



FIGURE 1. S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Window at Newhouse III. David Lassman | dlassman@syracuse.com. May 2015. Merlin No: 66495774.

The Stewardship of Our First Freedom

Elder Clark G. Gilbert

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Introduction

When Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints spoke at the University of Oxford’s Pembroke College about the impact of religious freedom on public morality, he charged people of faith to be effective stewards of religious freedom. Elder Cook stated, “There is no better demonstration of the great benefits associated with religious liberty than for devoted members of various faiths who feel accountable to God to model principles of integrity, morality, service, and love.”¹ In this sense, our religious freedom stewardship extends not only to society but also to God.

Religious Conscience and the Need for a Bill of Rights

Today’s religious freedoms have instructive historical underpinnings. When the Constitution was presented, many feared its creation would establish a federal authority so powerful that it would threaten not only

1. Quentin L. Cook, “The Impact of Religious Freedom on Public Morality,” University of Oxford Pembroke College Quill Project, October 23, 2019, 25–26, <https://news-uk.churchofjesuschrist.org/multimedia/file/Elder-Quentin-L.-Cook---Transcript---The-Impact-of-Religious-Freedom-on-Public-Morality.pdf>.

states' rights but also our God-given *individual* rights. Emblematic of these concerns was the fear of an established state religion. With some irony, it was James Madison, the founding architect of religious protections in Virginia, who now argued that individual religious freedoms did not require the inclusion of a separate Bill of Rights. Constitutional scholar Noah Feldman points out in his book *Divided by God*² that Madison felt religious diversity would guarantee religious freedom. Madison argued, "For where there is such a variety of sects, there cannot be a majority of any one sect to oppress and persecute the rest."³

Madison's Baptist and Presbyterian constituents, who had once worked so closely with him to disestablish the Anglican Church in Virginia, did not agree. They demanded that the Constitution be paired with a companion Bill of Rights that specifically outlined the inalienable rights so many had fought for in the first place. Despite his Federalist allegiances, Madison began to work on the compromise that led to the creation of the Bill of Rights and became the principal architect of the First Amendment.

Our First Freedom

Let us now turn to the language of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."⁴

There are two common misperceptions of the First Amendment as it relates to religion. First is the argument that the Establishment Clause was designed to protect Americans *from* religion, rather than simply prevent government from establishing a state religion. In reality, the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause are best understood as complementary attempts to protect religious conscience and religious exercise.

There is considerable historical evidence that the purpose of disestablishment efforts was, in fact, to preserve religious conscience.

2. Noah Feldman, *Divided by God: America's Church-State Problem—and What We Should Do about It* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 44–46.

3. James Madison, Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 12, 1788, in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. William T. Hutchinson and others (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 11:130–31.

4. "The Bill of Rights: A Transcription," National Archives, April 21, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

President Dallin H. Oaks of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints echoes this belief: “The prohibition against ‘an establishment of religion’ was intended to separate churches and government, to forbid a national church. . . . For almost a century this guarantee of religious freedom has been understood as a limitation on state as well as federal power [over religious practice].”⁵ In other words, the Establishment Clause was meant to protect religious exercise from governmental encroachment. Further evidence of this can be seen in the companion Free Exercise Clause: “Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the free exercise [of religion].” By pairing these rights together, the framers simultaneously protected religious conscience from a dominant religion, while also protecting religious exercise for all religions. These paired rights—or complementary components of the same right—ensured diverse religious participation. Professor Michael W. McConnell, director of the Constitutional Law Center at Stanford Law School explained, “Religion would flourish better if it were left free. . . . Just as free enterprise is good for the economy, free exercise is good for religion.”⁶

A second misperception of the First Amendment’s religious clauses arises in efforts to disassociate religious freedom from other first freedoms. A visual representation of this might come from the Newhouse School of Journalism, where the opening of the First Amendment is graphically and perhaps symbolically truncated to elevate freedom of speech and freedom of the press (fig. 1). Elder Neal A. Maxwell, a former Apostle in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, stated, “The First Amendment is a major branch of the tree from which one ought not try to prune any of the limbs of liberty. Those . . . who are not concerned with religious freedom, but solely with freedom of speech, will find that any pruning of the freedom of religion will adversely affect freedom of speech.”⁷

5. Dallin H. Oaks, “Preserving Religious Freedom,” (address, Chapman University School of Law, Orange, Calif., February 4, 2011), <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/elder-oaks-religious-freedom-Chapman-University>.

6. Michael W. McConnell, as quoted in Elizabeth Katz, “Founders Designed Establishment Clause to Protect Religion, McConnell Says,” University of Virginia, School of Law, October 30, 2005, <https://www.law.virginia.edu/news/200510/founders-designed-establishment-clause-protect-religion-mcconnell-says>.

7. Neal A. Maxwell, “Do Not Prune the Tree of Liberty,” *Church News*, January 25, 1975, 3.

The Heritage of Religious Freedom

This has been a long preamble on the First Amendment. The heritage of our first freedoms is inspiring. I love the visual of the Minutemen, called up to leave their plows at a moment's notice. When the Continental Army lacked for resources and soldiers, Thomas Paine penned his classic plea: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer-soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it *now*, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered: yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheaply, we esteem too lightly."⁸

We also have modern-day defenders who answer the call for religious freedom. I recently attended the Becket Canterbury Medal Gala. At the event we reflected on religious freedom victories in the Supreme Court, including cases vindicating religious freedom in religious education:

Hosanna-Tabor v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2012).⁹ In this case, described as "the most important religious liberty case in half a century,"¹⁰ the Supreme Court affirmed ministerial exceptions for religions to choose their own teachers without government interference.

In *Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer* (2017),¹¹ the Supreme Court ruled that the government cannot discriminate against churches that would otherwise qualify for funding just because they are religious institutions.¹²

In *Our Lady of Guadalupe v. Morrissey-Berru* (2020)¹³ the Supreme Court once again built on its previous ruling in *Hosanna-Tabor* to affirm that the government cannot dictate whom religious schools employ to teach their faith in a religious school setting.

8. Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis* (London: John Brooks, 1831), 1, emphasis original.

9. *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC*, 565 U.S. 171 (2012).

10. Ryan Colby, "9-0 Supreme Court Victory for Religious Liberty," Becket, January 20, 2015, <https://www.becketlaw.org/media/9-0-supreme-court-victory-religious-liberty/>.

11. *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*, 582 U.S. ____ (2017).

12. The Court reaffirmed this principle in *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue* (2020).

13. *Our Lady of Guadalupe School v. Morrissey-Berru*, 591 U.S. ____ (2020).

In *Carson v. Makin* (2022),¹⁴ the Supreme Court ruled that the government cannot exclude religious schools from public tuition assistance programs simply because they are religious.

The strong majorities in most of these cases demonstrate that religious conscience is not a partisan issue. Recent victories are a testament to the devoted work of modern champions of religious liberty, whose efforts extend the work of our early founders.

Religious Freedom Is a Stewardship

How will we use these hard-fought victories? Religious freedom is not an end unto itself. Our first freedom comes as a stewardship for which we are accountable both to society and to God.

Thoreau's Telegraph

Ironically, increased opportunity can lead to decreased accountability. I refer to this paradox as Thoreau's Telegraph. As communication technology began to expand in the mid-1800s, the telegraph created unprecedented ability to send messages quickly and efficiently across previously insurmountable distances. Henry David Thoreau noted this phenomenon with the observation: "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."¹⁵

Today we face the equivalent of a Religious Freedom Telegraph. Like a transcontinental telegraph, there is an entire infrastructure for religious freedom that requires construction, maintenance, and even defense to function properly. But the stewardship of our first freedom causes us to ask how we are using those opportunities. As organizations like Becket, the Wheatley Institute, the International Center for Law and Religion Studies, and others continue to strengthen and protect our religious rights, we have a companion duty to use those rights in ways that amplify our faith as a source of meaning, hope, and service to others.

14. *Carson v. Makin*, 596 U.S. ____ (2022).

15. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Stephen Fender (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 48.

Beyond Legal Scholars

I felt this stewardship poignantly at the recent Becket Canterbury Medal Gala. We attended the event with Brigham Young University president C. Shane Reese and his wife, Wendy. During the evening we celebrated further progress in the Religious Freedom Telegraph—continued Supreme Court victories, the creation of religious freedom clinics, and insightful scholarship. So, what is the resultant responsibility of a university president and a commissioner of education? We are not legal scholars. We will never stand before a court to defend religious rights. Sure, we can cheer on and elevate the efforts of others, but other than donning a black tie and attending such celebrations, how do we engage in this effort? The answer is to become committed stewards of our first freedom.

C. S. Lewis addressed the difference between fighting for freedom and using it for good in his lecture “Learning in Wartime.”¹⁶ On the precipice of the Second World War, in front of a packed congregation at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, at Oxford University, Lewis asked (and I paraphrase), If we are facing a global conflict, why shouldn’t every effort be invested in this looming battle? Is it not selfish or even unpatriotic to send our youth off to school? For our purposes, we might ask, Why study any other discipline? Shouldn’t we all become legal scholars to preserve religious freedom? Lewis then turns the argument to a higher form of inquiry: “How it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology.”¹⁷ His answer is tied to spiritual stewardship: our efforts “become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly ‘as to the Lord.’”¹⁸ Lewis’s words suggest that we honor our stewardship to first freedoms by offering our separate and distinctive gifts to heaven.

16. See a discussion related to “Learning in Wartime” in Clark G. Gilbert, “Education and the Struggle for Perfection,” Brigham Young University–Idaho devotional, January 10, 2017, <https://www.byui.edu/devotionals/president-clark-g-gilbert-winter-2017>.

17. C. S. Lewis, “Learning in Wartime,” (sermon, Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, England, 1939), 1, <https://www.christendom.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Learning-In-Wartime-C.S.-Lewis-1939.pdf>.

18. Lewis, “Learning in Wartime.”

On the evening of the Becket Gala, Professor Michael McConnell was recognized as the Canterbury medalist, the organization's highest honor for defenders of religious liberty. As I looked over other past recipients, I noted other individuals whom I have long admired, including the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who spoke at a Wheatley Forum just before his passing, and of course, President Dallin H. Oaks, former BYU president and First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I will draw briefly on insights from each of these Canterbury medalists as I explore "The Stewardship of Our First Freedom."

It was during Professor McConnell's Becket address¹⁹ that the idea of the stewardship first hit me. McConnell cited Friedrich Nietzsche's tale of a madman who runs through the marketplace declaring, "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!" In his novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has his mythic hero carry this same message throughout the world until he discovers a believing hermit who has isolated himself in the woods. Zarathustra marvels, "Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead!" Zarathustra has pity on this holy man, whose sincere belief has him mumbling his praise for God alone in the forest. Rather than declare that "God is dead," Zarathustra leaves the humble hermit alone, fearing his refrain would take away something naïve, but precious, in this man's sincere belief. McConnell observes, "And in like manner, the post-modern world is willing to leave the believer in peace, at least while he remains in the forest. Religious belief, even the secular world realizes, is precious to those who have it, and it would be pointless and mean to interfere with it."²⁰

There are at least two conclusions I draw from Professor McConnell's analysis of our post-modern critics. If we are to hope for more than pity, we must first find opportunities to step away from our isolation in the forest of faith and then do more than "mumble" arguments for belief.

Leaving the Forest of Faith

Let me speak first of leaving our isolation in the forest of faith. It is true that secular pressures are affecting religious communities. You are aware,

19. Michael W. McConnell, "On Singing, Laughing, Weeping, and Mumbling," (Canterbury Medal Address, Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, New York, May 25, 2023).

20. McConnell, "On Singing."

no doubt, of growing percentages of Americans who specify no religious affiliation. Pew Research's most recent estimate is that nearly 30 percent of Americans do not now identify with any religion.²¹ A Gallup study showed formal church membership also recently dropped below 50 percent for the first time ever.²² Beyond the decline in religious affiliation and practice, many faiths, including Christian faiths, increasingly feel under attack. Pew Research has shown that 70 percent of conservative Evangelical Christians experience "some" or "a lot" of religious discrimination. The percentages are even higher for Muslims and Jews from across the political spectrum.²³ We may have won increasing *legal* protections, but cultural pressures mount. As Paul Edwards and Justin Collings recently summarized in a Wheatley Horizon Report on the Constitution, "Although there have always been sharp critiques of various aspects of our Constitution, today's challenges to the fundamental legitimacy of . . . constitutional norms—from many quarters—feel more existential. . . . One risk is that major recent jurisprudential gains in religious liberty could be overwhelmed in the court of public opinion if the Supreme Court and its rulings are delegitimized."²⁴

Such pressures lead many to self-isolate like Nietzsche's religious hermit. Conservative commentator Rod Dreher's antidote is what he calls the "Benedict Option." In the language of the book's cover, Dreher cites how St. Benedict of Nursia, "horrified by the moral chaos following Rome's fall, retreated to the forest and created a new way of life for Christians. . . . His spiritual centers of hope were strongholds of light throughout the Dark Ages and saved not just Christianity but Western civilization."²⁵ Certainly, there is a need to preserve religious identity and community in an increasingly secular world. Eboo Patel of Interfaith America declares,

21. Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

22. Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls below Majority for First Time," Gallup, March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

23. "Sharp Rise in the Share of Americans Saying Jews Face Discrimination," Pew Research Center, April 15, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/15/sharp-rise-in-the-share-of-americans-saying-jews-face-discrimination/>.

24. Wheatley Institute Horizon Report Constitutional Government, Brigham Young University, First Quarter 2023, 1.

25. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2018), inner jacket flap.

“There is no diversity without particularity.”²⁶ And certainly, religious communities, including religious schools, are critical in preserving the religious particularity required for a pluralistic America.

But particularity need not require persistent isolation. Most religious universities gather in their students *for a season* before sending them back out to contribute to broader society. Think of BYU’s motto: “Enter to learn, go forth to serve.” Russell M. Nelson, president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has said, “Obtaining an education and getting knowledge are a religious responsibility. We educate our minds so that one day we can render service of worth to somebody else.”²⁷ By preserving religious particularity, we not only preserve the religious identity but we also preserve a unique wellspring of motivation that can lift and build others across society. In a special issue of *Deseret Magazine* entitled “Dare to Be Different,” we worked across faiths to emphasize the importance of the distinctive character of religious universities.²⁸ President Peter Kilpatrick noted that at Catholic University “We are serious about who we are.” President Linda Livingstone described how Baylor University is “unapologetically Christian.” Rabbi Ari Berman of Yeshiva University outlined the difference for students that a covenant relationship makes versus the more common consumer relationship. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and former president of BYU, has stated this university will only realize its destiny as it “embraces its uniqueness, its singularity.”²⁹

Stop Mumbling

Leaving the safety of our religious enclaves will require more than just mumbling about our faith. We have an obligation to study the arguments for religious freedom and articulate religion’s deeper contributions. The

26. Eboo Patel, as quoted in Tad Walch, “The Case for Faith-Based College Education and What Other Universities Can Learn,” *Deseret News*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.deseret.com/2023/1/12/23548705/the-case-for-faith-based-college-education-from-notre-dame-byu-yeshiva>.

27. Russell M. Nelson, “Focus on Values,” *New Era* 43, no. 2 (February 2013): 4.

28. Clark G. Gilbert, “Dare to Be Different,” *Deseret News*, September 14, 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/2022/9/14/23319209/elder-clark-gilbert-religious-universities-should-dare-to-be-different>.

29. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University” (address, Brigham Young University Conference, Provo, Utah, August 23, 2021), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland/the-second-half-second-century-brigham-young-university/>.

International Center for Law and Religion Studies, in partnership with the Wheatley Institute, has introduced a new resource called the Religious Freedom Library.³⁰ Studying these and other resources can help us sharpen our thinking and clarify our message.

We also have a duty to tell the broader story of faith's impact. Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education and former undersecretary of education in the Obama administration, recently stated, “[Religious universities] represent a significant part of American higher education and we need to figure out ways to take the work that you do and make it as important in the national dialogue as [your impact suggests].”³¹ Contrast this with a recent conversation I had with the editor of a prominent national publication who said to me, “We’d like to do more on religion in higher education, but frankly, the only stories we see are white nationalism and LGBTQ issues.” While we might be tempted to criticize such a narrow perspective, I wonder how much responsibility we share as religious institutions for allowing such a narrative to persist. Is it the media’s obligation to come and find us in the forest and decipher our “mumbling,” or is it people of faith who must tell our own story with clarity and conviction?

The Apostle Peter charged Christians to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15). The editorial team I mentioned earlier eventually provided us a chance to share how religious identity helps address some of the most vexing issues facing higher education. I shared with them how BYU–Idaho’s cost innovations allowed the university to triple in size without increasing its inflation-adjusted costs (fig. 2). I went on to show how the global reach of BYU–Pathway Worldwide has opened access to students who never thought they would have access to an education, particularly a high-quality education of the kind we are now providing to over seventy thousand students across the world with more than eighteen thousand students in Africa. Clearly, this conversation transcended the narrower framing the secular editor had originally supposed for religious universities.

Sometimes we must work across religious traditions, coming together to tell our story in ways that are hard to ignore. We saw this recently at a convening of presidents of religious universities hosted by the American Council on Education in Washington, D.C. Shirley Hoogstra, president

30. See Religious Freedom Library, <https://www.religiousfreedomlibrary.org/>.

31. Quoted in Tad Walch, “The Case for Faith-Based College Education.”

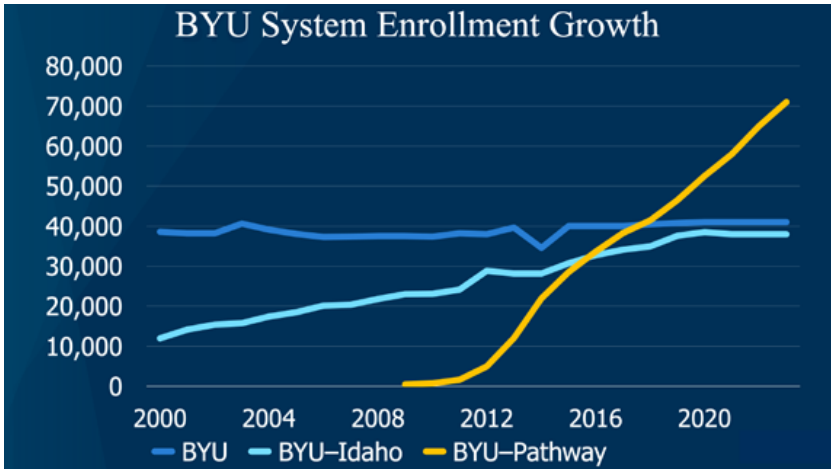


FIGURE 2. Enrollment growth at BYU, BYU-Idaho, and BYU Pathway. Courtesy Church Education System.

of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, and I discussed with Jeff Selingo, former editor of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, how religious identity can shape university innovation. That was followed by a panel with former BYU president Kevin J Worthen and Reverend John Jenkins, president of the University of Notre Dame, discussing how faith can lead to distinctive forms of scholarship. Not every media outlet covered the event, but everyone there knew these religious universities were serious about their missions and were prepared to represent them with determined conviction.

Our religious stewardship also requires us to leave the forest with the courage to engage even when we do not fit societal norms. This is what Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks referred to as being “creative minorities” in his remarkable *First Things* essay of the same title.³² Rabbi Sacks describes the Prophet Jeremiah’s charge to the Israelites in Babylonian exile to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”³³ Rabbi Sacks encourages his Christian friends to look to the example of the Jews who have long been religious minorities in exile. His

32. Jonathan Sacks, “On Creative Minorities,” *First Things*, January 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/01/on-creative-minorities>.

33. Jeremiah 29:5–7, as summarized in Sacks, “On Creative Minorities.”

counsel is to take courage, knowing that creative minorities can thrive religiously even as they strengthen society around them.

BYU's Wheatley Institute carries the torch of public scholarship on the role of religion in strengthening society. In his 2018 address to the G20 Interfaith Forum, Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints described this as "protecting the good religion does."³⁴ For example, multiple large-sample studies demonstrate how religious engagement correlates with overall societal well-being. In their study of religious restrictions in 198 countries, Brian Grim and Roger Finke show the positive relationship between religious freedom and social stability, socioeconomic progress, and freedom of the press.³⁵ Of course, the social science literature shows the robust benefits of religious practice for overall human flourishing,³⁶ ranging from marital stability³⁷ to increased happiness³⁸ to decreased risk of suicide and other deaths of despair³⁹ to reduced recidivism after incarceration⁴⁰ and increased educational attainment.⁴¹ Jason Carroll and his colleagues at the Wheatley Institute have shown how the measures of human flourishing are elevated, not only with increased personal religious participation but also through

34. D. Todd Christofferson, "Religious Freedom: Protecting the Good Religion Does," (address, G20 Interfaith Forum, Buenos Aires, Argentina, September 26, 2018), <https://www.religiousfreedomlibrary.org/documents/religious-freedom-protecting-the-good-religion-does>.

35. Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

36. Christos Andreas Makridis, "Human Flourishing and Religious Liberty: Evidence from over 150 Countries," PLOS One, October 1, 2020, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0239983>.

37. Kip W. Jenkins, "Religion and Families," in *Family Research: A Sixty-year Review 1930-1990*, ed. Stephen J. Bahr, 2 vols. (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 1:235-88.

38. "Religion's Relationship to Happiness, Civic Engagement and Health around the World," Pew Research Center, January 31, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/01/31/religions-relationship-to-happiness-civic-engagement-and-health-around-the-world/>.

39. Tyler J. Vanderweele and Brendan Case, "Empty Pews Are an American Public Health Crisis," Christianity Today, October 19, 2021, <https://christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/november/church-empty-pews-are-american-public-health-crisis.html>.

40. Byron R. Johnson, *More God, Less Crime: Why Faith Matters and How It Could Matter More* (West Conshohocken, Penn.: Templeton Press, 2011).

41. Ilana M. Horwitz, "I Followed the Lives of 3290 Teenagers. This Is What I Learned about Religion and Education," *New York Times*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/15/opinion/religion-school-success.html>.

shared family religious participation.⁴² It turns out that home-centered worship intensifies and extends the societal benefits of religious devotion. Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reminds us of the public virtue religion brings to society, declaring, “The good of religion, its reach, and the daily acts of love which religion inspires only multiply when we protect the freedom to express and act on core beliefs.”⁴³ As President Oaks has affirmed, “Most religions exhort their believers to give to the poor. Most also teach their believers that they are accountable to God for this duty.”⁴⁴ In other words, yes—religious freedom is a constitutional right, but it is also a compelling public good. It deserves protection on both counts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I express my gratitude for our first freedoms—for the founding-era framers as well as modern-day defenders who have fought to preserve our religious liberty. But if we are to respond to our secular critics and, more importantly, fulfill our accountability to God, we must go beyond our formally protected rights. We must remember and honor the stewardship of our first freedom. In response to modern Zarathustras, we must declare, “No, God is not dead.” But we cannot assert this claim if we hide nervously in the forest of faith and merely mumble the reason for the hope that is in us. Our defense of religious freedom is always compelling when it preserves our rights of conscience. But it is most inspiring when it moves us to articulate and act on our call to serve others, lift those who struggle, and shine a light to the world.

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42. Jason S. Carroll, Spencer L. James, and Hal Boyd, “Religion in the Home: Do Individuals and Couples Benefit from Home-Based Religious Practices?” an international report from the Wheatley Institution, Brigham Young University, 2020, 13–36.

43. Ronald A. Rasband, “To Heal the World,” *Liahona* 46, no. 5 (May 2022): 93.

44. Dallin H. Oaks, “Pursuing Religious Liberty Worldwide” (address, Notre Dame Religious Liberty Summit, Rome, Italy, July 20, 2022), <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/dallin-h-oaks-notre-dame-religious-liberty-summit>.