

## The Spiritual University

Not long ago I heard it preached to a gathering of the Saints of God that nothing one could learn at a university, with specific reference to Brigham Young University, could make any difference at all toward one's individual salvation. I found the assertion quite remarkable. It reminded me of Wolfgang Pauli's response at the conclusion of a physics seminar given by a colleague: "That's not even wrong!"

In 1993 Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman of the City University of New York published a study of American religion, *One Nation Under God*, which, with 113,000 respondents, is described as the most comprehensive random sample of detailed religious preference ever collected. In the study members of various religions were characterized by their median annual incomes, level of employment, percentage owning their own homes, and percentage of college graduates. The latter category, an indicator of educational motivation and achievement, finds Mormons significantly ahead of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, and Pentecostals; on a par with Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists; and significantly trailing agnostics, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and Unitarians.

Contrast this study with an assessment of Mormon educational endeavor made fifty years ago at the centennial celebration of the entry of the Mormon pioneers into the Salt Lake Valley:

"In 1923 a careful educational survey of the stakes of Zion...indicated a large preponderance of college graduates, the holders of masters' and doctors' degrees above any other group of like numbers in America or the world...More students graduate from college in Utah, in proportion to the state population, than in any other state...At the close of the first century, since the pioneers undertook to make the great deserts of the West their home, the Latter-Day Saints present a picture of educational achievement second to none in America or the world." (Dr. John A. Widtsoe and Richard L. Evans, *The Educational Level of the Latter-Day Saints*, The Improvement Era, July 1947, pp. 444-447)

The authors attribute this achievement, which is documented in some detail, to the fact that " The Latter-Day Saint student conceives his school work to

be part of his purposeful preparation for eternal life and joy." (Emphasis added.)

What, then, has changed? In fact, many things have changed. Mormons have been assimilated into the larger American culture, for better and for worse. Other religious groups have made their own strides forward, including higher aspirations for the educational achievements of women. But, you can also try the following experiment. Take a typical group of Mormon students and ask them, without prompting, to write down three reasons why they go to school. See if any of these reasons remotely resembles the idea that the Latter-Day Saint student conceives his school work to be part of his or her "purposeful preparation for eternal life and joy." The idea, in all likelihood, will simply not occur to them. If you explain it, you will still be met with uncomprehending disbelief. The connection between education and eternal life and joy has been nearly severed in the Mormon mind of the rising generation. There remains the temporal connection to education (meaning secular training) as a means to a better livelihood, but even this connection now seems less compelling than it once did in a world where college graduates often see no obvious opportunity for employment within their chosen field of secular training. If that final thread breaks, the severance will be complete.

Why should it matter? To be in the company of Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists is to be in good company.

It begins with something called "intelligence." We don't know very much at all about intelligence. It is described as eternal, as co-existent with God, and as the light of truth (*D&C 93:29*); as the glory of God or light and truth (*D&C 93:36*); and as "spiritual element" (McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, p. 387.) But, at some point, intelligence becomes intelligences (Abraham 3:22), the spiritually begotten sons and daughters of God (McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, p. 387.) In this instant, the intelligences are endowed with the potential to become as their parent is. It is probably the fundamental, defining doctrine of our religion, upon which all others hang, including the atonement. To fulfill that endowed potential is to "become perfect." The injunction of God to his offspring is "be ye therefore perfect."

The sons and daughters of God, spiritually begotten and endowed with divine potential,

were not like God. The spirit element was still separated from the physical element, without which there is not a fullness of the perfection that characterizes our parent (*D&C 93:33*). Salvation, it has been said is to "live the life of God." Latter-Day Saints take that description very literally. The fulfillment of their endowed potential requires an imprinting of the spirit element onto the physical element, without which they cannot fulfill their potential. For the spirit children to have a fullness of joy, we know only that it must be so; we do not know why. But, every eight-year-old child that prepares for baptism can at least recite that we must come into a physical world to receive a physical body. Without it, we cannot "live the life of God."

The children of God differ from their parent in two additional ways. They lack that fulfillment of their divine potential that we call "perfection," a perfection of both goodness and of ableness. God is both perfectly good, but also perfectly able to translate His will into being. We cannot "live the life of God" if we are not like God, if we are not perfect both in goodness and ableness. Among the spirit children, even the most elect, there is none able enough to create a world---save One, and none good enough to make an infinite atoning sacrifice---save One.

The goodness and ableness of God are learned. The spirit children, all of us, know next to nothing about almost everything. No one mistakes any of us for God. One need only go out on a dark night and peer into the heavens to know that there is an enormous gulf of ignorance that separates us from the Creator of that which we see. And what we see is the minutest fraction of what the telescopes reveal. If we imagine a long line drawn to symbolize the separation in wisdom and understanding between our present condition and that of God, with a rock and a tree at one end and God at the other, then our present position is very near the rock and the tree. There is an enormous separation between us and God. Voltaire hit the nail on the head when he chuckled at the pretensions of human beings and said: "Men can create gods by the thousands, but cannot create a worm!" Salvation (exaltation) consists, in part, in creating from the spirit child, a God that is able enough to create a worm. Salvation (exaltation) is to "live the life of God," the Creator of the world.

Conversion consists in looking in all the directions that one might go from where one

presently is and, heeding the Inner Voice, to move along the line, the long but narrow path, that leads toward God. We do not know how it is possible to complete the journey; we move forward in faith, a step at a time, toward a goal we cannot clearly see.

Not all things that one might learn at a university to move us along that path are of equal value. Much that is taught at a modern university is secular, i.e., those things that have no relevance beyond the grave. But, the heart of the university is not to be found at the secular periphery. It lies elsewhere and it is spiritual. We call those things "spiritual" that last, those things that persist beyond the grave, those things that are eternal.

The scriptures tell us that wisdom and understanding are the most important kinds of knowledge (*Proverbs 4:7*). These kinds of knowledge are stamped on the spirit and are spiritual. Wisdom and understanding are not knowledge of fact alone. They are knowledge of connection. "Wisdom" is to recognize the connection between our behavior and the consequences of that behavior. "Understanding" is to recognize the connection between the things that happen in the world and the fundamental laws and principles that govern it. It is where we might find wisdom and understanding that we search for the heart of the Spiritual University.

Religion teaches us wisdom. It tells us what we ought to do and what the consequences of our choices will be. It teaches us "wickedness never was happiness." It teaches us about the perfect goodness of God and the steps we must take to fulfill our endowed potential for goodness. It teaches us that we alone are not capable of achieving the perfect goodness of God, that after all that we can do, it is by grace that we are admitted to live the life of God. It teaches us that God is both perfectly merciful and perfectly just and that the only way we can be cleansed of our sins is through that gift of God that we call the atonement, mediated by Christ, an infinite and eternal gift. Only in this way can God be perfect in His justice and yet perfect in His mercy toward His spirit children. But, the cleansing work of the atonement is conditional upon repentance because it is God's purpose to see His children move along the path toward Him and become perfect as He is. It is His work and His glory for them to do so. Religion tells us what we must do to move toward God and what the consequences of our behavior will be. It tells us that we ought to make covenants with God and keep His commandments. This is wisdom. It is the subject of religion. It ought to be

found near the heart of the Spiritual University for it teaches the spirit child how to discern between right and wrong.

The fine arts and humanities are near the heart of the Spiritual University as well. They stamp indelible images on the spirit, images that last, images that are spiritual. They refine the spirit. During the 1960s, the Relief Society supported a cultural refinement series with literary collections edited by Robert K. Thomas and Bruce B. Clark entitled *Out of the Best Books*. Selections from literature and fine arts were used to teach lessons such as "Faith in God and Man," "Right and Wrong Attitudes," "The Place of Suffering in Life," "Refinement Creates Beauty," "Diligence Ennobles Work," and "Virtue Nourishes the Soul." These lessons of the fine arts and humanities are spiritual, not secular, themes and they lie near the heart of the Spiritual University because they teach the spirit child what the child ought to do and how to discern between what is beautiful and what is ugly.

The natural sciences are near the heart of the Spiritual University. The natural world is the handiwork of God. In much of Christian theology, the study of the physical world is nevertheless considered secular because the physical world is believed to be transitory, not eternal, and therefore not spiritual. Mormon theology teaches, to the contrary, that the "life of God" consists of a mating of the spiritual element and the physical element in an eternal bond. Thus, to understand the fundamental laws and principles that guide the physical world, is to stamp upon the spirit an understanding that persists, that is eternal, that is spiritual. It is the perfection of understanding and ableness of God that is His power to be Creator. God has given us this world as an example, an object to study and perhaps to emulate. The natural sciences are near the heart of the Spiritual University because they teach the spirit child how to discern what is true and what is false about God's creation.

Philosophy is there, too, near the heart of the Spiritual University. The lessons of philosophy refine the capabilities of the spirit for reasoned argument and for clarity of expression. These too are refinements of the spirit child that persist, that last, that are eternal. The study of philosophy allows us to participate in the great dialogues of the millenia that have shaped our social, scientific, and political structures. The tools of logical argument are tools of expression of the spirit and they lie near the heart of the Spiritual University because they enable the spirit child to choose between the true and the false.

It is sometimes said, and certainly acted upon by many as if they believed it to be true, that it is not necessary in this life to expend great effort to learn. People who strive for wisdom and understanding, they say, are wasting their time. There will come a time when learning will be "easy" and we will learn at a much faster rate than is now possible. Perhaps, even, we will be given a magic wand to create worlds, and, though we cannot tie our shoelaces in the dark, the wand will go "poof" and worlds will come into being. But, it is a forlorn hope. It is the hope of deathbed repentance, the hope that our existence is not an eternal progression, but an eternal game of leapfrog where we jump over the hard parts and pass, perhaps with a sneer, those who toil and labor "upward in the night" (Longfellow). It is the hope that if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through diligence and obedience than another, that there is, in an eternal perspective, no advantage whatsoever to it.

It is probably true enough that at some future time we will learn at a faster rate than we now do. We know that it is so because it is true even now in this mortal life. For example, it is possible to learn about the natural world at a rate that is a hundred-fold faster than the ableness of most people presently allows. The key is mathematics, for the natural world is best described, best understood, and best taught in the language of mathematics. We can accelerate our learning of the natural world, not by leap frog, but by progression. If we sharpen and discipline the faculties of our spirit by learning the language best suited to our object of study, we can accelerate our learning. Mathematics extends the capacity of our spirit for an understanding of a physical world that lasts and is eternal. Mathematics, too, is near the heart of the Spiritual University, for it magnifies a capability of our spirit. It is not that the nature of the thing studied changes, nor that we are transformed by magic, but that our capacity to understand is enlarged as we progress, line upon line, precept upon precept.

The list might continue. It is not meant to be exclusive. To be found near the heart of the Spiritual University, as we have argued, is not to deny others a place there as well. Our purpose here is to suggest that some things at the university that might be dismissed as "secular" (and, therefore, deemed less important) may be viewed from a perspective peculiar to Mormon theology in which they are deeply spiritual. Thus, the claim that the Latter-Day Saint student sees his schooling as "purposeful preparation for eternal life and

joy." The Spiritual University will be distinguished from the secular university not so much in the details of curriculum and administration, but by the internal attitudes toward learning that drive faculty and students.

However, the Spiritual University's mission is likely to be misunderstood by people who seek the Hastings Cutoff to salvation, a shortcut to the "life of God." A good university, but not a mediocre university, must be awash in both truth and falsehood. This is because human beings know next to nothing about almost everything. At a good university, faculty and students work at that frontier which separates truth from falsehood, winnowing and sifting among ideas, some of which are true and others that will prove to be false. It is not the purpose of the Spiritual University simply to indoctrinate. Rather, its purpose is to teach the spirit child how to discern between the true and the false, between the beautiful and the ugly, and between the right and the wrong. The tools of reason, experiment, clarity of expression, conformity with experience, the search for proper connections, agreement with revelation, and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit are all brought to bear to enlarge our wisdom and our understanding of the world. In its perfection, this ableness is the ableness of God. The search for wisdom and understanding is not a magic process that yields instantaneously to undisciplined thought and careless effort. The process grinds slowly, but finely, and for that reason, at any given time there will be false ideas at the Spiritual University as well as true ideas.

On the other hand, the Spiritual University will be a magnet that draws toward it wisdom and understanding for the benefit of Zion and the children of God. Wisdom and understanding are not the sole possession of any particular people, nor of any particular culture, nor of a single religion, including our own.

Our own ignorance is broad and pervasive. We have a long way to go before we live the life of God. It is not the object of our existence, as it is often expressed, to "be with God again." A tomato can, one supposes, be in the presence of God. But a tomato can never be like God, for it is not endowed with the potential of the spirit children of God. To be like God, to live the life of God, is to fulfill our endowed potential, to become perfect even as God is perfect, both in goodness and in ableness. It is an ancillary benefit of that perfection to live with God. And after all that we can do, it is by the grace of God that we are admitted to the life of God. Consider the words of Brigham Young:

"If we will not lay to heart the rules of education which our Teacher gives us to study, and continue to advance from one branch of learning to another, we never can be scholars of the first class and become endowed with the science, power, excellency, brightness and glory of the heavenly host; and unless we are educated as they are, we cannot associate with them."

Religion, the fine arts, the humanities, the sciences and the other liberal arts are near the heart of the Spiritual University. They enable the spirit children to discern quality from the lack of quality, to know right from wrong, to be able to discern true from false, and the beautiful from the ugly. But at the center of the Spiritual University, at its very heart, we shall find the Christ, the embodiment of all that is good, all that is able, all that should be our goal and aspiration. Lifted up He beckons us to move toward Him, demonstrating by His own example the perfection of goodness and ableness that is the fulfillment of the endowed potential of the spirit children of God.

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1996