). The 453-page outcome, a collaborative effort, is an amply (if not evenly) documented account of certain episodes of ideological commotion at BYU in the 1990s, framed by an overview of the history of the issue of “academic freedom” at the church university. This result is in many ways quite impressive, though the original, polemical motivation (for from the outset there is no doubt about the authors’ sympathy) seems not to have been much affected by the process of researching and writing. They alert us early on, somewhat delicately, to the fact that the “narrative leans toward the experience of some faculty members, due to our level of personal access to them” (p. x), and that the book is “primarily journalistic in tone” (p. ix). At the same time, they hope it will “measure up . . . to standards expected

of professional historians" (p. ix), whatever that means. So we know better than to expect a perspective of Olympian serenity. Given these limitations, the story—or the side of the story they tell—is presented quite skillfully, even engagingly. Still, it is disappointing that amid all this reporting and documenting, the authors apparently managed to avoid reflecting on the central questions that hover over practically all the events and arguments considered.

The subtitle itself suggests certain questions: what do we mean, what might we mean, what ought we to mean by “freedom”? by “authority”? What is at stake in the diverse uses of these terms—for example, in politics, in higher education, in religion? How does each of these terms relate to the other—are they necessarily antagonists? We need not doubt the sincerity of the authors in assuring us that they “do not seek to turn ‘freedom and authority’ into a heavy-handed interpretive framework” (p. ix). But the only way to back up this assurance would be to reflect on this very framework and thus to achieve some perspective on the original project of the book itself and on the passions surrounding and infusing it. Such reflection the authors forego.

The price of this missing reflection is a muddling of categories that pervasively conditions the tone of the book and dooms any attempts at careful analysis. From the first chapter—“The Uses of Mormon Education”—it is clear that whereas “authority” is identified with the church (as if the rejection of one authority did not inevitably expose us to another), “freedom” is neatly associated with the unexamined authorities implicit in “a desire for legitimacy in traditional academic modes” (p. 6) and even “an uneducated people’s desire for respectability in the eyes of the American nation” (p. 7). The authors mention, but do not even pause to consider, the idea that “BYU, by allowing religious perspectives in the classroom, actually affords a greater amount of academic freedom than that found at secular universities” or that “Mormon education” might be considered “as an alternative to prevailing national models and aims to be rooted in the revelatory as much as” and therefore, I suggest, not simply as opposed to, “the rational” (pp. 4, 5). Waterman and Kagel show slight
interest in elaborating on such an alternative or in asking to what degree the policies and decisions of the BYU administration that arouse their indignation might be reasonably interpreted as instrumental to such an “alternative,” because they are themselves altogether overawed by the prestige of “prevailing national models.” They therefore end up, somewhat despite themselves, writing a brief for assimilation to “mainstream American values,” provided that these are understood in the progressive version—that is, as uncontaminated by the “culturally conservative backlash against the perceived excesses of modern democratic society” (pp. 12, 13). Thus they find themselves deeply embarrassed by BYU’s apparent determination “to deviate from contemporary academic models and preserve a safe space for Mormon education, even at the expense of outstanding faculty and national reputation”—where “outstanding faculty” is understood, of course, as a strict correlate of “[progressive] national reputation.” This book is the story of that embarrassment and of a failure to be ashamed of it.

This said, much of the story is well told and well documented. Anyone trying to find a way into the historical record of BYU’s developing mission in the face of various challenges from the evolving culture it partly inhabits will discover here many valuable references and even, if he or she proceeds discriminately, quite a useful orientation. The first part of the book (chaps. 1–4), “Contexts,” is particularly to be recommended in this sense; here the authors offer very readable and interesting accounts—based on ample research—of feminism (chap. 2), student journalism (chap. 3), and the Honor Code (chap. 4) at BYU. In these chapters the protagonists are often allowed to speak for themselves, and so the uncritical bias of the authors is not too obtrusive—or only intermittently intrusive, particularly as they conclude each chapter. For example, much in the chapter on feminism could pass for an even-handed, blow-by-blow, and decade-by-decade account of an ongoing debate if it were not introduced by a remark about “official endorsements of gender essentialism, most recently found in the church’s 1995 document *The Family: A*
"Proclamation to the World" (p. 23), and concluded with a reinforcement of the book's governing paradigm concerning the tension between "conservative religion" and "national academic standards" (p. 62). The authors leave no doubt that, for them, there can be no questioning of the authority of "national academic standards," least of all from the standpoint of "conservative religion," nor can any prophetic authority (or even, apparently, recent scientific evidence) be allowed to flout the prestige of gender constructivism in the "progressive" academy.

Similarly, they conclude a useful if somewhat tendentious account of the history of the Honor Code with an ominous remark about "the precarious nature of one's status at BYU" and strike a final pose of heroic resignation before the brutal fact that "constant enforcement" will likely remain a necessity "as BYU continues to manufacture students—who then become model Mormons—for years to come" (p. 169). Such seething resentment and contempt for an explicit and widely shared mission of Brigham Young University—to foster the development of Latter-day Saints—the authors apparently take to be compatible with "standards expected of professional historians."

The motives of resentment and contempt become more intrusive in "Controversies," the second, main part of the book (chaps. 5–10). Here the authors are up to their necks in the recent issues and controversies closest to their hearts—or to their spleens—and here they rely most heavily on their own experiences and their favorite sources. They show no more sense of nuance in dealing with the complex, qualitative issues surrounding faculty review processes and standards than one would expect of student journalists, happy to assume, when it suits their cause, that the right number of publications or the right numbers on "teacher evaluation scores" should automatically decide the case (p. 203). Not that any such standard of judgment is explicitly developed. The only consistent interpretive theme here is the rightness of the dissidents' cause, a consistency untroubled by a certain difficulty in pinning down what that cause is supposed to be: is it the traditional commitment of the university to rational inquiry, to "in-
formation and knowledge,” as Waterman put it in one of his self-quoted contributions to the debate (p. 227), or is it the “postmodern” or “radical feminist” commitment to “change,” which of course never means changing the minds of the radicals?

But the main distortion in Waterman and Kagel’s account consists simply in the amount of text devoted to the cases the authors have always been convinced deserve to be *causes célèbres*. By quoting their heroes and their heroes’ fans (including, not infrequently, themselves) copiously enough, they are able to reassure themselves that they have played a major role in events, which, if they are not demonstrably of world-historical proportions in the precise Hegelian sense, at least have a chance of winning the favorable attention of the guardians of national academic prestige, whom they of course take to be the court of last appeal. To be sure, Waterman and Kagel deserve credit for giving some space to the arguments of their adversaries—space in the pages of their book but none in their minds. Thus, when they cite massive evidence for support for the BYU administration among faculty and the larger LDS community (p. 244; before concluding the chapter on Farr and Knowlton with what are no doubt supposed to be touching vignettes on the post-BYU lives of their heroes), they clearly do so only as evidence of the desperately blind conformism of the unenlightened masses.

Chapter 7 is particularly useful in revealing the links, or at least the presumption of solidarity, between the small dissident milieu at BYU and a would-be movement aiming directly at a radical transformation of the church. Waterman and Kagel give ample space to a number of “Mormon Intellectuals” (roughly, the subset of those who think themselves competent to reform the church and who succeed in getting quoted in newspapers) who openly courted excommunication and finally managed to achieve it. One is Lavina Fielding Anderson, whose radical antinomianism includes the notion that “the priesthood, the temple, the church must be taken down stone by stone and built again on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ”—as that foundation is interpreted by each “individual member,” that is
This is clearly incompatible with any institutional authority. Another is Janice Allred, who insisted on her right as a member of the church to promote new practices and doctrines concerning a Holy Ghost/Heavenly Mother (pp. 292–93); and finally the inimitable Paul Toscano, fully inhabiting his self-created role as a prophet crying repentance to the fallen church hierarchy—“Wo be unto him that is at ease in Zion”—and offering to correct their “false teachings” (p. 273). If decisive differences exist between the opinions and aims of such persons, which are clearly incompatible with any plausible understanding of loyalty to the church as presently constituted and the views of the dissident-heroes at BYU, then our authors show remarkably little interest in defining such differences. Of course they are as free as their heroes, under the blessed laws of the land, to dissent from the church, to leave it, to attack it, or even to try to start their own. But then we must be clear what is at stake. Given this complete failure to discriminate among the various advocates of greater “freedom” at BYU and in the church more generally, the authors’ occasional efforts at reassurance regarding the faithfulness or sincerity of the dissidents they wish to champion rings rather hollow. Do they really want to endorse any and all attacks on the church as presently constituted?

Lacking any capacity to criticize even the most radical critiques of the church, the authors are completely deaf to any arguments—including many they briefly cite—for understandings of “academic freedom” different from their own “unfettered”—that is, boundless—-notion. Since they do not wish to consider the possibility—or rather, the plain fact—that certain core teachings of the church simply contradict the liberalization of their heroes, they can only ascribe arguments of their opponents to some dark “alliance with broader conservative forces in the academy and in the culture at large” (p. 408). And so their last chapter consists of an ambitious attempt, though grafted onto an argument developed earlier by Scott Abbott (see p. 426), to describe the rise of a certain neoconservatism in America and to trace LDS suspicion of secularization and sense of opposition to the world to this outside political movement. To be sure, real connections exist between certain neoconservative intellectuals and some faithful
church leaders and scholars. This can be explained by the un alarming fact that the two groups hold a number of concerns and viewpoints in common. But Waterman and Kagel’s suggestion of some sinister political hijacking of the LDS mainstream is a laughable nonstarter for the simple reason that, as the authors themselves once let slip, a certain “religious and social conservatism” among Mormons preceded the development of ties with the neoconservatives (p. 429). The wonder is that our young authors apparently cannot even conceive of the possibility of a critical standpoint outside the “secular world” defined by the most recent academic fashions.

My critique of Waterman and Kagel’s contemptuous and therefore careless examination of issues surrounding The Lord’s University should in no way be taken to imply that the question of just what such a university should be has been finally or even adequately answered. Certainly a simple opposition between “us” (Latter-day Saints) and “them” (“secular,” “worldly,” “intellectual”) will not be enough to guide us in seeking to expand the mind’s freedom as we explore truths gratefully received on the authority of revelation. To begin with, we cannot even see how much we are already conditioned by “the world,” how much we ourselves owe to it, without first carefully examining the world’s self-understanding, as represented, for example, in ideas, and in literary and artistic expressions. Such examinations would in some cases justify and ground our suspicions regarding “the world” and in other cases open us more fully to whatever is virtuous, lovely, of good report, or praiseworthy. But the narrative and the arguments offered by Waterman and Kagel do little to advance such a task of discriminating engagement with the world of learning. If no richer understanding of the relationship, even the creative tension, between “academic freedom” and the “authority” of the restored Church of Jesus Christ than that at work in the accounts given by these manifestly bright and enterprising former students should come to inform discussions of such matters at BYU, then this failure would in itself constitute a much heavier judgment on the pursuit at Brigham Young University of its noble mission than any of the complaints so amply voiced in this volume.