

Faith and Inquiry

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My wife's uncle recently, and somewhat smugly, said something to the effect, "It's too bad you're studying philosophy (or perhaps any subject) at BYU since you only get one perspective." For the most part, I've found this is simply not true. I've found professors and students not nearly as homogeneous as often portrayed. Though I agree with my wife's uncle that we should engage in dialogue with those of differing opinions, since there are, of course, disadvantages when only a single perspective is represented on a topic, I'd like to focus on one potential positive interpretation of the sameness he suggested. There is at Brigham Young University a shared ground of faith, and not only should that faith be a vital element of BYU, it can play a similar role at other religiously affiliated schools. I would like to suggest briefly three ways that faith influences, or can influence, scholarship and the teaching and learning process. First, faith can open up inquiry, encouraging us to seek truth. Second, faith can make certain things stand out or become salient as we learn and research. Third, faith can give us a vision of the divine potential in others, and this vision can transform the learning process.

I believe that the gospel suggests a sort of faith in inquiry, in which we are encouraged to seek all truth. Brigham Young, for example, said, "Every accomplishment, every polished grace, every useful attainment in mathematics, music, and in all science and art belong to the Saints, and they should avail themselves as expeditiously as possible of the wealth of knowledge the sciences offer to every diligent and persevering scholar."¹

This could be read in a number of ways, but one is certainly as a charge to seek out the best in all fields, from chemistry to music to literature. Faith, it seems, opens the door to seek learning from all corners.

And this learning ought to include both the inspiring and the challenging. I remember that Gary Browning, whose Dostoevsky class was both inspiring and deeply challenging, included this quote by Joseph Smith in the course packet: “Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God.”² This passage gave greater purpose to my reading for this class and other classes. My faith encouraged me to take my studies seriously, and this leads to my second point.

Faith will make certain things stand out in the process of inquiry. I recently visited a friend attending Harvard. He had mentioned to a friend that he thought it was interesting to see so many scriptures from the Bible engraved around campus. The friend, surprised, responded, referring to one in particular, “That is from the Bible?” Some may find this story funny, but it also has a serious dimension. Faith may not always drastically alter what appears in the inquiry process, though it may, but it can add a new dimension of importance to already important issues or topics. And I think this applies to all sorts of fields—from chemistry to education to comparative literature.

Finally, faith can give us a vision of the divine potential in others, and this vision can transform the learning process. Several years ago one of my professors responded to one of my short papers with this: “You don’t write badly. . . . But you don’t yet write well. You are average or somewhat better than average as a writer, but . . . you could also write . . . much better. It will probably take continued practice. That isn’t something that happens overnight. But I encourage you to keep working at it because I think you could do well.” I’m sure that most of us here could point to a similar experience, perhaps even several times, when someone called us to be better and really believed that we could be better. Part of this comes from being willing to point out weaknesses and areas that are lacking, and part of it is being able to really see something better in those around us, something that allows us to say, “Keep working at it” or “You could really do well in this.” This type of experience can certainly happen in other universities and in other settings. But I believe that there is a unique possibility for such experiences when we have faith in the extraordinary potential of those in our midst, and this faith is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I have, admittedly, left many questions open about the role of faith in scholarship, teaching, and learning, as well as the place and the role of religiously affiliated institutions in higher education. But we ought to be careful of too quickly closing our minds in the name of faith, for our faith can be, and ought to be, at the heart of our teaching and scholarship.

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1. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 10:224.

2. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 137.